Work culture, gender and class in Vietnam: ethnographies of three garment workshops in Hanoi

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Work culture, gender and class in Vietnam:
Ethnographies of three garment workshops in Hanoi
Work culture, gender and class in Vietnam: Ethnographies of three garment workshops in Hanoi

PhD thesis

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Nederlandse Samenvatting

**Bedrijfsculturen, gender en sociale klasse: Etnografische beschouwingen over drie kledingateliers in Hanoi (Vietnam).**

**Inleiding: thema en benadering**


Een belangrijke vraag is hoe jonge arbeidsters in deze ateliers hun werk en hun dagelijks leven beleven. Dit thema is verder uitgewerkt en ingeperkt door te focussen op de achtergronden van de ontwikkeling van een lokale industrie en deze te verbinden met de ervaringen van vrouwen in het licht van recente economische hervormingen. De Vietnamese versie van deze economische hervormingen, Doi Moi, ingezet rond 1986 in een geplande, socialistische economie, heeft geleid tot een succesvolle ontwikkeling van macro-economische sectoren, maar heeft ook ertoe bijgedragen dat de inkomensverschillen groter zijn geworden, dat arbeidsrelaties niet altijd ten goede zijn veranderd en dat de verschillen tussen mannen en vrouwen groter zijn geworden.
Het proefschrift beoogt op een aantal vragen antwoord te geven: Hoe gaan kledingarbeid (st)ers om met de huidige economische hervormingen? Welke vormen van sociale ongelijkheid vinden er plaats als het om vrouwen gaat? Is er verzet tegen arbeidsregiems op de werkvloer? Hoe ervaren vrouwelijke werknemers hun sociale identiteit en hoe staat die identiteit in verband met het arbeidsregiem?

**Transitionele economie**

Een opvallend kenmerk van de huidige hervormingen in Vietnam is de hervorming van de staatssector en de ontwikkeling en uitbreiding van de private sector, met behulp van lokale ondernemers en buitenlandse investeringen. Bij de hervormingen van de staatssector zijn twee ogenschijnlijk tegengestelde ontwikkelingen waar te nemen, namelijk privatisering en marktgerichtheid, en tegelijkertijd het ontstaan van staatsbedrijven die uit kleinere firma’s zijn gevormd. Terwijl het aantal staatsbedrijven dramatisch is afgenomen, is deze sector aanzienlijk divers en gecommercialiseerd waarbij gebruik wordt gemaakt van overheidsfinanciën. De ontwikkeling van de lokale privé sector neemt toe, maar de bedrijven in deze sector zijn niet in staat te concurreren met staatsgeleide ondernemingen. De belangrijkste oorzaak hiervan is de ongelijke strijd tussen staats- en private sector. Ook blijken privé bedrijven (semi)-illegaal te opereren om belastingafdracht te vermijden en arbeidswetgeving te ontduiken. Toch is er een civielrechtelijke omgeving geschapen om buitenlandse investeringen aan te trekken. Bij de ontmanteling van staatsbedrijven zijn echter ook allerlei sociale voorzieningen op gebied van onderwijs en gezondheidszorg weggevallen. Daartegen komen werknemers in verzet en de regering erkent de noodzaak daar iets aan te doen. Goedkope arbeidskrachten zijn een voorwaarde voor succesvolle groei. Door drie verschillende werkvloeren in drie
verschillende types ondernemingen te bestuderen kunnen we nagaan hoe verschillen in arbeidsregimes doorwerken op de werknemers.

**Management**

Hoofdstuk 1 vergelijkt de verschillende manieren van leiding geven in de drie ateliers en benadrukt het belang van “bonussen” (secondaire arbeidsverhoudingen) als een manier om arbeid te controleren. De manier waarop dwang, compensatie en betrokkenheid wordt gedicteerd bepaalt de verhoudingen tussen werknemers en werkgevers. In de lokale privé onderneming heerste een bijna-familiaire manier van leiding geven die het gebrek aan slechte werkomgeving, een aftandse technologie en lage lonen moet compenseren.

Dit atelier is bijzonder geschikt voor jonge en onervaren arbeid(st)ers die juist van het platteland komen en een opleiding binnen het bedrijf zoeken. In het staatsbedrijf wordt compensatie gezocht door relatieve hoge inkomens, die gedeeltelijk het gevolg zijn van staatsinkomsten/subsidies en de sociale status van het personeel in dienst van dergelijke bedrijven die een vaste baan in het verschiet hebben. Echter, ook deze arbeiders hebben te maken met de beweeglijkheid van kapitaal op wereldschaal en met productieflexibiliteit waarmee ook privé bedrijven van doen hebben, om nog maar te zwijgen van corruptie en herinvesteringen in nieuwe bedrijven. Daardoor zijn de arbeidsuren lang en worden er strikt bureaucratische regels opgelegd. De meerderheid van het personeel in dit type bedrijf is ongehuwd, in het bijzonder vrouwen die zijn geschoold en die al een aantal jaren ervaring achter de rug hebben. In het type “Vietnamees-buitenlands” bedrijf gaan moderne technologie en een transparant arbeidsregiem hand in hand. Zij trekken vooral (gehuwd) personeel aan uit de omgeving, dat verder rekent op kortere arbeidsdagen. Als dan later blijkt dat het bedrijf hieraan niet de hand houdt
blijven het relatief betere loon en de moderne technologie als aantrekkelijke punten over. De hoge mate van laag gekwalificeerd werk bij het productieproces zorgt ervoor dat niet alle werknemers hetzelfde niveau van scholing nodig hebben. Stukwerk in combinatie met ongeschoold werk zorgt wel voor arbeidsintensivering en dient als een pressiemiddel in het arbeidsregime van dit type onderneming met zijn gemengde bedrijfsstructuur.

In hoofdstuk 2 komen nieuwe management tactieken aan bod zoals “nhay chuyen” (letterlijk vertaald als “omhoog springen systeem”), een vorm van een quota-systeem waaraan een bonus is verbonden. Het paradoxale van dit systeem is dat het voorkomt uit een collectieve identificatie met de productielijn (als team), het atelier en de fabriek, maar vooral op individueel niveau zorgt voor sterke competitie. De onderlinge competitie tussen arbeiders van de joint-venture is het sterkst; die van de privé-firma het zwakst. Arbeiders in staatsbedrijven wedijveren per team.

De economische hervormingen zijn in het voordeel van een individueel beloningssysteem (stukwerk). Collectieve identiteiten worden in toenemende mate geërodeerd door individuele factoren als gender, lokale netwerken, vakbonden, vrijwillige organisaties, jeugdculturen en life styles. Een gemeenschappelijke klasse-achtergrond leidt niet automatisch tot een collectieve actie zowel in georganiseerd als in ongeorganiseerd verband.

In hoofdstuk 3 komen de verschillen in management strategieën in de verschillende ateliers aan de orde zoals die gestalte krijgen in het beloningssysteem, de rekrutering van nieuw personeel en in de organisatie van bedrijfsvoorzieningen. In het atelier van het gemengd bedrijf wordt het stukwerk technisch aangepast zodat het salarisniveau op een zeker niveau blijft, ofschoon de productiviteit toeneemt als gevolg van een langere ervaring met het product. In het staatsbedrijf bepaalt het bureaucratische systeem de stuklonen die arbeidsters kunnen verdienen, maar de bepaling daarvan is niet altijd
duidelijk door de manier waarop de administratieve en personeelskosten, herinvesteringen en andere uitgaven voor zaken die buiten de productie liggen, worden berekend. De eigenaren van de privé-firma bepalen zelf het de stuklonen. Hoe die lonen ook worden berekend, in alle gevallen is er sprake van het feit dat zij door de werknemers worden geaccepteerd en dat er geen ruimte is voor onderhandelen. Als het om het aantrekken van nieuw personeel gaat, blijkt dat het staatsbedrijf zich schuldig maakt aan stuitende corruptie door niet alleen hogere lonen aan te bieden, maar ook door er een eigen training –en rekruteringsbureau erop na te houden. In de beide andere typen bedrijven is het aanwerven van personeel transparanter. Corruptie komt er ook minder voor. De private onderneming werft ongeschoolde arbeidsters aan met de belofte dat zij hun trainingskosten niet uit eigen zak hoeven te betalen. Ook kent dit bedrijf langere lunchpauzes en kunnen de arbeidsters op tijd naar huis om eten klaar te maken. Dat betekent voor het bedrijf een vorm van besparing. Zowel het staatsbedrijf als het privé-bedrijf voert een eigen kantine, met onderlinge verschillen in kwaliteit en prijs.

In alle drie de ateliers speelt gender een rol in de manier waarop het management wordt uitgeoefend. Net zoals elders vormen vrouwen de meerderheid in de kledingindustrie als een gevolg van hun “natuurlijke” geschiktheid voor het werk. Maar als om het snijden van stof gaat, zijn mannen in de meerderheid: zij voeren de schaar, terwijl vrouwen assisteren. Ook op andere afdelingen van het atelier speelt gender een rol: strijken wordt beschouwd als een hulpbaantje dat kan worden uitgeoefend door vrouwelijk personeel. Vreemd genoeg wordt diezelfde activiteit in het private atelier beschouwd als een “mannelijke” baan, waarmee hogere lonen kunnen worden verdiend dan het in elkaar zetten van kledingstukken en deze zijn zelfs hoger dan in het gemengde en het staatsbedrijf. Een andere vorm van gender-ongelijkheid is dat arbeiders in alle gevallen hoger lonen krijgen dan hun vrouwelijke collega’s. De bedrijfsleiding verdedigt
dit door te wijzen op het feit dat mannen minder door gezinsperikelen worden geplaagd en dat zij geen aanspraak maken op zwangerschaps-en moederschapsverloven. Mannen stromen ook sneller door naar leiding gevende functies dan vrouwen. Mannen hebben ook betere kansen op de arbeidsmarkt als zij de fabriek willen verlaten.

Paradoxaal is dat privé-onderneemers zich gedragen als socialistische managers terwijl managers in een staatsbedrijf zich als echte kapitalisten ontpoppen. In het vercommercialiseerde staatsbedrijf ontstaan hiërarchische verhoudingen tussen werkgevers en werknemers. Privé-onderneemingen zoeken baat bij paternalistische tactieken als gevolg van hun bescheiden omvang en onzekere marktpositie.

Arbeidsverhoudingen in volledig door buitenlandse ondernemers gerunde fabrieken zoals bv. Nike of Honda worden vaak geplaagd door “cultureel onbegrip” als gevolg van het feit dat het management Zuid-Koreaans, Japans of Taiwanes is. Om die reden heeft de joint-venture van het type dat hier is onderzocht geen buitenlanders op dat niveau in dienst.

Ondertussen is er overal sprake van arbeidsconflicten en klagen arbeid(st)ers over het ruwe gedrag van de leiding. Dat is het onderwerp van hoofdstuk 4. Er is overal wel een manier aanwezig om verzet te bieden: lijntrekkerei, je afzijdig houden, roddel en achterklaap verspreiden, leugentjes om bestwil om vrije dagen te krijgen of managers of werkgevers achter hun rug om beschuldigen. Verborgen verzet is doorgaans vaker en duidelijker aanwezig dan direct en open verzet. Dat komt voor een deel door de rechteloosheid van de werknemers tegenover hun werkgevers en ook door het gebrekkig functioneren van de vakverenigingen. Deze hebben als kenmerk, in overeenstemming met andere (ex)-communistische landen, dat zij vooral verbonden zijn met de eenpartijstaat.

Ofschoon er na Doi Moi wel enige veranderingen zijn ingetreden, nemen deze vakbonden het niet op voor hun leden. Hoewel de staat de rechten van de arbeiders zegt te
willen respecteren, zal deze alles doen om stakingen en arbeidsconflicten te voorkomen om zo te zorgen voor een goed en stabiel investeringsklimaat. Vakbonden gedragen zich hier navenant. Ze zijn niet efficiënt omdat het hun aan economische (dwang) middelen en menskracht ontbreekt om gerechtvaardigde stakingen te leiden. De privé onderneming heeft geen vakbond, maar die van het staatsbedrijf en de mede door buitenlanders gesteund bedrijf lopen aan de leiband van de bedrijfsleiding. In de joint-venture vinden echter meer werkonderbrekingen e.d. plaats dan in het staatsbedrijf en het minst zijn deze gesignaleerd in het privé-atelier. Daar zijn immers de meeste arbeiders jong, onervaren, ongeschoold en recentelijk afkomstig van het platteland. In de beide andere fabrieken zijn zij ouder en ervarener. Daarentegen heeft de leiding van het particulier bedrijf geprobeerd op te treden als de uitvoerder van een sociaal beleid, dat in wezen de taak is van de (socialistische) vakbond. Arbeidsconflicten in bedrijven met buitenlands kapitaal worden overigens vaker en sneller gemeld door de van staatswege gecontroleerde massamedia dan in staatsbedrijven, waar de werknemers zich niet gesteund weten door de partijorganen of hun frontorganisaties.

Migratie van het platteland naar de stad, het onderwerp van hoofdstuk 5, is een andere factor die bepalend is voor de dagelijkse praktijk van arbeiders, maar ook voor hun onderhandelingspositie. Lokale kontakten en vriendschap zijn belangrijker in het privé-atelier dan in de beide andere bedrijven. Dit bedrijf oefent hierop invloed uit door deze zaken te betrekken bij de bedrijfsvoering. Het staatsbedrijf en de joint-venture werven personeel aan door middel van advertentiecampagnes. Terwijl vriendschap wordt beschouwd als een vorm van solidariteit door de arbeiders zelf, is het ook een rekruteringsmechanisme en een reden om het werk vast te houden. Stedelijke arbeiders worden over het algemeen hoger aangeslagen dan migranten omdat zij een betere toegang hebben tot scholing en om dat zij dichter bij het werk wonen. Arbeiders uit de stad
verzetten zich direct en openlijk tegen de bedrijfsleiding, maar blijken ook in staat om hun medemigranten arbeiders te beschermen tegen onredelijke behandeling van de managers. Deze ruraal-urbane scheiding is overal in de samenleving zichtbaar.

Jonge, ongehuwde textielarbeidsters besteden graag hun geld aan kleding, sierraden en cosmetica, producten die hen als jonge stedelingen doen lijken. Daarover kan ook worden gezegd, zoals in hoofdstuk 6 aan de orde is, dat zij zich conformeren aan bepaalde gender normen en opvattingen over bijvoorbeeld vrouwelijke schoonheid als onderdeel van een mannelijke hegemonie. Gehuwde vrouwen onderwerpen zich meer aan de zorg voor hun families en lijken minder oog te hebben voor uiterlijkheden. Toch zijn er veel uitzonderingen waar te nemen. Er is gewoonweg geen standaardgedrag te onderscheiden. Er zou eerder gesproken moeten worden van hybride identiteiten.

Het beleid van de Vietnamese staat tegenover vrouwen is sinds 1986 drastisch gewijzigd. Voor die tijd werden gezinnen voorzien van gratis kinderopvang, gezondheidszorg, scholing en zelf vrije huisvesting. Na Doi Moi zijn de huishoudens verantwoordelijk geworden voor zowel productieve als reproductieve taken. Daardoor zijn vrouwen zwaarder belast geraakt. Zij moeten zowel de rollen van echtgenote als moeder vervullen. Tegelijkertijd verandert het beeld van vrouwen als werkneemster en als degene die ook carrière wil maken ten gunste van het gezin. Om hen in staat te stellen deze taak op zich te nemen zullen echtgenoten en ouders voorzieningen moeten treffen om vrouwen te vervangen in het huishouden. Daardoor zullen er spanningen ontstaan omdat de ideale rechten van vrouwen om te gaan werken niet stroken met hun onbetaalde baan als verzorger in het gezin. Die prangende vraag wordt in hoofdstuk 7 behandeld. Het dilemma heeft tot gevolg dat de status van textielarbeidsters is gedaald. Het groeiende sociale probleem van de ongehuwde spinster (e chong in het Vietnamees) is nauw verbonden met de dalende status van arbeidsters in de kledingindustrie.
Concluderend kan worden gesteld dat de economische hervormingen in Vietnam weliswaar een goed voorbeeld vormen van vergelijkbare hervormingen in postsocialistische landen, maar dat de gevolgen voor vrouwen in het “markt-socialistische” arbeidsproces minder eenduidig zijn. De inkomensongelijkheid is groter geworden, evenals die tussen stad en platteland. Te hopen valt dat met de nieuwe verhoudingen, de positie van arbeidsters en vrouwelijke migranten verbetert en dat hun stemmen worden gehoord.
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

As in many post-socialist countries, labour in Vietnam has occupied a paradoxical position in the social and political transformations of the country. On the one hand, Vietnam is considered as a revolutionary society because the country underwent decades of war in the last century. On the other hand, the trade unions, which are often considered as the main pillar of revolutions, were used to function as organizations for welfare distribution rather than representing the interests of the workers during the socialist period. Statistically speaking, since the economic reforms, especially in recent years, the increasing numbers and cases of labour conflicts and strikes in the foreign invested companies and local private ones have frequently been reported in public, reflecting the worsening labour conditions in the market economy as well as the growing public concern for this emerging social problem. Moreover, the reported labour conflicts often occurred in the factories of labour-intensive manufacturing, where the majority of workers are women. Such conflicting facts and arguments inspire one to explore further what impacts of the economic reforms on women workers in general have been.

In spite of being isolated in the socialist bloc in the past, Vietnamese labour history has never been isolated from the history of global labour. In other words, the former cannot be understood without the latter. The global millennial capitalism is characterized by capital mobility and flexible production (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000). Production is often relocated to places where there is cheaper labour and where there are lower levels of unionization. This weakens the bargaining power of workers in more advanced countries and also leads to a decline in trade unionism, which has a long history of struggle in these
countries. At the same time, in less developed countries, where labour-intensive industries are shifted to, the role of the state vis-à-vis the market has also been restructured to adapt to the new situation, promoting foreign investment and increasing international and local competitiveness by not only keeping the minimum wage at a low level, but also loosening the enforcement of labour law. In the new corporate culture, improvements in technology and different methods of labour control from direct to indirect, from paternalistic to self-disciplining, from bureaucratic to human resource management and total quality management in combination have substantially reduced coercion in the workplace. There is a considerable degree of compromise between trade unions and employers in the realization of their common goals, which are beneficial to all - the company, trade unions and workers. At the same time, the material life of workers has been improved in the long term due to the higher consumption levels found in most capitalist societies. As a result, workers seem to be voluntarily subordinate to the capitalist arrangement in exchange for employment, wages and status.

In such a global arena, what is special about the case of Vietnam? The country’s economic reforms as well as its desperate efforts to integrate into global capitalism make it difficult to become an exception in the general global context. However, there are also two particularities about the Vietnamese case. First, Vietnam has a socialist past, which has shaped the discourse of egalitarian labour management relations. Management belonged to the working class, the most important constituent of the revolution. In such a way, factory managers and blue-collar workers were given high status in relation to some other groups in society, notably intellectuals, entrepreneurs and self-employers. Trade unions like any other interest groups and mass organizations were subordinate to the interests of the Party State. Trade unions used to be the scene for political education and
were the re-distributors of workers’ welfare. With the economic reform, the role of labour has changed, from the main constituency of the Party State to a commodity in the global market. The discourse of egalitarianism has been replaced by a hierarchy in labour management relations, which was rephrased in the form of the autonomy given to state management to improve the performance of the state sector. Understanding the importance of the private sector for the national economy, the state also encourages the development of the private sector, which is experiencing rapid growth in size and number. Although the state has issued a legal framework to protect workers’ rights, the general tendency that it advocates is to prevent and avoid strikes and labour conflicts as much as possible in order to create a stable environment for investors. The state’s intervention in a company’s working conditions or labour management relations is rare before a strike or labour conflict happens. There is also a withdrawal of the state from the provision of welfare services, which used to be given free, at least to state employees, in the form of housing, education for children, health care and child care. This places greater burdens on the household and women in particular.

Such a configuration of the global and local context raises the question of women workers’ daily experience, and this relates to their bargaining power vis-à-vis management and resistance strategies. The central research questions of this thesis are: How have women garment workers coped with the economic reforms of the country? What are the forms of social inequality that women workers have experienced? Have they had any forms of resistance on the shop-floor? If so, what are these forms? How are women workers’ social identities formed and how is the formation of social identities related to the struggle of the workers?
With regard to social relevance, an understanding of resistance and working class identities on the shop-floor can help to shed light on labour and the history of women and labour movements in Vietnam in the post-economic reform period. However, it should not be assumed that workers’ resistance on the shop-floor can potentially lead to durable, patterned and organized collective action. In other words, an examination of workers’ resistance can only be seen as a reference to collective action, but can not explain why a collective action did or did not happen, while an examination of collective action alone might ignore class identity and often assumes its existence (Callinicos, 1987). Thus, the thesis does not focus on collective action alone.

The garment industry was chosen because it is the key industry in the priority of development, in view of the fact that it not only produces high export revenues but also creates many new manual jobs. Garment exports grew from US$ 90 million in 1990 to US$ 1.35 billion in 1997 and generated about 20 percent of the country’s total merchandise export, ranking second to oil (IFC, 2000, p. 11). According to the Vietnam Garment and Textile Association, there are about 2 million garment and textile workers in the whole country at present, most of whom women (Vietnam Economy, 16 August 2005). While garment workers account for the majority of this figure, it does not include a very large number of garment workers in the informal sector, particularly small and medium private workers. In recent years, the number of newly established garment companies and factories has grown dramatically, leading to a serious lack of skilled labour in spite of the general problem of high unemployment rates. Moreover, there are high rates of labour turnover in most garment workshops. On average, this rate accounts for 10 to 20 percent of the total number of workers in a company, while in high seasons
of business many companies lack up to 30 or 40 percent of the labour force needed.¹ This situation is often explained by the intensification of the industry, low wage levels and greater numbers of garment workshops established in local areas (Vietnam Economy, 16 August 2005). For these reasons ethnographic research was conducted in the garment workshops in order to better understand the contradiction between an abundant labour force and the lack of skilled workers. The three companies where I carried out my field research will be named DG, a state-owned company, MH, a joint-venture between a Vietnamese state-owned company and a South Korean partner, and TT, a purely local private company. They were all located in Hanoi.

**Contextualization**

*Economic Reform and state sector reform and privatization*

In the late 1980s, Vietnam embarked on an ambitious program of renewal, *doi moi*, that produced immediate results, enabling the country to turn its economy around dramatically, restore stability, accelerate growth at 8-9 percent per annum in the first half of the 1990s, and attract public and private foreign capital commitments, something unprecedented in Vietnam’s history. Market-oriented economic reform using the ‘multi-sectoral’ approach ‘under socialist guidance’ produced immediate effects on a backward and stagnant economy, thus pushing up living standards of people on the whole to a new level. The vision of a New Tiger in Southeast Asia seemed to have become achievable for Vietnam in the near future (Kolko, 1997).

From the 1954 Geneva Accord to 1975, the economies of North and South Vietnam evolved in quite different directions: the former was based on an attempt to construct

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¹ The lack of garment workers is more serious in Ho Chi Minh City and the South than in Hanoi and the North.
socialism through autarchic, centrally planned, heavy industry oriented industrialization, while the latter was set on the capitalist path of development (Vo Nhan Tri, 1990, p.58). In the North, the exigencies of the protracted war shaped Vietnam’s economic and political structure decisively. Statistically, light industry only accounted for 10.5% of total state investment in industry in 1976. In 1980, the figure increased to only 11.5% (Statistical Data of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1982, p.41). This irrational structure led to the dominance of large state-owned enterprises in import-substituting heavy industry over medium and small enterprises in light industry and handicrafts. As a result, textile and garment industries were not paid much attention during the subsidizing period. Textiles were among the basic consumer goods which Vietnam had to rely on for external aid. The clothes produced in factories were mainly uniforms for soldiers.

From 1975, while being unprepared for the challenges posed by unification and the management of a peacetime economy, the country was hit by a political and economic crisis. It should be noted that during this time the economy was heavily dependent on assistance from the Soviet Union and China. Furthermore, the border conflict with China in 1979 seriously hampered the economic growth of the country. As a consequence of the economic crisis, output from state enterprises and handicraft cooperatives declined by 6.5 percent and many of them operated at only 30-50 percent of capacity over the period 1976-1980 (Statistical Data of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1982, p.29).

The origin of ‘market socialism’ can be traced to that economically difficult situation. The first set of economic reforms was undertaken in 1981 as a reaction to the economic crisis. The importance of these policies lies in the tolerant attitude towards the private sector (Johansson and Ronnas, 1995, p.53.). Although it once wholly identified a market economy with capitalism, the Party justified its radical move in 1986 called Doi
Moi with the revelation that a ‘market stage’ was really integrated into the ultimate transition to socialism. The Party resolved that Vietnam would develop a ‘multi-sectoral economy’ and give various economic components and business establishments more headway to develop quickly: “…the state will regulate and lead the market economy to develop further in accordance with…socialist orientations.” (Cited in Daily Report: East Asia, January 24, 1994, p.70). In this sense, the market was regarded as a purely tactical and temporary measure to pave the way to socialism. This idea was expressed by the fact that those existing institutions and policies that were still viable were retained. This was the hybrid nature of so-called market socialism (Kolko, 1997).

Since the early 1980s, the state-enterprises have enjoyed some autonomy as regards production ‘outside the plan’. From 1987, they had greater freedom with regard to production, investment, financing, pricing and personnel. In 1992, the first formal legal foundation for the existence of SOEs (state-owned enterprises) was laid down by decree, requiring all SOEs to re-register in subsequent years. Although there was a decline in the state share of GDP in the latter half of the 1980s, in general the state sector was still the leading one in terms of industrial output, especially in the context of heavy industry.²

The transformation of SOEs is characterized as a process of decentralization, liberalization and deregulation. The first transformation is the shift of economic responsibility and decision-making power from the central to provincial and local government and from ministries to enterprises and the establishment of state corporations. After several attempts at restructuring, many SOEs that performed poorly were closed down. Even so, efficient SOEs were so few that they could not justify having

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² SOEs’ share in industrial output of oil was 100%, electricity 100%, metal-working 91%, electronics 73%, chemicals 75%, construction materials 65%, cellulose and paper 73%, food-processing 67 % and textiles 66% (Statistical figures from World Bank and International Monetary Fund reports in 1994 and 1995).
a leading role in the state sector, and they were unable to provide sufficient partners for cooperation with foreign partners (Akiba, 1998; Fforde, 2004). Given this context, a decision regarding the experimental formulation of state corporations which would operate as business conglomerates was issued. The Vietnam National Corporation of Textile and Clothing Industry (VINATEX), which was established in 1995 in accordance with the Decision of the Prime Minister’s Office 55-CP of 1995 with 53 member enterprises, functioned as the coordinator between its members. Before the mid 90s, DG, which was established in 1991, was under the control of three ministries at the same time: the Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Light Industry and Ministry of Finance. However, after the decentralization, DG officially became a member enterprise of VINATEX, which gradually turned out to be a ‘mini-ministry’, taking over the current functions of the state ministries as manager of the general corporations and centrally-run SOEs, thereby being capable of refusing compliance with state instructions relating to economic activities whenever these instructions went against the interests of the state managers. DG also expanded itself as a state corporation by establishing several new factories in joint venture with the provincial governments. These small new factories were under the direct supervision and control of the local authorities with regard to bureaucracy and administration. In the same manner, all foreign-invested and joint-ventured companies like MH, which were located in the area of Hanoi, were under the direct control of the Hanoi People’s Committee. The state corporations or centrally controlled SOEs like DG were, in general, given privileged access to capital and other concessions than all those outside them, including small SOEs which were controlled only by local governments and private enterprises, both foreign and locally invested. As a result, managers of these general corporations and of SOEs under them have always tried to maintain the status quo
and have resisted further SOE reforms to preserve their power (Probert, J. and D. Young, 1995).

The second transformation was the commercialization and quasi-privatization of the state sector. The liberalization of the system began by reducing the number of plan indicators and also prohibiting an SOE’s superior levels from issuing orders without ensuring that the SOEs had also been supplied with the resources to do so. This meant that the SOEs had greater freedom in securing resources on the free market, and also in selling the proceeds. Logically, this enhanced the freedom of SOEs to shift resources to those activities that they found most profitable, and so supported their ‘own’ autonomy (Fforde, 2004, p.6). In such a way, Adam Fforde argues that the Vietnamese SOEs were highly commercialized in the late 1980s, although they were still subject to external administrative regulation. More importantly, one of the outcomes of the commercialization of SOEs in the 1980s was the existence of the so-called ‘von tu co’ (own capital) within them. The concept was related to the so-called ‘three funds’ system, drawn from Soviet practice, which permitted SOEs to pay into certain funds amounts derived from reported good performance relating to issues such as plan fulfilment and cost reduction. These funds could be used in a way that would benefit the staff and workers of the SOEs and the ‘own capital’ could at times be viewed as ‘theirs’. This helped to shape a negative common view that only when private firms, including multinationals, had strong connections with the state or/and the state-owned firms, could they operate successfully in the environment of Vietnam.

The first form of semi-private business was industrial cooperatives, which were nationalized by the state in 1953 and 1954 in the North. In 1947 the first garment cooperative in Co Nhue, named Nhue Giang, was established. A report from the Vietnam
Union of Cooperatives (VUC) said that before the onset of ‘doi moi’ Vietnam had more than 30,000 industrial and handicraft cooperatives. However, during the economic reforms many of them had either gone bankrupt or were being run by members informally as private enterprises (Vietnam Investment Review, 1 January, 1995). In the early 1990s, all garment cooperatives in Co Nhue had to be closed due to its poor performance, and this forced the laid off members to become self-employed.

Farmers, family firms, private small-medium enterprises (SMEs) and relatively large foreign investment enterprises comprise the private sector in Vietnam. Before 1988, Vietnam had no private enterprises apart from family firms, which unofficially employed some wage labour. A typical traditional organizational form of small trade and industry, especially in the north, is the industrial village. These villages produce craft products such as furniture, porcelain and silk under contract, thereby absorbing a large number of rural workers. These small-scale structures were widespread even at the time of the planned economy. When private enterprise was formally permitted and was legally put on an equal footing with the state sector in the late 1980s, these industrial villages emerged from informality and expanded rapidly. However, due to rapid rural transformations and other factors, they are diminishing and are now gradually being replaced by family firms and SMEs (Riedel, J. and Chuong S. Tran, 1997). Co Nhue was considered as one of these industrial villages. The most important organizational form of private enterprise was the family firm and SME. Only a quarter of Vietnamese enterprises engage in manufacturing activities, but these employ between them as much as 45 percent of total labour and generate 30 percent of the turnover in the enterprise sector (UNIDO Overview in https://www.unido.org/doc/40674). They fall mostly in the SME category, as defined in Decree 91/2001: whether by the measure of employment (less than 300 regular
workers) or registered capital (less than VND 10 billion), 95 percent of them can be labelled small and medium enterprises. The majority of registered enterprises employ between 5 and 50 regular workers; altogether, 80 percent of enterprises have less than 50 workers (https://www.unido.org/doc/40674). Because of their small size, tax evasion and violations of labour laws have become a common practice of these SMEs (Thomas, 2001a). Among the three companies investigated in this thesis, only TT was a SME because it employed fewer than 300 workers. As in many other small workshops in Co Nhue, workers in TT did not sign any labour contracts with the employers.

The impacts of the economic reforms on gender relations

While social inequality is the biggest negative impact of the economic reforms, gender inequality is considered as a part of this problem. Truong (1997) argues that from a historical perspective, in spite of its shortcomings, Vietnam’s gender policy before the economic reforms contributed substantially to the improvement of women’s social and political standing in the country. However, while the doi moi programs formally declare their intent to protect women’s interests and promote women’s participation, in reality doi moi contains several areas of gender bias, which is located in the redefinition of the boundaries of the ‘public’ and ‘private’, production and reproduction. These biases are currently undermining the position of women in general.

During the period from 1930 to 1975, the issue of women and family was directly linked with national independence. In the general approach of the party-state on gender relations, production and reproduction are considered as two integrated parts of one system. In the first period, from the late 1920s to 1945, the Marxist theory was adopted as an instrument to mobilize women to participate in the struggle against the French
(Tetreault, 1996). In the period from 1945 to 1975, while men had to go to the battle to fight, women were the main the labour force of production behind the front to support the war in the South and to construct socialism in the North. Familial patriarchy, which prevented women from participation in the national struggle, was seen as backward and needed to be eliminated. The attack on patriarchal structures resulted in a legal ban on arranged marriages, polygamy, concubinage and prostitution, providing a very progressive legal framework governing man-woman relationships, and excellent achievements in the rate of female literacy and the level of education and participation in the national struggle on many fronts (Mai and Le 1978, Marr 1981, Truong 1997). In return for women’s effort in the national defence, the state provided support for women in their roles as reproducers through the organization of childcare and crèches, so that their double burden would not undermine their productivity.

Between 1975 and 1980, after the reunification, the state approach to the family as both the productive and reproductive unit still prevailed but more emphasis was put on the role of women as wives and mothers in the family. The discourse on family stressed stability and functional cooperation between husband and wife in the family. At the same time, the Women’s Union initiated the campaign of the ‘New Culture Family’, which encouraged men and women to share decision-making and housework. However, the Women’s Union also emphasized that marriage and motherhood shaped women’s identity to a great extent. First, the emphasis on motherhood signifies that the recognition of women’s work in the family may be placed at risk. Second, the ideal type of family and motherhood that was promoted by the state and the Women’s Union was far from the reality that many women had to face. One of the most obvious evidence was that many
women who participated in the war passed the marriage age. Many of them adopted orphans or even had children out of wedlock (Truong 1997).

During the period of 1981-85, the emphasis on the family as the unit of production was the new move in the party-state’s policy on women and gender relations. In the failure of the cooperative model, the household system, which made full use of the labour force of the household, was introduced as an efficient means of resource utilization to solve the problem of food shortages. The success of this system in agricultural production led to its sanction in industrial production as well, particularly in light manufacturing such as garments and handicrafts. As evidence of this, household production of garments began to be developed without being prohibited or sanctioned, also from 1981. The success of this system also heavily influenced family policy during this period. While the collectivized production deconstructed the household and made the contribution of all members visible, the household contract system rendered the contribution of individual members invisible. While assigning the family/household the basic task of taking care of itself economically, the system also left the household/family free to devise its strategy for mobilizing resources and securing its own reproductive needs. Thus, attention was not given to a collective reproductive strategy and the sexual division of labour was no longer a focus of policy concern (Truong 1997).

In the market economy period from 1988, the party-state paid more attention to gender relations in the family through the introduction and improvement of the legal frameworks. This might be due to the fact that the party-state anticipated the negative effects of the economic reforms on women. For example, the Family Code which was revised in 1986 forbids domestic violence and stipulates that housework must be viewed as a contribution to family income. In 1994, the Labour Code was introduced, with
Chapter 10 entirely devoted to the rights of women workers. For example, firms employing women in large numbers will benefit from special treatment by the state through tax deduction or women workers who adopt infants are given the right to leave with social benefits (Truong 1997).

In spite of these legal changes, the country could not avoid the negative effects of the process of privatization. One might argue that the negative effects of this rupture were offset by the income effects of the privatization of production. Women have even welcomed the new constitution of gender relations because economic restructuring coincided with an overall increase in income (Hoang, 1994; Moghadam, 1994). However, in fact, not every woman is the beneficiary of the net effects. While the young, mobile and educated women are the winners from the economic reforms, to a number of groups of women, for example ones who are old, migrant or have low education, income gains cannot compensate for the loss of their time, mobility and ability to broaden their awareness. According to Truong (1997), “these losses might have put limits on their scope to strategize with a long-term perspective and to develop an adequate collective response to macro-economic changes”. In the case of female garment workers, the high rates of unmarried women who missed out on marriage, their lack of time for leisure, entertainment and family life and their inadequate knowledge of workers’ and women’s rights, as well as the procedures for strikes, are the side effects of gains in income. Moreover, their preoccupations with the pressures of marriage, stigmas and the dilemmas of remaining at work in the city or going back to the countryside, in a way constrained their capacity to cope with the situation with long-term strategies. In such a way, the economic reforms have marginalized the women workers’ positions in the long term.
Vietnam’s Garment Industry and the triangle business

The garment industry was imported into Vietnam at the end of the 19th or in the early 20th century. When the French started to recruit local soldiers, it was imperative to produce uniforms domestically for local soldiers. Co Nhue used to be a suburban village which had the tradition of producing uniforms, first for the French army and then for Vietnamese soldiers. Before the collapse of the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries in 1991, over 90 percent of all Vietnamese textile and garment products were exported to these markets under governmental agreements to pay back foreign debts or to barter for machinery for infrastructure projects (Cu Chinh Loi, 2000). DG was established as a response to the agreements between Vietnam and the former Soviet Union during this period. There were not only trade relations but also labour cooperation between Vietnam and Eastern European countries during the 80s. Taking advantage of the scarcity of basic goods in these countries toward the end of the socialist period, these migrant workers earned extra income from exporting cheap clothes to Eastern European countries and selling them on ‘black markets’. In such a context, Co Nhue was chosen as the base for producing jackets of ‘low price and low quality’ for Eastern European markets. Households and small businesses in Co Nhue continued producing for Eastern European markets. As it was an unofficial channel, the business was unstable. Some enterprises like TT were able to explore a new market in a number of African countries. However, they still had to combine this with the domestic market in low seasons. In general, production in small workshops in Co Nhue such as TT was still seasonal and fluctuated.

Since 1991, due to the disintegration of the Communist bloc, most garment firms have had to expand into capitalist markets, including the quota markets (the largest being
the EU, then Canada and Norway), and the non-quota markets (such as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Russia). Situating Vietnam in the global garment industry, one could mention the three main trading networks: the European Union (EU), Japan and the United States (US). Eastern Europe (EE) and some African countries are smaller and often unofficial markets. In each of the main networks, there is a triangular manufacturing arrangement: the Vietnamese garment producers, foreign buyers and firms from East Asian Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) like Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan. In this triangular system, most Vietnamese buyers are assemblers (Tran, 1996). In other words, Hong Kong, South Korean and Taiwan based companies, which use Vietnam as a subcontracting base, provide all the fabrics, accessories and patterns. The tasks of Vietnamese subcontractors include applying paper patterns to foreign-supplied fabrics, cutting and assembling them into clothes. After the quality-control process, they package them and ship the final products to buyers or middlemen. About 4 percent of the total retail price goes to Vietnamese firms for cutting, making and packaging (the CMP price). About 16-20 percent goes to the middlemen for inputs, management and quality control. The rest, about 76-80 percent, goes to foreign buyers for designs, transportation, insurance, marketing and other miscellaneous costs and retail mark-up. This evidence suggests that most value-adding in the global garment industry can be found not only in backward linkages (such as designs and inputs) but also in forward linkages (such as distribution and marketing), and not in manufacturing (Tran, 1996). However, the triangle is a dynamic situation since all three players are constantly trying to establish more direct contacts with each other over time. As a result, together with the improvements in management, design and marketing of Vietnamese producers, as well as better quality of material and accessories which are produced domestically, more and more foreign buyers
place orders directly with Vietnamese producers. DG is among one of the few state-owned garment companies that have grown strong enough to receive a percentage of direct orders from customers without going through East Asian intermediary firms. In the beginning, these East Asian firms approached Vietnam’s state-owned companies like DG in the form of business cooperation contracts. However, gradually these East Asian companies have built the factories of their own in Vietnam (100 percent foreign invested companies) or formed joint-ventures with Vietnamese companies. In both forms of joint venture like MH and 100 percent foreign investment, these East Asian firms were able to take advantage not only of cheap labour but also the quotas in exports to the EU and US markets provided by the Vietnamese government that all Vietnam-based firms are entitled to have. Often East Asian managers were hired to be workshop supervisors in these 100 percent foreign invested and joint-venture factories to transplant not only garment techniques but also work disciplines from these Asian countries into the Vietnamese industrial environment. However, these companies faced a great public outcry about cultural misunderstandings and conflicts between these foreign managers and Vietnamese workers, and so some joint-ventures like MH started using Vietnamese staff in shop-floor management positions. The East Asian foreign patterns controlled only design, general technology and the quality of output.

**Conceptualization**

As labour is an interdisciplinary field, research on labour relations invites the contributions of different theories and approaches in the field to make it become broader and more diversified, and hence to catch up with changes in the new workplace due to globalization. While the main aim is to reflect what is happening on the shop-floor
between managers and workers and between workers themselves, the theories enable readers to see beyond the workplace and to understand the external factors which influence what is happening inside the workplace. In this regard, my main theoretical framework is informed by theories on the labour process in its innovation and combination with social identities, human resource management and feminist theories.

*The labour process theories*

Material conditions of existence as shaped by corporate capital in particular often give rise to a certain commonality of experience, based on workers’ dependence on employers for their livelihood (International Institute of Social History, 1998). The core of this perspective lies in its insistence on the class nature (in terms of class power, control and interests) of work, work relations and workplace organization (Braverman, 1974; Micheal Burawoy, 1979, 1985; Friedman, 1977; Litter and Salaman, 1982). The pioneer of the labour process theories is Harry Braverman, who contended that industrial work in capitalist societies in the Industrial Revolution involved the degradation of traditional craft skill and with this degradation came a real subordination of labour (Braverman, 1974). Despite having several critics, Braveman has inspired many generations of students of sociology of work to expand the labour process theories.

Criticizing Braverman’s one-sided (objectivist) conception of the labour process, Burawoy (1979, 1985) brought into the theories the manufacturing of consent as the subjective dimension of work. For the first time, resistance was not seen as binary opposition to compliance and subordination. Instead, the boundary between resistance, accommodation, cooperation and compliance becomes blurred. He also gave a classification of two main factory regimes: the despotic and the hegemonic (Burawoy,
1985). In the former, coercion prevails, while in the latter consent prevails (although never to the exclusion of coercion). As monopoly capitalism displaced competitive capitalism hegemonic regimes replaced earlier despotism in the workplace. The hegemonic regime reflected the role of the state in its intervention in the workplace. More recently, labour theorists inspired by Burawoy have tried to develop the notion of ‘hegemonic despotism’. In the new workplace, with the introduction of new working practices in the name of human resource management (HRM) and under the influence of the ‘rational’ tyranny of capital mobility in the name of inevitable flexibility, the despotism in the notion of ‘hegemonic despotism’ is that of the coercive forces of the global market (Tuckman & Whittall, 2002).

In the garment industry of Vietnam, hegemonic despotism can be observed on most of the shop floors due to capital mobility and flexible production, as both opportunities and constraints of integration into the global market. The workshops are organized and workers are managed and controlled in such a way that the commodities met international requirements with regard to quality as well as time of delivery. Moreover, the competition in performance not only between companies but also between workshops and teams within one company continued to increase. While the presence of global capital is more evident on the shop-floor, the state intervention in production and labour relations becomes less direct due to the general trend of decentralization. In spite of the stipulation of several laws and regulations both in business and labour relations at the macro level, one cannot observe a regulatory and supervisory framework at the micro level. However, the legacy of a paternalistic socialist work environment in which the employees are highly dependent upon their workplace for social welfare and job security still exists.³ This

³ Warde (1986) used the term ‘organized dependence’ to refer to this paternalistic work environment
explains, to a certain extent, why a paternalistic management style can still be observed in the local private workshop or why many workers wan to work for state-owned factories and hence, and why corruption can happen in the recruitment of workers to the state owned factories, although the actual employment benefits and labour relations in relation to the working conditions are no better than those in the private workshops, especially the foreign-invested ones.

Organizational theories

As mentioned above, the centre of the classical labour process theories is labour control. In Labour and Monopoly Capitalism, Braverman (1974) finds the logic of capitalism through the techniques of scientific management. Arguing that capitalists have all developed a variety of strategies for controlling labour, of which Taylorism is only one and not necessarily the most effective, Friedman (1977) divides capitalist control strategies into two major types, ‘direct control’ and ‘responsible autonomy.’ Richards Edwards (1979) suggests that capitalists have developed a sequence of modes of labour control in response to new forms of worker resistance and new production needs. Simple control gives way to technical control, which in turn gives way to bureaucratic control. It is often supposed that workers would comply with the rules or these modes of

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4 Scientific management is a term introduced by Taylor (1911) in the early twentieth century to refer to a system of rationalization of blue-collar work; i.e., for its fragmentation, control and speed-up, or a comprehensive plan, composed of a number of interrelated innovations that promised to improve the overall productive efficiency of the enterprise (quoted in Peter F. Meiksins, 1984, p. 179).

5 See note 4 of this chapter.

6 According to Friedman (1977), direct control involves the techniques of scientific management.

7 In this mode of labour control, workers are allowed substantial levels of autonomy and discretion at work. (Friedman, 1977)

8 According to Richards Edwards (1979), most small workshops are considered as having simple control.

9 Technical control: the control by the assembly line. (Richards Edwards 1979)

10 The elaborate internal labour markets of contemporary corporations function as a kind of labour control, which is called as bureaucratic control. (Richards Edwards, 1979)
control. However, it is also noticed that in the Japanese techniques of management culture has been introduced into labour control to generate employees’ commitment (Lincoln, J & Kallenberg, A., 1990). Developed from this model, the HRM\textsuperscript{11} approach (for example, see Cole 1979; Lincoln & Kallenberg 1990, Legge, 1995, Durand & Stewart, 1998) tried to move from compliance to commitment. Commitment is portrayed as internalized belief, as generating constructive proactivity on the part of employees. Compliance, in contrast, is seen as being maintained by externally imposed bureaucratic control, and as generating reactive rather than proactive behaviours. It is also noted that during periods of economic recession and high employment, workers are forced to make a commitment to the companies not because of the effectiveness of the cultural management strategies but because of their low bargaining power in the labour market in general. Instead of culture, control and commitment, Charles Tilly and Chris Tilly (1998) suggest a different triangle: commitment, coercion and compensation. Nichols and his colleagues (2004) propose another paradigm by distinguishing three aspects of labour regimes: labour control, material support and contract. Material support can be understood as a part of compensation, while compensation can be made in different ways, which are not always material support, but could be emotion and emotional manipulation. According to the Tillies (1998), compensation is socially and culturally constructed. Therefore, depending on the situation, compensation is made flexible, in material support or in emotional binding. In such a way, culture is introduced into the workplace when necessary, because strong culture is not always desirable as it inhibits immediate flexibility in response to unfamiliar conditions. In a time of high unemployment and the downsizing of corporations, it is also argued that the expanded use of subcontracting,

\textsuperscript{11} HMR stands for human resource management.
temporary and part-time workers is a new form of capitalist control (Piore & Sabel, 1984). In such a case, contracts, which give workers full employment benefits and job security, are rewarded in exchange for their commitment. However, when the contracts do not provide workers with more benefits as well as job security, and when workers themselves want to remain as temporary or part-time workers, contracts cease to become an important factor. Thus, contracts, depending on the situation, can be included in the category of compensation. Although the Tillies acknowledge the fuzzy boundaries between control, compensation and commitment, from a broader view, compensation and commitment can also be seen as modes of labour control. Therefore, incorporating these new modes of labour control such as compensation and commitment, we can have a new triangle of labour control between coercion (direct control, simple control, and bureaucratic control), commitment and compensation. This triangle is more inclusive and can reflect the dynamics and flexibility of the negotiation between workers and management. In this thesis, I will argue that compensation is the most important factor in the triangle that guarantees whether coercion and commitment work. The comparison of different mechanisms of compensation in the three workshops will highlight this element of compensation. The rhetorical management style could be observed more clearly in the state-owned company rather than in the local private and foreign invested company. While the foreign-invested company was more inclined towards bureaucratic and scientific management, the local private factory found its strength in the quasi-familial management style.

In the human resource management literature, although the new management practices have an individual form, they often emerge from the broader framework based on the emphasis on workshop and a company’s ‘collective identification’ and team-based
work organization (Storey & Bacon 1993; Bacon and Storey, 1995). Whereas in certain sectors in the past, the ‘gang system’ was based on cooperative relations between employees, team-working (on the production line) redefines collectivism in management terms through the competitive relations between individuals within and between teams. Thus, the gang system is similar to Marx’s ‘collective worker’\(^{12}\) in the sense that they both emphasize on the cooperative characteristic of the labour process. While individualism and collectivism are not contradictory to each other, they are two sides of the same coin in new management practices. At the same time, the ‘collective worker’ has not disappeared from management’s redefinition of individualism. Through the re-articulation of individualism versus collectivism in management language, the formal relationship between individual employees has been restructured in order to undermine autonomous collective identities, viz. trade unionism. The thesis will exploit this re-articulation of management to further understand different factors influencing workers’ solidarity practices in the three workshops. However, it should be noted that such solidarity practices are different from collective action. The finding of the thesis is that although collectivism in the sense of autonomous collective identities is the highest in the local private workshop and the lowest in the foreign-invested workshop because of the strict application of new management practices, the latter had the highest level of collective action.

\(^{12}\) The collective worker implies the necessarily cooperative character of the capitalist process in which valorization depends on the collective functions of individuals, where “it is sufficient for [a worker] to be an organ of collective labour, and to perform any one of its subordinate functions”. (Marx, cited in Carter, 1985, p. 61; Martinez Lucio & Stewart, 1997, p.49)
Class analysis has always been given attention by feminists in spite of the tendency that the retreat from class has occurred across a range of academic sites, including feminism (Skeggs, 1997). This retreat is associated with the decreasing political legitimacy of some forms of socialism, the difficulties which are associated with the definitions of class, the demise of structuralism and the view that class is a relic of modernist theorizing. In such a way, class becomes unimportant, or additional to gender as the main analytic perspective. In this thesis, my strategy is to place class at centre stage in order to highlight the saliency of class-based feminist analyses. In general, feminists have developed four ways in which class can be understood.

First, in the additive approach, feminists list a number of bases for women’s oppression. This assumes a hierarchy of oppressions, whereby the more you can add to the list, the greater your oppression. However, critics argue that we do not experience ourselves in this disjointed way in everyday life (for example, see S. Acker, 1999).

The second approach pays attention to the situated nature of knowledge production that arises from women’s experiences. Capitalism and patriarchy are claimed to be interdependent on each other to make women workers more disciplined and harder working with low salaries. Important turning points in women’s lives and changes in marriage and family patterns directly influence their employment strategies, shaping the way that power works in the relations between management and women workers. Westwood (1984) offers vivid accounts on sisterhood and strength, weakness and division, the inherent contradictions in women’s lives under the conditions set by patriarchal capitalism. Focusing on working mothers, Lamphere (1985) describes how these are struggling to mediate a host of contradictions in combining the two roles, as workers and as mothers, through concrete behavioural strategies. Writing about Asian
woman workers, anthropologists try to explore the link between industrialization and the household, the labour reservoir for factories. In the case of East Asian women, industrialization has actually reinforced and intensified traditional family patterns, particularly parental control over daughters (Salaff, 1981). At the same time, the families’ situations are the first factor that shapes the way that married women work or organize their productive and reproductive work (Hsiung, 1996). In general, the forms of women workers’ consciousness turn out to vary, consisting of mixed feelings of family obligations and growing personal autonomy (Ong, 1987; Salaff, 1981; Hershatter, 1986; Honig, 1986; Wolf, 1992; Saptari, 1995). In the literature on South East Asian industrialization and women, Ong (1987) describes the image of multinational capital as eagerly tapping into a cheap and convenient pool of female labour by making use of women’s positions within cultures of ‘traditional’ gender role and ideologies. In the manipulations of female workers across the global assembly line, there are convergences between capitalist and non-capitalist, local and foreign patriarchies and between globality and locality. The forms of women’s response to management and industrialization are various, depending on culture (Ong, 1991). For example, Ong (1987) analyzes women’s forms of resistance to capitalist work discipline, such as occasional spirit possessions and hysterical seizures, from the feminist perspective. Although the approach offers a plurality of accounts and the complex ways through which women negotiate the relations of control which constitute their class situation, it is criticized on the grounds that women’s class identities are fixed either by their relationship to economic production or by their father’s or husband’s identity. In other words, class is a fixed position located in a hierarchy.
In the third approach, gender is treated as a power process rather than a structure. Such a position can be included in the theories of social identity formation because they both stress the contradictory and precarious processes through which we come into being. In these ways, identities, whether of class, gender, race, sexuality or ability, are conceptualized as fluid, contradictory and always in the process of being formed.

According to Joan Scott (1992), the nature of gender in the workplace has three components: gender symbolism and gender ideology, gender organization and gender identity. Gender ideology and symbolism refer to the dominant cultural interpretations of sexual differences inscribed in gender symbols. Gendered forms of social organization specify the constitutive role of gender in the ongoing functioning of social institutions, such as job segregation or household division of labour. Gender identity refers to the multiple and often contradictory experiences of femininity and masculinity which may differ from the hegemonic images offered by gender ideologies. Thus, gender is not just inscribed in the organizational hierarchy, in which men predominate in managerial positions, in skilled jobs or in the consequent income gender gap, but gender as a power process is also found in accepted notions about who women workers are and what they need. These cultural constructions of gender are conceived and used by management to legitimize and naturalize labour-management relations in factories. They are not purely ideological as they have material roots in shop-floor organization and are shaped by a set of social institutions outside the shop-floor in the labour market, the family, kin networks and even the state (Lee, 1998, p.28). In particular, in her study on women workers in two factories in a manufacturing sector, the women workers in the factory of the Chinese mainland have the identity of ‘maiden workers’ and those in the Hong Kong factory have the identity of ‘matron workers’. Such a conception of identity shifts our attention away
from defining class in terms of an abstract analytic category, for example working class, and from a job title such as manager or worker. It moves us much closer to seeing how class is produced through practices and social relations. Although Lee has made an important step in bringing gender into the labour process, she mainly focuses on work and workplace, while largely ignoring the external factors or social processes in society at large, like the state, trade unions and labour activism.

The fourth approach also explores the production of the subjects but using Foucauldian conceptualizations of power. The term production is used here not in the economic sense but rather in terms of the production of identity positions and the production of resistance. With regard to the production of resistance, social theorists such as Knights (1990), Willmott (1993) and Collinson (1994) try to demonstrate how individualizing tendencies in the capitalist labour process lead to fragmented and atomized subjects. They use a Foucauldian framework for the relationship between power and subject, in which subjectivity is analyzed as a ‘truth effect’ of the exercise of power (Foucault 1980; 1982). Collective consciousness (class, ethnicity, gender) is the formation and reformation of the self, as an aspect of subjectivity, which is the most important factor for understanding strategies of resistance. Self-formation is a complex outcome of subjection or subjugation and resistance to it. Power, then, does not directly determine identity, but merely provides the conditions of possibility for its self-formation – a process involving perpetual tension between power and resistance or subjectivity and identity. The approach has expanded the labour process to the areas outside production which directly influence workers’ daily life, such as consumption and gender relations, making a link between these seemingly compartmentalized areas of production and consumption, gender relations and labour management relations. However, as a critic of
the theories, because power is seen everywhere, resistance is also seen everywhere. As resistance is an ambiguous concept, which is not always translated into action, depending on different criteria, one has to interpret or assume that it is an act of resistance.

Criticizing the focus on power and subjectivity and tending to shy away from class politics, the Marxian labour process theorists argue that as the approach starts with individualizing employment relationships as designed by the new management practices, resistance, as a result, always takes a subjective form. However, this thesis argues that workers’ acts of resistance, although taking an individual or subjective form, also have a collective dimension.

In most of the research that explores the production of identity positions or identity formation, consumption becomes the site that connects ‘worker-producer’ and ‘citizen-consumer’ and where the juncture of different kinds of social identities is articulated. Paul du Gay (1996) argues that as knowledge of the dynamics of contemporary consumer culture is essential in order to understand the construction of work identities, an examination of work organization and conduct is no longer amenable to purely ‘productionist’ analysis. Lisa Rofel (1999) compares three different cohorts of women workers who came of age in three important periods in China’s recent history (the socialist revolution, the Cultural Revolution and the Deng era), and concludes that each period produces its own ‘imaginary of modernity’ with very different implications for women. The changing relationship between production and consumption through time is associated with the ‘imaginary of modernity’ or the ideological images of women. The new gender identities are produced based on the desire to overcome the limitations of the gender ideologies of the past. The study of Freeman (2000), which elaborates on how gender identities are produced through the consumption of high heels and corporate
uniforms by modern women workers, can be seen as an example of this approach. The study has taken into account many factors outside the workplace, like international political economy, gender ideologies and consumer culture, to make a link between economy and culture in the production of the subjects. While the women refuse to be fixed in a particular class position of Third World exploited women workers, the study can be criticized as ignoring the differences between these ‘pink’ collar women workers. Pun Ngai (2003) also demonstrates how a new subject of dagongmei (women migrant labourers from the countryside) is being formed in the consumer revolution in China. Not only is the relationship between production and consumption delinked, but also production is considered as subsumed under consumption, which gives rise to the formation of workers’ social identities. In general, the emphasis on consumption is often criticized on the grounds that it implies an end to the class struggle. However, workers’ inclination or disinclination to unionization depends on many factors which have nothing to do with whether their material life has improved or not. On the other hand, one of the dangers in using concepts of identity and subjectivity to frame analysis is that it may lead to assumptions that one can take up an identity, or a position, at will. For example, the identities of ‘dagongmei’, ‘maiden’ or ‘matron’ are all attributed by the authors but not used by the women themselves.

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My position in this thesis is that we are always already positioning ourselves within and being positioned by social structures. In particular, following Joan Scott’s

13 On page 4 of this chapter, I have already explained the separation between working class consciousness and collective action. The social movement literature has used different approaches to tackle this issue. For example, Jenkins, C.J. (1983) argued that the successful mobilization of economic and cultural and human resources is essential to the formation of a social movement. Crossley (2003) on the other hand, focused on the reproduction of radical habitat to explain the presence or absence of radical actions.

14 Lee (1998, p. 162) argued that these identities provide the repertoire of available representations and images that women themselves recognize as meaningful. However, she also acknowledged that the women “add their own twists and turns to these narratives and suffuse them with their own meanings”. In other words, there is a gap between the authors’ and the women’s interpretation.
approach, I will try to examine the gaps between a gendered form of social organization and gender identity in relation to the concept of skill. Thus, skill is both an objectively and socially constructed concept and class relations are formed through such gaps. Guided by Lee’s theoretical framework, which informs the gaps between gender symbols and gender identity, I also find that management makes use of the social construction of gender in different modes of labour control, from coercion (consent) to commitment (compliance) and compensation. While a quasi-familial management style and localism (the use of local networks and local relations to control workers and to reduce the cost of labour reproduction) are more evident in the small local private workshop, the hegemony of the state and the global market in the two big companies provides workers with job security, social status and relatively good incomes and high productivity thanks to advanced technology (which also helps to generate higher incomes). Quasi-familial management style and localism are used to compensate for low salaries and the marginalized and vulnerable positions of migrant workers in the city, while the hegemony of the state and global market compensate for the coercive elements such as the intensification of the industry and strict bureaucratic rules. In the small local workshop, the employers intentionally construct family identities among the workers, while the workers themselves see each other like brothers and sisters. In the two big companies, gender identity is mainly produced through consumption for the self and the family and through the relationship between the workers themselves and their families. Besides describing how management transplants gender ideologies into the masculine corporate culture, the thesis also emphasizes the gendered nature of ‘resistance’ in the workplace (Collinson, 2000). Although resistance takes a subjective form, gender is considered as an important medium of the workers’ struggle.
In order to emphasize the argument that class is not an objective social position but functions as a framework which provides access to various kinds of capital, I will also try to demonstrate the cases in which the workers seek to escape from negative class identification by taking up the discourse of improvement and through strategies of upward mobility (Skeggs, 1997; Hughes, 2004). Moreover, I will also try to find the abnormal cases that do not fit into the general pattern of working class and gender identity in a particular workplace, in order to demonstrate the indeterminate meanings of the behaviours of social actors and to illustrate the theoretical point of mutual constitution of multiple social identities.

Besides the effort to understand the gaps between gender ideologies, gendered form of social organization and gender identity, this thesis also highlights the issue of agency of women workers. The intersection of gender and class is examined not only in the site of the workshop through the social construction of skill, labour entry, labour control and management as well as workers’ different forms of resistance, but also outside of the factory walls (motivations for migration, relationships between garment workers with their prenatal families, communities, friends and co-workers (neighbours) as well as in the issues of love, marriage and family life).

Thus, one of the main theoretical contributions of this thesis is an elaboration of how gender and class intertwine in contemporary Vietnamese society. With regard to labour process theories, the thesis highlights the significance of the compensation element in the labour process in producing different levels of work commitment and job satisfaction. Instead of interpreting any workers’ behaviours in the oppositional binary of resistance and obedience, the thesis argues that there is a various forms of misbehaviour,¹⁵

¹⁵ Misbehaviour can be defined as bad or unacceptable behaviour, which does not follow the rules of the formal institution.
ranging between the two extremes. Against the dominant view of many feminists that gender has taken over the central position of class in the scene of workplace, the thesis argues that in the context of global capitalism, although class relations have changed into the different forms or techniques for governing the subject, class still frames social actors’ possibilities and access to a variety of capital. In other words, the salience of class politics can be articulated if one connects it with workers’ identification with the other social identities like gender, race and sexuality in social processes such as migration, urbanization, modernity and unionization.

**Methodologies**

In order to answer the research question, I carried out in-depth research in three garment companies in Hanoi. In other words, through the comparative ethnographies on the work and life of workers in the three companies, I have tried to answer the main research question of how women garment workers in the three companies cope with the economic reforms. As the three workshops are all located in Hanoi, my intention is not to make a generalization about garment workers in the whole country. In fact, Hanoi is the host of only a small number of garment factories in the whole country, with a high percentage of state-owned companies and very few joint-ventures with foreign partners and 100% foreign-invested companies. On the other hand, Ho Chi Minh City and Binh Duong have attracted the majority of foreign investment in labour-intensive industries in the industrializing zones in general and in garment industries in particular. In a way, the thesis focuses, geographically, on the impacts of the process of migration from northern rural areas to Hanoi and the impacts of the urbanization of Hanoi on female migrant

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16 The research questions were listed on page 3 (Introduction)
workers. However, with regard to the impact of globalization and technology on workers’ and women’s identities as well their collective actions, what was happening in the three garment workshops can partially reflect the mechanism on the wider scene. More importantly, by placing a particular workshop or person in their embedded contexts, I have always tried to analyze the case in the light of its particular locations in relation to the general picture. My strategy is not to find a case study that can represent all other cases. Rather, I have tried to link that particular case to the general situation to understand how it is formed or functions as a cell or an organ in the whole body. Therefore, it can be said that the thesis may make contributions to some understanding of the life and work of garment workers and female workers in Vietnam in general.

With regard to time, the comparison of the situations before and after the economic reforms will be made more analytically than substantially. As most of the garment workers are young and none of the workshops studied were established before the economic reforms, there were almost no informants who had had the experience of working during the subsidy period. Therefore, it was almost impossible to ask about the experience of garment workers before the economic reforms. However, an analytical comparison can be made on each of the issues, based on the literature written about the period before the economic reforms. In other words, although the subjects did not experience any changes, an investigation of how different or the same subjects are formed in each period can explain the (dis)continuity of the discourses.

The thesis is divided into two main parts. Methodologically, the element of comparison between the companies in the first part was stronger than in the second part. The first part consists of the first four chapters, which focus on the factory life or work life of the workers. In this part, as management styles decisively influence the labour
relations and workers’ attitudes towards management and the companies, the comparison of the three companies’ management style is clearer than that in the second part. As a result, the difference between the workers shaped by the companies’ different management styles is highlighted to a greater extent. As the second part focuses on women workers’ life outside the factory walls, the companies’ management styles become less important, while the difference between workers in terms of age, family background, local network in the city, and marriage status becomes a more important factor in determining women workers’ behaviours and attitudes. In other words, throughout the whole thesis, the individual person is the basic unit of analysis, while the company is only a factor which plays a role in shaping the difference between the workers. Thus, the comparison between the companies is sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit.

The main method I have used in this thesis is interviewing and participant observation. In order to conduct the fieldwork, I decided to ask for the permits to enter the workshops and work with workers every day for a period of two or three months in each workshop as a research student. As a result, I was able to both form acquaintances with workers, and move from one place to another place in the workshop to observe the whole production process, while I could still reveal my background as well as the purpose of my field research. However, it was not easy to obtain such permission in any workplace. TT, the local private workshop, was the easiest place to enter. As the owners and managers were the ones who understood my research best, they also did not see me as a threat. Possibly the owners might have thought that the workshop did not have any problems in relation to working conditions and labour relations in comparison with the general situation. Also after talking with the owner’s wife for a while, it turned out that
my father was a former colleague of her father, which also meant that I had not lied about my identity. As soon as I got the trust of the owners, I could enter the workshop at any time I liked and I could talk freely with the workers during their work. There were about 50 workers in this workshop and I conducted in-depth interviews with all of them. As the workers’ rented houses were close to the workshop, and the workers also had more free time at home, I was able to visit them at home more frequently than those in the other two workshops. Close relationships with the workers in this workshop allowed me to accompany them to make around eight visits to their parents’ families in their home villages. I also attended a number of wedding parties of TT workers.

In a joint-venture like MH, any strangers needed to get approval from the general director to enter the company. I got access to MH’s general director through the director of H, the Vietnamese state-owned partner of the joint-venture. MH’s general director used to be on his staff before she moved to the joint-venture. Being a master’s student in a part-time MBA program who was also writing her thesis, she was sympathetic with me and gave me permission to interview her garment workers. With the approval of the general director, I did not have to explain much about my research with shop-floor managers. As there were eight teams in the company and each team had about 100 workers, I could choose only Team 8 as the focus for the in-depth research.

The access to DG was the most difficult because the company was very sensitive to the issue of labour. I was introduced to the head of business and commerce of DG by an official in VINATEX. I imagine that the man was quite an influential figure in the company, so when he introduced me to the head of personnel and administration, the latter immediately gave approval for me to enter the company for a few months as a student researching garment industries. Luckily, I was not the first person to enter the
company as a research student. Before me, there had been a few students who wrote their master’s thesis on the company as an example of a successful state-owned company which had adapted quickly to the market economy. Moreover, a number of students from the technical college, who were specializing in garment techniques, had also done their internships on the shop-floor for a period of time. So when I first entered the workshop and introduced myself as a research student who wanted to collect data to write my thesis on garment workers, everybody from shop-floor managers to workers all thought that I was more or less like the internees. Of course, after the interviews and interaction with me, the workers gradually understood the purpose of my research better. Thus, among the three companies, I was able to approach the director and management staff directly only in TT. The permission to enter to both MH and DG could only be obtained by personal contacts with the officials at a higher level than the companies. Although the purpose of the field research that was used to introduce me to management in order to get the permission to enter the workshops was sometimes too general or abstract, in most cases, the informant workers understood the purpose of the research correctly.

An advantage of being a woman and a Vietnamese was that I could easily make friends and quickly build up close relations with women workers. At the same time, although I was born and grew up in Hanoi, I had no experience as a worker and found myself to be an outsider rather than an insider. This meant that there were many things that I did not know about the garment work and life of migrant workers, so I did not take the small details for granted. On the other hand, although the workers knew that I had been living abroad for a few years, the fact that I was still a student also reduced the distance between us and limited the effects of power relations. Moreover, many young girls liked to talk with me about their love affairs as I was also unmarried, while married
women were also able to share their family-related issues with me, because I was more or less their age. In general, they paid more attention to my unmarried status instead of my research or my work. While many women tried to convince me that if I continued to study, it would be harder to get married or to have children, some tried to comfort me with the thought that the marriage age in the city was different from that in the countryside, while others said that the higher the education a girl had, the more difficult it would be to find somebody to match with. This reflected the fact that the pressure of marriage was an obsession for the girls, while at the same time they were conscious that class played a big role in the decision of marriage. In other words, the patriarchal system was reproduced among the majority of women. Few asked what I would like to do after graduation, or whether it would be easier to find a job. One woman said that it would be the best if I applied for a position in the personnel department of DG, but of course I would need the support or sponsorship of some ‘high-ranking’ persons in the companies or of the higher authorities. Few said that they did not want to earn much money but would rather have a relaxing job like me: coming to the workshop, chatting with the workers and noting down something in the notebooks. This showed the limited knowledge of the workers who were not aware of how classed society based on knowledge production is emerging in the society at large. However, I also had the disadvantage of being a Vietnamese, doing research on Vietnamese society. As a Vietnamese, it is easy to ignore small details that are connected with wider social processes. In other words, the position of an insider of this kind enabled me to collect data easily, but in order to analyze the data one needed a more objective view of the general picture. As a social scientist, being aware of this location can help to overcome the limitations that it brings about.
The structure of the thesis

There are seven chapters in this thesis. Chapter 1 compares the management styles in the three workshops and emphasize the importance of compensation as a mode of labour control. The interactions between coercion, compensation and commitment represent workers’ negotiation with their employers. Each company has a different strategy for compensation to retain workers’ commitment, be it attitudinal or behavioural commitment, depending on the companies’ capacities, and workers’ trajectories (ages, family situations) and strategies. In the local private company, a quasi-familial management style was used to compensate for low salaries, out-of-date technology and a bad working environment. The workshop was particularly suitable for young and inexperienced workers, who have just come from their home villages and want to have training on the job. In the state-owned company, compensation was viewed in terms of relatively high incomes, as an advantage of making use of state assets and the social status of state employees and employment security. However, facing the same competition from global capital mobility and production flexibility as the private companies, workers had to work long hours and follow strict bureaucratic rules. The majority of workers in this company were unmarried women who possess good skill levels and have a few number of years of working experience. In the joint-venture, modern technology and a more transparent mechanism can be seen as the long-term advantage of the joint venture. Also at the beginning most of workers (quite a number of them married and from the surrounding areas) applied to the company in the hope of having shorter working hours (for example, compared with DG, the state-owned company). Later on, although the company did not keep its promise, workers still received rather competitive salaries because of good equipment. A high level of
deskilling of the production line did not require all workers to have high levels of skill. The system of daily quotas in combination with a high level of deskilling increased the level of intensification, a coercive element in the labour regime in this company. In general, compensation is a socially conditioned concept and is closely associated with gender relations. But how it interacts with gender is elaborated in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 tries to analyze skill and deskilling as subjective concepts. Among the three workshops, TT had the lowest level of deskilling and MH had the highest level of deskilling. This chapter analyses some new management practices such as like ‘nhay chuyen’ (jumping system) or a quota system with bonus, which reflects the contradictory forms of individualism versus collectivism in different workshops with different levels of deskilling and work organizations. The finding shows that competition between workers in the production line was the highest in MH and lowest in TT, while competition between teams was the highest in DG. Men’s skill was considered as higher than women’s skill and the recruitment of men was considered by management as preferable to that of women. At the same time urban workers were considered as more skilled than workers with rural backgrounds, due to the easier access of the former to vocational training and employment. While the state-owned company offered workers higher salaries and better employment stability, corruption was also found in the job entry procedures in this company because there was some illegal channeling that makes use of the official system of skill levels and vocational training. Workers’ bargaining power vis-à-vis management was negatively affected when they had to invest more on job recruitment. In the economic reforms the state actually welcomes the increasing individualism/collectivism in management terms and ignores the employers’ practice of
privileging men and allows the existence of unequal and opportunistic mechanisms which are an open invitation for rampant corruption.

Chapter 3 studies workers’ indirect and covert resistance. Although there are different ways to define resistance, in general the chapter argues that resistance should not be conceptualized as the opposite of obedience, and there is always a certain level of resistance in all workers’ misbehaviour. When the workers only have a wish to retain a sense of their own independence, the misbehaviour does not fit completely in the binary logics of resistance and obedience. However, although many workers’ misbehaviour such as work avoidance and even keeping distance, gossip, rumours, jokes, lies or attacks behind the back of the employers take the subjective form of resistance, they always contain some collective dimension for the collective worker and autonomous working class identities. More concretely, these forms of misbehaviour always reflect a part of the collective reality in which the antagonistic workplace relation is rooted, the desire for outright resistance, the function of consolidating the network by gossiping or spreading rumors, the tendency of individualizing employment relations in new management practices as well as the ambivalent and shifting positions of managers and privileged workers.

Chapter 4 argues that organizational structures of the trade unions in the whole country, the out-of-date conception of trade unions and the negotiating state in its relations with the civil society play a major role in explaining why most labour conflicts in garment workshops only remained unorganized and dispersed actions. The chapter demonstrates that there was certainly outright resistance in every workshop, even the ‘quietest’ one. The trade union structures and their actual operations in the past and at present are also analyzed to show that illegal strikes occurred as the only means that
workers could use to protect themselves. Moreover, the chapter also shows that the
dynamics of the negotiating state in Vietnam in its relation to the civil society contribute
to the authorities’ ignorance of the violation of the Labour Codes as well some biases in
the discourse of labour relations. So far, the mass media have only focused on reporting
cases in the foreign investment sector, while remaining quiet in the other sectors.
Possibly, such biases in the discourses of labour relations in the mass media might in fact
support workers in foreign invested companies to take more direct and collective forms of
resistance than their co-workers in the other two companies.

Chapter 5 deals with the process of migration of garment workers from the rural
areas to Hanoi. Although rural-urban migration is often seen as the result of the economic
gap between the areas, this chapter shows that it is difficult to separate economic
motivations from those which are related to gender. In a small local private workshop,
while localism functioned both as dividing and uniting migrant workers, there was strong
identification among workers with brotherhood and sisterhood, which played an
important role in reinforcing their commitment to the workshops. Class relations were
formed not only through the difference in the way management treated urban and migrant
workers but also in the way they reacted to management. The former, who were more
privileged by management, had more direct and overt forms of resistance than the latter.
Outside the workshop, rural urban gaps were manifested in the employment of the
majority of migrant in low-paid but labour-intensive jobs, in the living conditions and
consumption patterns of migrant manual labourers vis-à-vis those of urban citizens.
Moreover, such class relations have also derived from a desire to escape the negative
effect of working class identity and the desire for social upward mobility through
education, changing jobs or marriage.
Chapter 6 deals with consumption both as the source of employment and as a focus of new customer-oriented practices (consumerism or consumption revolution). While the intriguing relationship between production and consumption can be observed in the daily experience of garment workers, neither production nor consumption is seen as a totality: the understanding of one is incomplete without the other. On the one hand, consumption was used as a part of management strategies to keep workers’ commitment. On the other hand, workers’ consumer behaviours were tactical: they were neither completely subject to consumption as the techniques of the self nor did they freely create meanings of their consumer behaviours, which fell outside the social structures. In other words, the meanings of workers’ consumer behaviours were sometimes indeterminate. While class framed the possibilities of their access to certain kinds of consumer and cultural goods, class identities were not definitely clear in any consumer behaviours. However, in general, the consumption patterns of young women and married women were different. At the same time, women workers refused to be fixed in any particular category of modern or traditional women.

Chapter 7 links gender, sexuality and labour through the marriage market. On the one hand, there is a high percentage of unmarried women workers in the total female labour in the garment industry because the girls complain that they do not have time for relations due to long working hours. On the other hand, many garment girls were also described as leading a Western life-style with too much ‘freedom’, like living together with boyfriends without marriage, or even becoming part-time sex workers to earn some extra income. The dilemmas of returning home or continuing work in the city that unmarried women often faced, reflect not only the social and family pressures on marriage and their own obsession with the marriage issue, but also the insecure situation
of garment workers as they get older. Labour flexibility actually reduces the chance for more organized labour action. The new trends in the marriage market not only reflect the declining status of women workers in comparison with other female occupational groups, but also the return of patriarchal values in the form of new ideal images of womanhood. Such images are actually alienating from the daily experiences of women workers who both have to work hard and long every day to maintain the living of the family and have to fulfill the important tasks of mothers and wives. Such gaps are expressed through the anxieties and guilty feelings of the mothers, who think that they have not done their duties well enough. It is claimed that such gaps contribute to the problems of ‘e chong’ (unable to get married) of the garment girls in the marriage market as well as their fear of ‘e chong’.
PART 1

Chapter 1: Management strategies in the three workshops, with emphasis on compensation as an important element in the labour process

Introduction

Why do people perform work in particular settings and why do they exert effort? The question has occupied the minds of most sociologists in the field of labour and human resource management. In this thesis, the answer to this question, which relates to the issue of management strategies and labour control, is particularly important to an understanding of how women workers in the garment industry in Vietnam have coped with the changes in their daily lives after doi moi. Tackling the issue of labour control, which directly influences workers’ daily experience, the Marxist labour theorists emphasize the coercive element, which underlines the use of force or threats to make workers work to extract the surplus value of labour. As a result of coercion, workers consent to the labour regime, and this denotes a harmonious relation between labour and capitalism as well as the subordination of labour to the labour process (Burawoy, 1979). However, human resource literature argues that the final target of management is not consent but commitment, and it is this which keeps workers in the organization (Legge, 1985). Charles Tilly & Chris Tilly (1998) propose that it is indispensable to place compensation or the concrete coordination of interests between labour and capitalism outside class struggle, because these represent the implicit negotiations and bargaining between the employers and workers. Among the three modes of labour control, this

1 While Braverman (1974) was the founding father of labour process theories, which started with the objective conditions of work and labour control, Burawoy can be seen as another prominent scholar in the literature, who first emphasized the importance of subjectivity in the labour process. He argued that coercion and consent are two sides of the same coin, which it is impossible to separate.
chapter will try to highlight the important role of compensation, in its relationship with coercion and commitment. Compensation here should be understood not only as income or material rewards, but also working time, the status attached to the job or even emotional manipulation. Moreover, compensation has a gender dimension, because each company tried to focus on satisfying one kind of concern important to women workers.

The chapter will try to compare the three management strategies in three companies. In the private small company, ‘quasi-familial’ relationships between the owners and workers were supposed to compensate for workers’ low salaries, the low level of technology and a bad working environment. This strategy of management was particularly suited for young girls, who had recently come from the countryside and had not yet mastered the necessary skills. In the state-owned company, in spite of the company’s commitment to global social responsibility and the state’s guarantee of workers’ wellbeing, workers had to work very long hours every day (from 12 to 15 hours per working day) and had to follow strict bureaucratic rules. However, relatively high wage levels and job security and the social status of being state employees were considered as compensation for such coercive elements. The management strategy could be characterized as ‘ritual affirmative’ (Burawoy and Lukas, 1992), revealing the gaps between management strategies and labour practices. While women represented the majority of the companies’ workers, most women workers were unmarried and migrant, were supposed to accept easily the intensification of the job for long hours, and were not occupied with family responsibilities. At the same time, they also wanted to have some savings from working in the companies for a few years before getting married, returning home or moving to other jobs. However, unlike the girls in the local private workshop,

2 The term used by Burawoy and Lukas (1992).
3 How women planned (or their strategies) in this state company to use compensation will be elaborated.
female workers who were employed at DG had certain levels of skill and at least a few years of working experience before entering the company. MH was a newly established company and was jointly invested by a South Korean multinational. Therefore, the production line in MH was better equipped and also had a higher level of deskilling, which meant a higher level of productivity. High productivity connoted both a high level of job intensification (tension and pressure means coercion), but also a high level of compensation (the more pieces workers produce, the higher the salaries become). As a newly established factory, MH had to compete not only with other companies in the network of the South Korean mother company in business, but also with other garment companies in the area in order to attract skilled labour in the labour market. When the company had just been established, it advertised the advantage of shorter working hours\(^4\) (in implicit comparison with other garment companies, notably DG), and hence many married women and workers from the neighbourhood applied for the job. However, when production became stable, the company was not able to not keep this promise. Nevertheless, working hours at MH were slightly fewer than those at DG and high technology, which enabled high productivity, could somehow compensate for the high intensification. Also due to the high level of deskilling, those who did not have high levels of skill could catch up with the production line and could achieve high productivity. Management by daily quota was the most prominent feature in the management strategy of this company.

Thus, in all three factories, compensation plays its dynamic roles in relation to labour control and commitment as well as in the interaction between different workshops,

\(^{4}\) There were announcements that workers had to work from 8 am to 5 pm, which meant 8 hours, the standard working time for white-collar workers.
implicitly and explicitly. Compensation is a socially conditioned term. In other words, whether the compensation is made in cash, social capital or working hours, it is often subject to social conditions, such as management strategies of the company as the employer, or the types of worker whom the company wishes to recruit and who want to work for the company. Methodologically, the comparison between the companies is not made structurally, comparing one item after another in parallel. Rather, the chapter focuses on only the strong points of the company as its compensation for the coercive elements in its labour control. Implicitly, the strong point of one company is not that of one of the other companies and will not be taken into account in a detailed way.

The triangle of coercion, compensation and commitment

In this part, I will try to explain the theoretical framework of the chapter, which plays a very important role in the understanding of one of the main arguments of this thesis. Compensation explains why there are different management strategies in these three workshops and why a particular type of worker decides to work for a workshop with a particular management strategy. This sounds as if workers might have the freedom to choose where they want to work. To a certain extent, skilled and experienced workers can have more choices than unskilled ones, but in general workers’ choice depends on the economic, social and cultural capital they have in their access to the labour market as well as different kinds of companies. On the other hand, although in general most companies want to employ workers with good levels of skill, their business sizes as well the market

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5 I want to use the term ‘strategies’ instead of ‘styles’, because strategies concentrate on the planning/choice activities at the centre, with far less attention paid to the implementation at operating levels, while styles are less conscious, intentional and coherent (in Legge, 1985, pp.30-32). As commitment was only the target of management and because (as will be demonstrated in next part) in spite of having the compensation, some workers still did not stick to their commitment, the term ‘strategies’ is better suited in this case.
requirements for product quality, constrain their capacities regarding the payment that they can offer the workers, and their selection of the types of workers (skilled or unskilled, experienced or inexperienced). Thus, both employers and workers can make some choices (choice in the levels and kinds of compensation on the side of employers and choice of workplace on the side of the workers), but the scope of choice is different on each side. For example, some companies are in a position to select the best workers in the labour market, while some workers have no other choice except to work for a small company which offers their employees low salaries.

However, first of all, one should go back to the nature of the labour process in order to understand why the negotiation takes place. Classical labour process theorists like Braverman (1974) often placed ‘control’ at the centre of the labour process with the hope of restoring Marx’s understanding of exploitation (Cohen, 1987). The classical theorists started to develop different modes of labour control such as ‘scientific management’,6 ‘direct control’, ‘responsible autonomy’, ‘simple control’ and ‘bureaucratic control’.7 Criticizing the classical ‘control’ approach as being one-dimensional, Burawoy (1979) added a subjective dimension to the labour process in order to understand why surplus value continues to be obscure to workers. He argued that in any mode of labour control there are always two inseparable elements, namely coercion and consent. There are two main types of labour regime, the despotic regime, in which coercion prevails over consent, and the hegemonic regime, in which consent prevails (Burawoy, 1985, p.125). However, the despotism of early capitalism is gradually being replaced by the hegemonic regime because of a combination of workplace and state regulation emerging to buttress workers against the extreme excesses of market

6 See note 4 of Introduction.
7 See the explanation of these different modes of labour control in notes 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 of Introduction.
despotism. Alan Tuckman and Michael Whitall (2002, pp. 66-68) develop the term ‘hegemonic despotism’ to explore how the hegemony of capital with its capacity for global mobility is established and maintained in the workplace regime, given little evidence of resistance to this capital restructuring.

“Under hegemonic despotism, labour vulnerability to the national and international mobility of capital leads to a new despotism, which is built on the foundations of the hegemonic regime. Management turns the hegemonic regime against workers, relying on its mechanisms for coordinating interests to command consent to sacrifice. If formerly labour used to be granted concessions on the basis of the expansion of profits, it now makes concessions on the basis of the relative profitability of one capitalist vis-à-vis another” (Nichols, Cam, Chou, Chun, Zhao & Feng, 2004, p. 664).

However, in any case, there is always a certain level of coercion, either by management or the tyranny of capital mobility, or a combination of both. However, Burawoy’s approach is criticized by literature on management as being sensitive to a range of social relations relating to labour control, rather than paying attention to the success or failure of the management project (Nichols, Cam, Chou, Chun, Zhao & Feng, 2004). While Burawoy’s view of the manufacturing of consent has more meaning as a mode of labour control, it is often supposed that it works. Management theories suggest that in general the generation of workers’ commitment is the target of the management project rather than the manufacturing of consent. Commitment suggests a voluntary wish to continue working for an organization. This wish is due to affective attachment to an organization, but is also due to factors other than emotion, and may be translated into the behaviour of continuation of organizational membership. Commitment is different from
fear or compliance. Compliance occurs when the workers play their game with the employers to gain more benefits in wage-effort exchange and it ensures individual and collective survival (Cole 1979; Lincoln & Kallenberg 1990, Legge, 1995, Durand & Stewart, 1998). Thus, in the case of commitment, workers do not have to engage in any game with management, and it does not relate to workers’ collectivism in the understanding of trade unions. In the case of Vietnam’s garment industry, commitment can be more relevant to the workplace regime at the micro level than compliance and consent, because the state-party controlled unions have not developed into a vibrant independent social movement that can incorporate all workers (both formal and informal ones) in their official bargaining.

Also criticizing the labour process theorists for emphasizing the link between control and class struggle, Charles Tilly & Chris Tilly (1998) state that work, in general, depends on transaction among parties, notably between producers and employers. Such transactions vary in the relative weights and asymmetries of three classes of incentive: coercion, compensation and commitment. Coercion consists of threats to inflict harm, compensation offers contingent rewards, and commitment invokes solidarity (Collins, 1975; Patrick, 1995, Tilly & Tilly 1998, p. 74). Specifically, solidarity includes not only recognized membership in a valued category but also a wide variety of long-run rewards and punishments. Coercion, compensation and commitment have distinctive meanings but fuzzy boundaries. For example, threats of harm often concern possible withdrawals of contingent rewards, whereas long-term threats and rewards shade over into invocations of solidarity. Thus, there are several overlapping aspects between coercion, compensation and commitment, and they all aim at labour control, both physical and cultural. (Tilly & Tilly, 1998, p. 73). In this chapter, I will also try to apply the Tillies’s triangle of
coercion, commitment and compensation in examining the management strategies of the three garment workshops in Hanoi. I will try to emphasize compensation as the key term to management strategies in each workshop in relation to the others in the context of a competitive labour market and capital market, both locally and globally speaking. When compensation is considered as the dominant concept among the three in the triangle, it is easier to evaluate whether a management project works, to a certain extent. I will also try to argue that compensation should be understood not only in terms of material rewards but also in terms of psychological bonding between employers and employees. Moreover, the form in which compensation is made (material support, time or emotion) depends on what the main concern of the majority of women workers who are employed by the company is. At TT, the compensation is quasi-familial labour management relations, as most of the workers are young girls who have left home for the first time. At DG, the compensation can be understood as high salaries and social status as state workers. Material rewards, which are used to finance the growing demands of young migrant girls but also skilled workers, can compensate for long working hours. At MH, the compensation is either shorter working hours or competitive salaries, depending on production demands. The target of this compensation is married, skilled workers and/or those coming from areas surrounding the company.

**General Technical and Business Characteristics of Garment Production Lines**

In this part, I will present a brief review of how different business trajectories of these companies might influence their management strategies in relation to their decisions on the forms and levels of compensation to workers. Besides explaining the basic technical aspects of the garment production line, I want to argue that management
strategies are not something that the employers and management staff plan out of thin air, but are constrained by the technical aspects of the industry, the market (types of customers), the business sizes of the companies as well as their positions on the international and national political and economic map.8 In this part, I will focus more on the general technical and business aspects of the production line that might influence management strategies, while in the next part I will explain in more detail how the business sizes and the political and economic positions of each company play a role in their management strategies.

Since the normalization of diplomatic relations between the US and Vietnam in 1995, many US firms have begun to place orders with Vietnamese producers through East Asian NIC firms. The granting of Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) status lowered the tariff rates tremendously and made the prices of Vietnamese garments more competitive. In particular, after the signing of the Bilateral Trade Agreement in 2001, more and more US firms came to visit Vietnamese factories and placed direct orders. In contrast to the EU firms, the US firms only signed large orders with the producers who could meet their strict requirements in terms of material, production capacities, facilities, and workers’ working conditions. They also preferred to have direct contacts with Vietnamese producers rather than going through East Asian middlemen. However, since the first half of 2003, the US has started to apply quotas to Vietnamese garments as they do to other developing countries to curb this sharp increase as a threat to the US garment industry. As a result in the coming years the Vietnamese garment industry will have to face tougher

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8 Actually, all these factors are intangibly crystallized into the size of the production line or the level of deskilling. In the next part, I will try to demonstrate the manifestations of these factors in the daily activities of organizational life. The chapter focuses more on the comparative descriptions of management strategies as outcomes rather than on the factors influencing the outcomes. Even so, it is important to mention these factors.
competition in the global commodity chains. During the time I conducted the fieldwork, MH was producing for the US, while DG was exporting mostly to traditional markets like the EU and Japan. The differences between these two markets were that the quantities of an order from the former were much bigger than those of the latter, but the quality required for the former was less strict than that for the latter. On the other hand, the markets of TT were not fixed, serving both domestic and foreign customers. Sometimes it produced for export to Eastern Europe, and sometimes to African countries like Angola. In general, the differences related to market influence, the level of workers’ skills and income, as well as management strategies.

As everywhere else in the world, most garment workshops in Vietnam are organized as a production (assembly) line, which means that a worker cannot complete a product on his or her own, but needs the cooperation of others (the collective worker). When work is divided into a number of tasks, one can call this the technical division of labour. However, the transformation from craftwork to production line is called the process of deskilling. In general, deskilling means a separation between conception and execution on the production line to solve the structural need of capitalism to achieve control over work (Braverman, 1974). The latter has more implications for labour control than the former. Technically, the level of deskilling of a production line is expressed in the number of steps that the technical department delineates in the whole procedure to assemble one product, as well as the time (in seconds) associated with each step. For example, in the large state-owned company studied by Angie Ngoc Tran (2002, p. 60), there were over 70 steps needed to complete a man’s or woman’s shirt, while there were 172 steps needed to assemble a coat. Each step may be different in the level of difficulty and time to perform, but the gaps are not very great.
more steps (tasks) depends on the size of the production line (the planned number of workers on a production line). At DG, there were around 45 to 50 on a production line, at MH this number was 100, but at TT the maximum was only 20, while the minimum could be three or four persons (when the workshop was producing unsophisticated products for domestic markets). In general, the implication of different levels of the technical division of labour is that the more a worker (with a low level of skill) specializes in a task, the easier it is for him or her to achieve higher productivity and better quality in executing the task. This relates directly to the levels of material compensation. The implication of different levels of deskilling is that the more a worker (with a low level of skill) specializes in a task, the more difficult it is for him or her to master the whole production process, and thus to become a skilled worker. However, this does not prove to be true for already skilled workers. Moreover, the issue of skill, productivity, and quality also depends on the markets and customers. For example, although MH was newly established and workers were not so used to modern technology and the levels of workers’ skill were uneven, workers’ productivities improved rapidly after a short time of operation, not only because of a higher level of deskilling, but also because they produced the same kind of product\footnote{Short trousers for men (casual clothes).} for a long time (sometimes up to six months) in a big order from the US.\footnote{As a joint venture with a South Korean multinational, MH was given priority in receiving a big order for simple products from US customers by its South Korean mother company during the early stage. Sometimes, the production of the same type of products could last up to six months.} On the other hand, DG mainly produced shirts and coats for Japan and the EU, and the markets required products in small quantities but asked a high level of quality. As result, the orders were often small and the organization of the production line had to change constantly to meet the demands of flexible
production.\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, although workers at DG had higher levels of skill and had more working experience, their productivity was affected by this flexible production.

Last but not least, workers’ piece wages are determined by the price per piece (a complete product) that the company offers to the whole group of workers undertaking the production process of that piece (piece price). The technical staff have to work out a standard time (in seconds) to perform one task, and then the standard time to produce a complete product. Then they divide the piece price into the total number of seconds for a complete product in order to find out the labour cost per second and then multiply this by the number of seconds for a task to find out the labour cost per task. Managers can inform workers of the standard time in seconds to perform one task as well as the labour cost for each task. A worker’s piece-wage is the result of the labour cost per task in multiplied by the number of pieces the worker produces within a period of time. The products like coats and shirts, which require a high level of skills, are often supposed to have higher piece rate per task\textsuperscript{13} than short trousers or casual clothes. When the companies, as in the case of DG, can sign contracts directly with customers without going through middlemen, workers were also supposed to enjoy higher piece prices. However, these were only the external factors (technical and market factors) that might influence workers’ levels of material compensation. A more important factor that determines workers’ compensation (not only in form but also in level) is the company’s business performance and management strategies. The following part of the chapter will carefully examine the management strategies of each workshop in relation to compensation.

\textsuperscript{12} I once witnessed that the quantity of products was so small that even after two days of production, one team had to change the whole organization of the line to start a new order.
\textsuperscript{13} The tasks that are used to compare piece wages have the same task content (level of difficulty) and take the same amount of time to perform.
TT: Quasi-familial labour management strategies (paternalism)

TT, which employed only 50 workers, was a small local workshop in Co Nhue, a suburban village in Hanoi, with around 40 or 50 households and small garment workshops. Among these, TT was considered a rather well established one because the owner, whose name was T, had set up his business as a private limited company which had a legal status and the obligation to pay corporate tax to the government. On the other hand, a number of garment workshops in Co Nhue, which were of more or less the same size as TT, did not register themselves as legal companies. However, like most of the workshops in Co Nhue, the workshop was located inside the home of the owners’ families, making the boundary between business, work and life become blurred. TT did not sign labour contracts with the workers, did not pay workers any extra amounts for health insurance or social security alongside piece-waged salaries, and no trade unions were set up to protect workers’ rights. As anywhere else in the garment industry, the most coercive element was the physical control of labour in the workshop: workers had to work from 8 am to 8 pm (with a break of about one and half hours for lunch), 7 days a week, even during national holidays. Workers had to save up their holidays for sick leave and special occasions at home like weddings, funerals and so on. However, they could only obtain holidays with the permission of the owners. This meant that owners might agree or might not, depending on whether the business was busy or a deadline for the delivery of output was coming soon. If the workers took holidays of their own accord, they might get fined by the owners. The working environment at TT could be considered as below standard: there was a high density of machines, which were out of date, in a small space with few ventilating fans on one side wall. So there was a high level of pollution (dust from the cloth). However, workers were not provided with uniforms, caps
and masks. They did not have to wear masks during work. Moreover, they had to buy needles for the sewing machines they were using. The more needles they broke, the more expenses they had to pay for out of their own salaries.

Among the three companies, discipline at TT was the least strict. The owners and managers did not strictly supervise workers’ implementation of the rules that they devised. For example, according to the rules, workers were not allowed to talk while working. However, in fact, only when workers were talking loudly when the owners passed by would they be reminded of the rule. Only when the deadline for delivery was coming close would, H, the owner’s wife, go around the workshop and ask people to talk less and to concentrate on their work. Sometimes workers could even bring their friends into the workshop, and these could sit next to them and chat while they were working. When one worker finished his or her task, he or she could always come over to their co-workers’ place to have a chat. When workers arrived at the workshop late, the managers would only remind them, but there was no financial sanction for getting to work late. Eating in the workshop was not officially allowed, but was also not forbidden. It was acceptable if the girls did not eat all the time or do it too openly. Compensation for defects did not become an official rule and rarely were workers fined for making mistakes. In explaining this loose discipline, T, the owner, told me: “I think that making garments is a tough job. If discipline is too strict it will not motivate people to work hard”. Lan, the oldest worker who had 10 years’ working experience in private garment factories in the South, often complained about the low piece-rate wages that the owners offered the workers there. At the same time, she also pointed out the good side of the workshop: “However, the good thing here is that the owners are ‘thoang’ (flexible and
easy going). In my former company in the South, we were never allowed to speak freely like here”.

However, the main management strategy that the owners used to keep the workers working for them was the quasi-familial relationship between the employers and workers or a kind of paternalistic\textsuperscript{14} despotism of labour regime. In my first interview with T’s wife, she made a general statement of what she understood as the basic needs of workers towards the employers. She deliberately emphasized the importance of the compensation for the absence of warm family relations when young workers left their home for the first time:

\textit{To workers, the most important thing is wages. The next is ‘cach ung xu’ (the ways the employers treat their workers). Young women workers, who are living far away from home, are often ‘thieu thon tinh cam’ (lack affection). It is important for the manager to understand this psychological need for affection among workers. Even for some workers, employers’ behaviour is considered as more important than wages.}

Thus, the compensation was made strategically in terms of emotion (or control by emotion) but not in material rewards because the workers were young and had just left the protection of their own family. However, the way such emotional relations were applied to male workers was different from those applied to female workers. Such a difference was based on femininity and masculinity to naturalize the control relationships. While both the boys and the girls were considered as the employers’ nieces and nephews, the boys were trained to become mature men with good work ethics to be able to handle their own businesses, while the girls were supposed to become good wives and mothers in the

\textsuperscript{14} Paternalism implies some kind of patron or protection from the seniors to the juniors.
future. Good women meant working hard and having proper speech and manners. The privileged positions of male workers in the workshop both revealed and grounded gender inequality or discrimination against women in the society.

Male workers in the workshop were often considered as closer relatives to the owners than female workers. Hence, their entitlement to more privileges in the workshop was not questioned by the female workers. Among the 10 male workers\(^{15}\) in total I met in the workshops, one was the owner’s real elder brother and one was the son of his sister. Both worked in the cutting section. The mechanic of the workshop was also his cousin. All these three relatives were living with their own families in Co Nhue and went to work at TT every day. While there were three others who worked on the production line as garment assemblers, the remaining four who functioned as both cutters and logistic workers were allowed to live inside the residence/workshop with the owners’ family. The girls often told me that these boys were considered as adopted nephews of the owner. Tru, the main cutting worker, who stayed longest at TT, was the son of the woman whom T considered as his own sister during his military service in Vinh Phuc some 15 years earlier. Huy was the son of a friend to whom the owner owned a debt for giving him strategic advice in business. Bang and Nguyen were also nephews of some close friends of the family. They did not have to pay rent for accommodation like the girls, and at the same time they were treated more like family members. They were allowed to sit at the same table and eat the same food during the meal. The boys could use motorbikes for the workshop’s business but sometimes they were also allowed to go out with girlfriends on the motorbikes with the permission of the owner. T even sent Huy on a two-year training program in mechanics at a college in order to replace his own cousin. T paid the tuition,\(^{15}\) The number of male workers in the workshop was also not stable. However, the highest number at a time (during my fieldwork) was 10, while it could be 6 or 7 most of the time.
transportation fees as well as pocket money for Huy, who could avoid half a working day by going to school. However, in general, the household economy also operated without a definite working time, or a clear-cut division of labour. At the same time, there was also no a clear boundary between work and family activities. T intended that as members of a family business, when the boys saw a job that needed to be done, they would do it regardless of time or explicit orders from the owners. By intentionally having quasi-family, quasi-employee-employer relationships with workers, the owners could utilize the flexibility of male workers not only regarding working hours but also the gender division of labour. The boys had to do different kinds of jobs like cutting, buttoning, driving, carrying goods, cleaning and cooking, which were both men’s work and women’s work. For example, Bang who liked cooking and was good at cooking, was often the one who cooked for the whole family. At the beginning of the order when there was a huge amount of work in the cutting section, Bang joined that section. Sometimes one saw him doing buttoning. Sometimes he had to go to buy some material inputs which were out of stock. And sometimes he could also be seen doing nothing and chatting with the girls working on the production line. While Huy did not have to cook, it was assumed he was the one who would wash the dishes after the meal. At the same time, the division between the work of the workshop and the work of the owners’ family was not at all clear to the boys. Huy sometimes became the driver of Aunt H, even for purposes other than business. On the 3rd anniversary of T’s mother’s death, Bang had to stay overnight to cook for the party, while Tru had to wake up at 3 am to prepare for the removal of the tomb. In general, the boys who had multi-functions received higher salaries and had more physical freedom and mobility at work than the girls working on the production line, while they did not have to pay for lodging.
Treating the boys like his own nephews, T, the owner, not only wanted to teach the boys the technical aspects of garment production, but also work ethics, which was important for the boys’ future career or business. T often said that a man’s dream was not to be employed by others for his whole life but to set up his own business. However, according to him, in order to make that dream come true, the boys would have to work harder and cultivate work ethics from now on. For example, when seeing that the yard in front of the workshop was dirty, the boys should not have waited for each other to do the job, which was considered as women’s work. As a work ethic, the boys should have the habit of doing it without any hesitation or being reminded. Such work habits would be very valuable for the boys’ future.

Although the rhetoric of work ethics was not very successful because the boys were still lazy and needed to be instructed all the time, in general the emotional approach that constructed the family identity did work to a certain extent. One day I was invited to have lunch together with the family. When it was time for lunch, the boys quickly carried food from the kitchen to the middle room, which was used for quality checking and packaging products. They performed one task each so that the meal could be served. Observing the cooperation between the boys, I asked Tru: “Did you know each other before coming here?” Tru replied proudly: “No, we came from different areas but now we are living under the same roof with Uncle Tuan. So we are brothers”. Only when everything was ready for lunch did T and H come and sit down on the mat where the dishes were placed. The scene looked like a normal lunch in any big family in the countryside of northern Vietnam.

With regard to the female workers, only a few were relatives or friends of the family, while the rest were introduced to the workshop through the network of workers’
friends and local people or through vocational centres, or came to the workshop themselves when seeing the advertisement in front of the workshop. The emotional compensation was made in the way the owner’s wife saw the girls as her own nieces, giving them a means of livelihood and practical advice about their growing female bodies, teaching them the proper speech and behaviour of young ladies, and training them to be a ‘good’ (which often means hard-working) wife and mother in the future. For example, the following was what she told me about how disappointed and betrayed she felt when her ‘beloved ones’ left the workshop after having a conflict with her:

Some years ago, when their mother brought them here from the countryside, the two girls looked thin and spindly like children. One was 16 and the other was only 17. The mother, who looked poor and miserable, asked us to take care of the girls. She brought five kg. of good sticky rice from her village to give us as a present. Five kg of good sticky rice could be seen as an asset in the countryside. I cannot forget the image of how the mother and the girls came here to apply for jobs on the first day. We loved them and considered them as children in the family. Of course, I could not teach them everything carefully like my own daughter, but I could also advise them about important things like proper speech, proper behaviour, work and so on. In general, there are so many things to teach. Can you imagine that they even did not know why there is pain during menstruation and all kind of that stuff? I had to tell them everything and how to keep the body hygienic. You see, we were just like their parents. If they did not work for us but for the others, they could not have overcome difficulties they faced in their first days in the city. They were very unwise. They should understand that it is this workshop which will take care of them when they are sick or even tired because they do not have family or relatives
here. Before I also used to be a worker, so I know. When one goes to work, what one needs is not only wages but also love between people so that we can help each other in difficulty. Money is not everything. Moreover, I privileged them so much that other girls were jealous about that. Now they said: “Aunty, you just think of Oanh and Ly. Now, they all left, didn’t they?” I also visited their families in the village. I gave them money every time. Their houses looked very poor. There was nothing valuable within the four walls. Besides workers’ salaries, we have to pay so many things when they are sick or hospitalized. Now (when the two girls left the workshop), we should not blame them because they were raised in such circumstances. Those people do not care much about their own future. They do not live with discipline. They do not strive hard for tomorrow.

What she said was very much rhetoric, because the small amount of charity or gifts to her family or some instruction could not hide the hierarchical relationships that existed between the labourers and the employers. Of course anybody could see the difference between the workers and the owners’ own children, who stayed in their grandparents’ house all the time and only came back to the house/workshop in the evening because the owners were afraid that the air pollution in the workshop might affect their health. However, as Wray noticed, community relationships were maintained through charitable donations and sponsorships (Wray, 1996, p.703). In particular, instead of partially paying the cost of health insurance to workers as required by the Labour Law, he was willing to pay the hospital fees and treatment expenses for workers when they were sick or hospitalized. This did not happen in any other workshops in Co Nhue. As a result, some workers said they found it difficult to move to other workshops in Co Nhue which even offered them higher wages. The owners often went to visit girls’ houses in the
neighbourhood and brought them some fruit or cakes as gifts. When they did not bring anything or forgot to bring money, they even borrowed workers’ money to buy some food from the street vendors for them. The next day, the girls happily asked the owners to pay them the money back. After telling me the story, one of the girls in the group said: “You see, nowhere can we have such an easy-going owner-worker relationship like this”. Thus, maintaining a community relationship with the girls was one of the strategic ways of obtaining their commitment.

Such quasi-familial labour relations could easily be shaped in the context of the household economy and the communal relationship in the rural areas (Simmons & Kalantarridis, 1995). Although Co Nhue is a part of Hanoi nowadays, a few years ago, it was only a village. At the same time, the egalitarian labour-management relations in the past also exerted some effects on the current situation. The workshop owner family was leading a rather modest life in comparison to its income and status. On the second floor, where the couple lived, the furniture was out-of-date. The dress they wore and the motorbikes they rode did not show that they were entrepreneurs. In the socialist life-style, a bourgeois living standard, which was higher than the average one of the working class or any bourgeois behaviour that tended to show off luxury life-styles would be a target for political education. On the occasion of Lunar Mid July Festival of 2002, which was considered as the second biggest festival of the year after Tet (the New Year Holidays), T did not allow any workers to go home that day because of urgent production requirements. Usually, an abundance of good food would be cooked in the family on that day as an offering to the ancestors. However, the owners’ family did not make anything special on that day. The wife told me that she was afraid that the workers would not be able to concentrate on work while the smells of good food were coming from the kitchen.
She herself admitted that the business did not allow her family to have a normal family life.

When I was in the workshop at the beginning, I often heard that some young girls admired the owner: “He is the director but he works like a worker”. As mentioned before, the owner (the husband) deliberately set himself up as an example of work ethics for all the members of his family business. H herself also operated the sewing machines sometimes when she had free time, even though it happened once that the next day a worker had to disassemble all the pieces H had done because of mistakes. The images of hard working Uncle and Aunt that T and H tried to construct followed the ideological representations of socialist leaders. There is something similar between such representations and the way Melinda Tria Kerkvliet and Le Van Sinh (1997) presented the image of an ideal leader of the working class in the eyes of retired workers in a state-owned cigarette factory:

“During the subsidy period, they recall that life was difficult and people were generally poor, from directors down to workshop workers. Nevertheless, people had regard and feeling for each other. They often mention Nguyen Quang Chinh, former factory director (1963-1969) and Party secretary (1976-1977, in the same factory), to illustrate these sentiments. He lived with his wife and children in the same cramped housing with other workers. He was fair and did not play favourites, for he did not give his wife a high position in the factory. When he visited the workshops, he worked with the workers instead of keeping his hands locked behind his back. Workers called him ‘uncle’ (bac). Indeed, he was a leader who was as poor as the workers, and when he died many workers cried as they would for a father” (Kerkvliet & Sinh, 1997, p. 16).
Thus, the socialist environment might somehow influence the owners’ behaviour in the way they represent themselves towards the workers. In other words, the discourse of egalitarianism in the past could also partially shape the current reality on the shop-floor of local capitalists.

In general, the main management strategy that the owner used to compensate for low wages and other coercive elements of the labour process was the quasi-familial and community relationship. On the one hand, this relationship was created to legitimate the control relations. On the other hand, it was influenced by not only a village relationship in the rural setting but also the rhetoric of egalitarian labour management in the past. According to Hochschild (1983), labour management became the management of hearts. In the context of Vietnam, the commercialization of the labour force reinforced the aspect of the commercialization of human feelings.

**DG: Ritual affirmative management strategies**

In general, DG fitted the label of hegemonic despotism, because social insurance schemes and state and company employment regulations coexisted with the ‘rational’ tyranny of capital mobility over workers. The compensation for long working hours and strict discipline as the most coercive element in the labour process was the prestige of being state employees, having stable employment and rather competitive salaries within the garment industries. Such compensation was made through the ‘ritual affirmative’ management strategies, or a kind of rhetoric and ideological slogans rather than measures aimed at improving labour practices in reality.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the role of labour has been changed in the state sector reform, which gave management more autonomy in decision-making relating to
labour. At the same time, the economic reforms opened the way for liberalization in the garment sector, leading to higher pressure for competition and flexible production. Both state and private companies were distributed export quotas based on their production capacities and performance. This meant that there was a high degree of competition among garment companies in order to obtain more export quotas. Within the state sector, as mentioned in the Introduction, state corporations were encouraged to grow bigger in order to be able to sign big contracts with the US and EU customers. Competition took place not only within companies under the corporation, within workshops under a company, but also within production teams (or lines) under a workshop. They were financially independent of each other, but were business rivals in the competition for higher allocations of funds and export orders and quotas. Thus, each member of a production unit had to make a commitment to good performance to the state and the market or the multinational traders and the mother company.

According to a manager of DG, socialist practice in management-labour relations no longer existed in this state company. The vice-director of workshop No.6 said that the company was trying to apply the ‘capitalist way of management’. He added that because “our facilities and equipment are not as good as those in capitalist countries”, so “our way of capitalist management must be brutal”. Implicitly, the vice-director meant that in the transitional period abundant labour power was being used as compensation for the lack of technology in order to make productivity as high as in the developed countries. Thus he admitted the overwhelming coercion in DG labour control. On the other hand, he ambiguously recognized its teleological capitalist development, in which ‘our capitalism’ seemed to be located at a primitive early stage.
Long working hours are very common in the whole garment industry in Vietnam. In such a general context, DG was the most notorious in this sense. During the high season, workers had to work until 10 pm every day, including Sunday and Saturday. One worker whose home village was in Nghe Tinh Province, a province in the centre of Vietnam which is far away from Hanoi, said that DG’s reputation for long working hours spread even as far as to his remote village. When he returned home on vacation, he was surprised when his villagers asked him if such a rumour was true or not. Many quit the company, simply because they could not stand such long working hours.

The absence of a particular worker represented a big issue on the production line of any garment workshop. The absence of one worker, especially a skilled one, could influence the whole production process. Even if the manager assigned another worker to replace the position of the absentee, it was not easy for the new worker to achieve the productivity of the one who was officially assigned to the position. Such a delay in one task could lead to stagnation in a range of tasks on the production line. The control of absenteeism could be said to be the real battlefield between workers and management in DG. A manager told me that only a few years ago, the girls often demanded to take leave for a few days to go home to help their families to harvest crops. Although the families could always hire labourers in the village and pay them an amount which was much lower than what their daughters earned for one day in the garment factory, it was considered as the girls’ obligation to help their parents during the harvest time and it was the habit of the girls to combine factory and farming work. However, when the factory work became more stable, the control of absence became stricter. If workers were absent for a fourth time without legitimate reasons, they would be dismissed. Besides sick leave, only ceremonies such as funerals or weddings of family members could be counted as
legitimate reasons. It should be mentioned that workers could not simply say they were sick and then ask for sick leave. They had to go for a thorough examination by the factory doctors. Only with the approval of the doctors would they be allowed to apply for a limited number of days of sick leave in accordance with the doctor’s recommendation. However, only if the worker had a fever was she or he considered as being sick by the factory doctor. Mai got married one year ago and had not become pregnant. She wanted to go to a gynaecologist for a check. In order to do so, she needed a day off which also meant that she needed the approval of the factory doctors for this. However, she came back to the workshop from the factory doctor disappointed. Her friend told me that she did not have a fever so she was not allowed to take even one day off to see doctors at the hospital, even for such a delicate reason. Sometimes the workers looked pale and exhausted, but they would only receive some words from the doctor like: “If you still can work, go back to the workshop and try to work”. Thus, without having serious symptoms such as fever or severe physical pain, workers were not considered to be sick. With regard to childcare leave, if a woman worker who had a sick baby wanted to apply for leave, she would also have to bring the child to the company to get approval from the factory doctors. Young mothers whose houses were far away from DG were very irritated about such rules, because the cold weather outside could make their babies’ problems worse. In general, in order to prevent workers from playing tricks to get more holidays, the bureaucratic rules to control absenteeism were very rigid and even became ridiculous.

The changes in management–labour relations are also expressed in the daily language between managers and workers. Officially, speaking through the loudspeakers to the whole factory, the workshop director often addressed workers as comrades. Understandably, the generation of the directors had spent their youth in a socialist
environment where managers and workers equally called each other comrades. However, the informal language on the shop-floor in daily life between management and workers went the opposite way. Trung, the former male foreman often called workers ‘may’ and referred to himself as ‘tao’.\(^{16}\) When the foreman got angry at workers’ mistakes, he might use humiliating language like ‘\textit{ngu nhu con lon}’\(^{17}\) or ‘\textit{d me may}’\(^{18}\). Workers considered these as dirty words which seriously hurt their feelings. Some young workers who had just entered the company even cried when scolded in this manner. They said that they could not get used to the kind of language of ‘fish and crab sellers in the market’ (\textit{hang tom, hang ca})\(^{19}\). One girl who had worked in the company for some years said that they had become ruder and tougher in dealing with the co-workers after working in the company for a while. If they just kept quiet, they would be bullied. Another girl agreed with this point by telling her own experience. Before entering the company, she did not know how to speak vulgarities, but now she could do it easily without feeling shy any more. Workers got used to the ‘rude environment’. One said: “I could not understand why, but over here if we don’t shout at each other, production does not go smoothly. Maybe that is the proper way people ought to behave at work”. Thus, not only the manager shouted at the workers, but the workers did the same to each other. Such changes in the girls’ behaviour somehow reflected the despotism of the labour regime, which was not expressed randomly in the rude expression of a particular manager but in the heavy responsibility that managers put on them from the top leaders of the company to produce more and more commodities of good quality. Workers’ reactions were a

\(^{16}\) “You” and “I”, pronouns used in an informal and casual context.
\(^{17}\) You’re as stupid as a dog.
\(^{18}\) Fucking your mother.
\(^{19}\) The language of low class people who often utter dirty vulgarities that hurt or offend others.
mixture of outright resistance to management and habituation to coercion at the same time.

Workers still remembered that Trung, the male formal foreman of team 12 kicked one young girl when she had done something wrong with the products only some years ago. This was the reason why, although he was recognized as a capable manager, he had not been promoted to vice-director of the workshop for many years until recently. Since then, no managers had dared to beat workers. Talking about the coercive style of management at DG, Hung, the former the vice-director of workshop No.6 said to me:

*Here, we (managers) have to deal with all kinds of people including low class and even bad people so we must have a different way to treat them. You are living in a different environment, where people are friends of each other and people love people. But here things are different.*

A handsome manager who was always in a white shirt and walked around the workshop with his two hands behind his back made a ‘class’ excuse for their coercive management style, namely that poor and destitute people did not deserve to be treated gently. Such a ‘condescending’ attitude was different from the traditional egalitarian relationship between workers and management in the past. Ironically, while the manager-owner in the private workshop tried to behave like a socialist state manager, the state manager tended to act the part of a capitalist. I heard from the workers that the group of management staff (from vice-foreman of the team upwards) in workshop No.6 of DG celebrated their birthdays together. This is a kind of informal association of management staff, which also showed that management did not try to establish harmonious relationships with workers as in the past, but intentionally kept a hierarchical distance from them. However, as mentioned in the previous part, the owners of TT dared not
celebrate the Mid-July Festival in their family while their workers were still working. A
crossover in the managers’ behaviours reflected the trend of privatization and
commercialization of the socialist state, as well as the hybridization of different social
processes in post-socialist societies. Such a system created a ‘class relation’ of privileged
state managers and workers, even though in principle workers at DG were legally under
the protection of the state, the employers and the business network to a certain extent.

First of all, this was expressed in a rather comprehensive wage system including
bonuses and fines. Besides the piece-rate wage, workers at DG received a basic wage,
which functioned as a fund of social security while workers had leave with permission or
the company did not offer the workers jobs during their contract period. This basic wage
was determined by the official skill level of the worker. In general, after workers took a
six-month training course in a normal vocational school and passed the examination to
enter the company, they were entitled to the entry-level. Only those who graduated from
the Garment Technical School of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs were
automatically graded in much higher ranks. Every year, the company organized a
competition in which workers could take part if they wanted to upgrade their levels,
although this meant only a small increase in their monthly salaries. However, as the basic
salary only accounted for a small percentage in the total monthly income which was
determined mainly by the piece-rate wage, workers were not very eager to upgrade their
skill levels. Besides the piece-rate wage and basic salary, the monthly salary also included
a bonus, which was used as an instrument of reward and punishment. Bonuses were given
according to three grades (A, B and C), in which workers were classified by their foremen
every month. Workers who were put in grade A earned an extra 15% of that month’s
salary. B was 10 percent and C was zero percent. A grade meant no absenteeism, no
violation of discipline and producing products of good quality. Workers in B grade might violate one of the principles. C, which meant no bonus at all, was given to those who made several serious mistakes in the month. Thus, besides the skill levels, the grades of performance were used to classify workers and their incomes, and hence became a direct method of labour control. When a worker was absent without permission, it would not only be counted as one out of the limit of three times, but he or she would also be downgraded from A to B or from B to C for three consecutive months. During my fieldwork in team 12, I saw that most of the workers got grade A. This meant that in general workers at DG got three items of salary: the basic wage, the piece-rate wage and a bonus, while workers at both MH and TT received only one item of salary, namely the piece-rate wage. Among the three companies in particular and within the garment industry in general, worker’s salaries at DG were considered as high. For example, if the monthly average salary of a worker in the middle of production in the months of good business at DG was around 1 million dong (75 US$), at MH this amount was around 800,000 dong (55 US$), and at TT it was only 500,000 dong (30 US$). Competitive salaries at DG were one of the most important reasons that attracted the employees, and this in turn encouraged corruption in the recruitment of new workers to the company. High salaries were certainly a big attraction to many unmarried migrant girls who already had certain levels of skill and a few years of working experience. As will be elaborated further in Chapter 6, most of the girls at DG could buy nice clothes, watches and jewelry for themselves. Some could help their parents to finance the study and accommodation of younger siblings in the city. Some were able to put away large savings before marriage. These answers were different from those of the girls at TT, who said that they were

20 The mechanism of corruption will be explained further in Chapter 2.
already happy because they were no longer a burden on their parents since working at TT. This showed that the girls in these two workplaces with different ages, levels of skill as well as different levels of social, economic and cultural capital, had different expectations regarding their jobs. However, most of the girls at DG told me that they could not work in such hard conditions for a very long time, or for a lifetime. They just tried to work for a few years to save some money either for marriage or as some capital to move to other jobs or to open their own businesses.

Alongside the long tradition of the socialist state that privileges the working class, which gives state employees higher status than those of any other sectors, big companies which export to large markets such as the US and the EU are obliged to conform to the universal code of practice for labour conditions which are often called the SA 8000 Standard of global social responsibility. Only when the producers fulfil all the requirements of this code, do customers in developed countries buy their products. In such a way, consumers in developed countries can be confident that the goods they are buying have been produced in accordance with a recognized set of standards of labour rights. The SA 8000 code of practice is an example of such a set of standards, which is broken down into nine key areas, namely child labour, forced labour, health and safety, freedom of association and collective bargaining, discrimination, disciplinary practices, working hours, compensation and management systems. An internationally accredited auditor supervised the implementation of the code and awarded DG its certification. Besides SA 8000, DG had to obtain two other certificates, namely ISO 9000 and ISO 14001. The former concerned standards of product quality and the latter the environment within the factory. On one of my first days at DG, a boy in team 12 of workshop 6 asked

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21 Of course, the TT workshop did not have to follow any kind of standards to sell products.
me whether I was coming to check ISO 9000 Standards. When I asked him if I looked like someone who had come to check ISO, the boy started to tell me about how he had been taught to prepare for the check carried out by the delegation from the auditing company:

*Each team had to send one person to attend the course organized by Mr. Tung (the head of the personnel and administration department). We had to learn a lot, to learn how to tell lies. The questions are very trivial. For example, “In the evening, what time do you often go shopping?” We told each other that we actually did not have spare time to go to the market in the evening after work, but as a reply we ought to say that we went home from work at this time and then went shopping at that time in the evening. Another type of question was: “Do you know how many items there are on the payment sheet of your salary? What are these items?” In fact, we had never seen or known such items, let alone received the money. In the course, such questions were put forward and we learned how to answer them. In our team, I was the only one who had been selected to go the course last year.*

By that time, I realized that the course was prepared for SA 8000 but not for ISO 9000. The worker could not even distinguish the differences in the purpose and content of these three certificates. This showed that workers were quite indifferent to the company’s official policies and strategy. On the contrary, the shop-floor became a theatre, where management turned workers into puppets in their hands. The selection of one bright and good looking but obedient boy out of 50 workers was intended to guarantee the success of the play. The public secret was kept because there was compensation, the guarantee of a stable job with relatively high payments in a big state company.
During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to observe the preparation of DG’s Workshop No. 6 to welcome the delegate from France who came to check on the implementation of ISO 14001. On a previous day, workers were distributed copies of the handbook on ISO 14001 and were asked to learn the contents by heart. The day before, the workshop’s director constantly reminded the workers of all the ‘items’ that they had to do on that particular day. The reminder of the director showed that all the checking and supervision were superficial. The global social responsibilities only worked as a slogan hung above the workshop building, but could not actually enter the shop-floor. Since the company was informed beforehand of when and how the checking would be conducted, such preparation was not so difficult. In fact, ‘chu nghia thanh tich’,\textsuperscript{22} a culture whereby the appearance is more important than the content, and achievements quantified in a big statistical figure used to report to the boss are more important than whether the company is making a profit or having good performance, is not so strange in any state company. In the command economy, where the state subsidized state companies, these companies never went bankrupt and their performance was only known through the figures reported to the state by the companies. Thus the manner in which DG handled the delegation supervising the implementation of SA and ISO was nothing new.

The company has a rather modern appearance, with two newly built three-floored hi-tech buildings. In front of each building, there is a big hall with two tall lush green areca trees in the two wings of the hall. The two big banners are hung on the two sides of the green glass wall above the hall. The yellow paper letters look prominent on the red background of the banners with the words: “Productivity, quality and economic

\textsuperscript{22} It can be translated literally as ‘running after awards or records without paying attention to the quality of the work’.
efficiency are the measurements of the dignity and capacity of each employee”23, and:
“The employees of the DG Garment Company are determined to implement the speeding up strategies of the Vietnam Textile and Garment Industry during 2001-2005”24. There are also small posters on the sideway to the hi-tech buildings with words like “The DG Garment Company is committed to fulfilling social policies”.25 Only when going further into the hall, can one see a small bronze signboard with the words: “The project has been built to welcome the Party Congress No.8”26. The signboard is not only hidden inside but also the small letters, which are engraved in the bronze board, can not catch much attention from visitors. Near the entrance there is a big lift, which is as new as the building itself. However, according to workers, it was used only to transport inputs and outputs, but not to transport workers.

The human resource management literature argues that managerialism is a rhetorical discourse and there is a gap between rhetoric and reality (Legge, 1995, Hamilton 2003; Carter & Jackson, 2004). Although slogans as symbols of the socialist time still existed, the contents of these slogans had changed somewhat. Business performance replacing political education became the top priority among the company’s targets. As evidence, the signboard as propaganda for the Party State is small and quite hidden from view in comparison with the slogans for productivity and social policies. The company’s commitment to workers’ wellbeing is also put clearly in one of the slogans. Moreover, the unused elevator, which just exists as mere decoration but not for use as its main function, symbolizes a contrast between the appearance and the content, an

23 In Vietnamese: “Nang suat, chat luong, hieu qua kinh te la thuoc do pham chat nang luc cua moi can bo cong nhan vien chuc”.
24 Can bo cong ty may DG quyet tam thi dua thuc hien chien luoc tang toc cua nghanh det may Vietnam 2001-2005.
25 Cong ty May Duc Giang thuc hien day du cac chinh sach xa hoi.
26 Cong trinh chao mung dai hoi lan thu 8 cua Dang.
incompatibility between the official function of something and its actual operation.

‘Ritual affirmation’ is the term that Burawoy and Luckas (1992) used in their ethnography on a state company in Hungary in its shift to the market economy. Both management and workers were ‘painting socialism’ in ritual affirmation of the ideology (Burawoy & Lukacs, 1992). However, while the commitment to the Party seemed to be marginalized in social space, the company had to show more commitment to its corporate social responsibility, which revealed the irreversible presence of global market forces, even though, such commitments were only rhetoric.

In general, the labour management style at DG was rather coercive in the context of the economic reform. The official discourse of egalitarianism was replaced by a more hierarchical corporate relationship, as managers had to be more responsible for the results of work. Being tied to the global market on the one hand, workers enjoyed rather high salaries and stable employment. But on the other hand they were also under greater pressure to produce more products of better quality. When viewing the compensation in the form of cash from a gender perspective, one can notice that the company attracted mostly unmarried and skilled female migrant workers who were not occupied with family responsibilities, had good skills to perform difficult tasks and had good health to endure pressure and long working hours. They were also girls who wanted to earn money not only for survival, also but for consumption, saving and helping their future families.

**MH: Management by the quota system**

As was mentioned in the Introduction, although MH was a joint venture, there were no foreign managers on the shop-floor. However, as the production lines were designed by the South Korean company and the company’s business was guided and sponsored by
this mother company, a specific management strategy had to be worked out to match this characteristic. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the company received rather large orders from US customers to produce simple products (short trousers for men of different kinds). At the same time, high levels of deskillling of the production line plus modern and new equipment facilitated high productivity. High productivity of the production line was the highest priority in management objectives. As a result, a daily quota system was used as the main management strategy to promote high productivity. The higher level of deskillling of the production line and management by quotas increased the job intensification (tension). While the bureaucratic rules were rather strict, control by scientific management in the workshop was also dominant in this workshop. Workers worked slightly shorter hours and also earned slightly lower payments than their co-workers at DG. It could be said that compensation was made in the form of relatively high salaries, slightly shorter working hours, a more standardized working environment and a more transparent system.

Discipline was rather strict at MH. When one finished work temporarily, he or she was not allowed to go to other people’s desks without the permission of the foreman. In the joint-venture, there was a rule that if the foreman found someone sitting with a friend, the punishment would be that he or she was not allowed to go back to their own position for two days. This meant that the worker would not get payment for two days. Moreover, the board of management issued fines, which were worth 10,000 dong for each ticket. Besides the managers, who could always handle issues relating to discipline, there was a special manager who only made tours around the workshop and gave fine tickets to the

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27 In principle, high productivity should go together with high quality. However, in fact, when workers were not very used to the equipment, high productivity could only obtained at the expense of quality.

28 See note 4 of Introduction.
workers who were caught red-handed violating the rules. Eating in the workshop and wearing shoes used outside the workshop were forbidden. Besides that, workers had to wear uniforms, masks and caps, and had to tie their personal scissors to the sewing machine with a string. If small scissors were hidden among a pile of clothes, their sharp end might tear or leave some scratches on clothes. In that case, workers had to make compensation in cash out of their own salaries. Similarly, if it was impossible to repair the defective products, the foreman had the right to destroy a part or the whole product, and hence workers also had to pay for that defective part. If workers were more than fifteen minutes late, they were not allowed to enter the factory on that day. This meant that they would lose that day’s wage. Depending on the foremen’s decision, they also might lose their position on the operation line. The same fine was applied to workers who were absent without permission.29 Being pushed out of the sewing line, they were assigned to the auxiliary section, where the main work was to cut the waste thread from the assembled products. Workers made jokes about this situation by comparing them to football players who were suspended for a period of time for serious violations in the playing field. The term ‘bi treo gio’ which literally means being hung by one’s legs, referred to workers’ being expelled from their positions on the production line. Such a punishment often led to a big loss in monthly salary, so workers were afraid of this kind of punishment.

The most prominent management strategy was the quota system, which meant that a team or a production line must produce a quantity of products before they could go

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29 In DG, the expulsion of skilled workers from important positions on the production line might cause some trouble for the line’s productivity and quality. In MH, as the division of labour on the line was more detailed, complicated tasks were divided into smaller ones to make them simpler and there were only a few difficult tasks left. As a result, the absence of one worker did not cause much trouble in general because the foremen could find somebody else as a replacement, who could easily catch up with the line speed.
home that day. While workers at DG went home every day at a fixed time, 10 pm, workers at MH sometimes left the workshop at 8 pm, and sometimes at 9 pm, or even later. Without any definite time, it was difficult for husbands to pick up their wives from work.\textsuperscript{30} At both DG and MH, there were two shop-floor vice-directors. While at DG each shop-floor vice-director was in charge of 6 teams, mainly concerning discipline, at MH one was in charge of productivity and the other of techniques in the whole workshop. At TT, a shop-floor manager was responsible for everything. So only at MH, was there a separate manager who took care of productivity. At the same time, workers had to take note of their productivity for every hour on a sheet of paper hung in front of them. The vice-director in charge of productivity, while doing the rounds of the workshop, had the duty of reminding the workers to speed up (if their productivity was below standard) or rearrange labour in such a way that workers could meet the daily quota at the end. This division of labour among the management staff expressed the company’s special concern with productivity.

Moreover, the daily quotas were not fixed at all. For example, from October to December 2002, the day production quota for team 8 increased from 600 to 700 pieces. Management legitimizied this increase with the fact that the more workers got used to the products the faster they would produce. At the same time, many workers complained that not only the sub-contract price for one product that came to workers’ hands got lower but also the time for one standard operation became shorter. As an example, one worker told me that she was assigned in October to an operation of only 3 lines and the standard

\textsuperscript{30} Some families lived about 10 or 15 km away from the company. There was no convenient public transport, and it was dangerous and tiring for the women to cycle home after work in the evening. This was used to support the argument that the family had to use all the resources it had to support the women’s employment. In other words, it was inevitable that women were the main bread-winners or co-providers in the working class families.
operation time was fixed at 141 seconds. In December, she still sat in the same position but had to do 4 lines, whereas the operation time decreased to 90 seconds. In the end her salary remained the same, although she could work much faster because she had already got used to the operation. In this way workers were aware of manipulation by management in the measurement of unit labour costs, something which Peter Meiksins (1984) saw as an essential intervention of capitalism in the organization of work to exploit wage labour.\textsuperscript{31} Thus, deskillling becomes a tool in the hands of capitalists to justify their exploitation of workers. On the subjective side, the workers also experienced a higher level of intensification (job pressure and tension). Accidents like needles running through workers’ fingers sometimes occurred in the workshop.\textsuperscript{32} In DG, the company did not intervene in the calculation of piece-rates through technical and management practices but changed the piece-rates through its bureaucratic system. This meant that each workshop had its own accounting book. After getting the orders and the piece-prices from the company, the workshop (shop-floor management staff) would calculate different kinds of costs for workshop management staff, administration staff, technicians, mechanics and quality checking staff and then offered the teams the final piece prices.

Despite supervising around 100 workers in a team, foremen in MH also had less authority in decision-making in the team. There was a division of labour between the foreman and vice-foreman. The foreman was in charge of the coordination between tasks, discipline control and other general issues, while the vice-foreman dealt only with

\textsuperscript{31} Meiksins (1984, p. 185) argued that “… the capitalist has the ability to dispose of labour power and the means of production as he sees fit. Capitalists, therefore, find it much easier to intervene in the organization of work than did previous exploiting classes. And, because of the need to maintain and augment the rate of exploitation in order to compete effectively, such interventions are essential to the process of capitalist development”.

\textsuperscript{32} This detail is also mentioned in Chapter 3. Of course, job intensification is one of the reasons leading to accidents. However, as the machines were automatic, and were fixed to run at high speeds, accidents occurred more easily, and when they happened the injuries were more serious.
technical issues. However, at DG the foreman had to be in charge of both discipline and techniques. In team 8 many workers who had worked at DG said that foremen at MH were less authoritarian than at DG. Workers explained that foremen at MH were involved less in technical issues, which were considered as the main reason for the foremen to insult workers. At the same time, being a new factory which was producing casual clothes for the cheap market segment of the US, technical requirements at MH might possibly have been less demanding than at DG. With regard to leave, foremen could only give workers permission for one day’s leave. If the workers wanted to have leave of more than one day, they had to make a request to the personnel department and wait for approval. I even witnessed that the shop-floor director called the forewoman of team 8 into the management room and reminded her about her impolite language towards workers. However, at DG the workshop management staff did not interfere in the verbal conflicts between workers and foremen except for the case mentioned in the previous section, in which a foreman beat his worker. This did not mean that foremen at MH did not insult or humiliate workers, but they did not dare go beyond a certain level because if the workers felt that the foreman was treating them unfairly or humiliated them too much, they could always complain to the high-ranking management. Some workers in team 8 told me that the personnel department had already received two letters complaining about their forewoman, who was warned about her rudeness in communication with the workers by the workshop director. The department promised that if they received two more letters, the woman would be removed from her position. It is hard to know whether

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33 For example at DG, when Trung, a shop-floor vice-director, made a tour around the workshop, he saw clearly that Kien, a vice-foreman, and Hang were having a fierce verbal exchange, but he did not even come near. Still holding his hands behind his back, he continued his slow walk without being bothered by the harsh noise. No intervention could mean that he delegated Kien full authority to decide most of the things in the team.
this would really happen. At least the story showed that the company was aware of their obligation to listen to the voice of the workers to improve labour–management relations.

When I asked one manager about SA 8000, ISO 9000 and ISO 14001, he replied that the company was not bothered about obtaining these certificates because it consumed time and money to apply for these certificates. DG, as an independent company in Vietnam, needed to be able to show these certificates to their customers to gain their trust, while MH could still receive big orders through the South Korean mother company without these certificates. This did not mean that MH did not follow the standard requirements in terms of techniques, working environment and social policies, but it was guaranteed as a site among the production chain of the South Korean multinationals. With regard to social policies, labour specialists hired by the customers also came to check and to interview workers about working conditions at MH. Just as at DG, workers were also taught to tell lies. In the beginning, the foremen picked up some workers and told them not to say that they had to work on Sunday. Later, they were called to go to the management room for another round of education (in telling lies). The interviewees were even promised they would be given 50,000 VND for playing their part. At the same time they were implicitly intimidated by being told that anyone who revealed the information would be sacked. It seemed that the labour specialists did not even randomly choose workers in the workshop, but only interviewed those who were already sitting in the management room waiting for them. In this way, the company could easily make some arrangement in advance.

As mentioned in the introduction, MH was a newly established company which was located in Gia Lam, the area which was a location for many garment companies, 

34 This is elaborated in Chapter 3, in part where workers made jokes about the interviews.
including DG. Understanding workers’ frustration about long working hours at DG, MH attracted skilled workers from DG by advertising that the company would apply the standard working time for white-collar workers. This meant that it started at 7 am and ended at 4 pm. As a result, several workers left DG to move to the new company, MH. For the first three months, when the factory ran trial production and workers were on training, they had to work only until 4 pm. When production was in full operation, workers also had to work much longer. However, in general, working hours were a bit shorter than at DG, and the time for workers to leave the workshops was not fixed because MH only fixed the production target for the day. Several workers also dropped MH because they did not want long working hours any more. They also blamed the company for telling such a gross lie to attract skilled workers. Some even regretted moving from DG and realized that it was more or less the same everywhere in the garment industry. In fact, there were quite a number of workers, both married and unmarried, who originally came from the neighbourhood of the company, while the majority of workers at DG and TT were migrant rural workers.

Both DG and MH provided lunch for workers. The nominal price for each serving of lunch in the two factories was the same, 3000 dong. MH subsidized workers half the cost of the lunch, which meant that workers only had to pay 1500 dong for each lunch. DG workers had to pay the whole 3000 dong, which would be automatically deducted from their salaries, no matter whether they wanted to have lunch in the canteen or not. It is worth noting that MH was located in an industrial area, where there were no homes and no restaurants were operating. So workers had no choice other than eating in the company’s canteen. After having had lunch in both companies, I think that the quality of

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35 More on this can be found in Chapter 2.
lunch at MH was much better than that at DG. Such a difference was mainly due to
different ways of organizing the canteens. MH subcontracted the canteen’s operation to a
private company, while DG’s canteen was operated by the company employees. If
workers in MH complained too much about the quality of the meal, the company would
subcontract to another company. However, DG’s leaders might have been in complicity
with the canteen staff in reducing workers’ meal portions and ignoring their complaints
about the quality of the meals. This kind of corruption might also have happened in the
recruitment procedures of DG.³⁶ So several workers at DG, who could not stand the bad
meals in the canteen, went out to have lunch in the neighbourhood of the company. In
other words, although they earned only a little more than their colleagues at MH, they lost
some 200,000 dong per month for their unused lunch. At TT, workers had to provide
meals for themselves. Workers often went back to their homes, which were often very
near the workshop, and cooked lunch for themselves. In return, they had one and a half
hours for lunch break instead of the mere thirty minutes at DG or one hour at MH.

The technology and working conditions at MH were the best of the three
companies. Although DG had two new buildings, which had been given very fancy names
as hi-tech buildings, not all of the equipment inside was high technology. Among the six
workshops, only two workshops were equipped with state-of-the-art machines, which
were invested by Japanese customers. Therefore, the two joint-venture workshops were
not allowed to produce for any other customers except their Japanese investors. In the rest
of the four workshops, machines were rather old and out-of-date. Hence, in order to
produce the same number of products as the two modern workshops or MH, they,
workers in the workshop No. 6, had to work longer. As a newly established joint venture,

³⁶ This point will be further expanded in Chapter 2.
MH was equipped with automated machines, which were the standard ones in the advanced garment factories around the world. As a result, workers with an average skill level could improve their productivity easily within a short time after getting used to the type of products. Regarding the working conditions in the workshop, several ventilators of high capacity were fixed at one end of the workshop at MH. This ventilating system made the workshop much cooler while extracting the dusty air from the workshop. The workshops at DG were equipped with air-conditioners, which seemed to be more modern than big ventilating fans. However, in standardized garment workshops ventilating fans are better because they can blow dust from the inside to the outside, while with air conditioners the dust is carried around inside the workshop. In fact, in order to save energy DG did not switch on its air conditioners except in very hot weather. Like the lifts, the air conditioners were mainly used for display. As a result, the industrial environment at MH was better than it was at DG. Needless to say, the industrial environment at TT was the worst of the three companies. In a narrow and long room of roughly 5 x 25 m., a total of nearly 50 sewing machines were placed in three lines running the length of the room. There were only two small ventilators on one of the sidewalls as a means of bringing fresh air from outside into the workshop. As it was difficult for the workers to move back and forth in the workshop, they sometimes threw piles of woollen cloth to each other, and every time they did this the air became dustier. Another advantage of working at MH was that standardized masks, scissors and needles were distributed to workers. All the broken needles of the team had to be sealed in a paper bag to be exchanged for new ones. But at both DG and TT workers had to buy these items by themselves, and this of course would in fact reduce their salaries.
In this way there were many good advantages in working for MH, mainly the standardized industrial environment. The mechanism (of recruitment and organizing the canteen) at MH was much more transparent than at DG.\textsuperscript{37} In the beginning, in order to attract skilled workers from DG or other garment companies in the neighbourhood, MH deliberately advertised its shorter working hours. This compensation was made to target married women in the neighbourhood, who wanted to have more time for the family instead of more cash. However, after a few months, when the assembly lines went into actual production, workers had to work until 8 or 9 pm normally, and sometimes overnight. Thus, the intention of reducing working hours as an advantage of MH could not be sustained. Many workers saw it as a lie on the part of management and a few already quit the company. State-of-the-art machines and the daily quota system, on the one hand, facilitated workers’ productivity, hence improving their material compensation levels. At the same time, they also increased the job intensification level. In brief, the daily quota system was the main management strategy.

**Conclusion**

Compensation is an important element in the negotiation between employers and employees as well as the labour process. First, while compliance only ensures the individual and collective survival in the organization, compensation generates workers’ commitment and binds individuals to the organizational membership. Thus, commitment rather than compliance is the highest objective of any management strategy. The triangle of compensation, coercion and commitment enables us to answer to a certain extent the

\textsuperscript{37} This did not mean that corruption did not happen at all in the labour recruitment of MH. It could happen in a few cases but not in a structural manner and on large scale as at DG. This point is also further elaborated in Chapter 2.
question of whether this management strategy works. Secondly, the focus on social
relations in labour control, coercion and consent alone, will lead to a loss of dynamic
interaction and competition between companies in the same field in the labour market.
Such competition is a result of the hegemony of capital mobility or the anarchy of the
global market, which challenges any company, no matter in what kind of ownership
sector it belongs. While coercion and consent are the characteristics of an individual
labour regime, compensation implies a comparison between companies’ management
strategies. Compensation can be very helpful in explaining why workers continue
working in a company whose labour control is more coercive than the other’s or how an
employer can persuade a particular type of worker to work for him while paying only low
salaries. As social actors, workers are aware of their imperfect social environment with
limited resources and hence try to obtain a certain goal, which is considered as being a
priority in their strategies. However, when workers compare management strategies
between companies, this does not necessarily mean that workers would freely move from
one company to another. Implicit comparison only means that the compensation partially
meets the expectation of a large number of workers in the company to keep their
commitments.

Compensation often has some gender dimension. At TT, the compensation was
made mainly in the strategy of quasi-familial relationships between the owners and the
workers. In compensating for low salaries, the absence of labour contracts, health
insurance, and social security and the non-unionization status, the owners offered young
female migrant workers without skill a program of training on the job. This meant that
inexperienced workers could gain the skill without paying fees while still earning some
money to (partially) maintain their livelihood in the city. At the same time, labour
discipline was not as strict as that in the big factories. Specifically, the owners offered the boys training in work ethics, which they thought would be useful for the boys’ career later. With regard to the girls, stress was placed on training the girls to become good wives in the future. By providing welfare, training and educating workers, the owners tried to nurture workers’ emotional attachment to the workshop like sons and daughters towards their big family. At DG, the state-owned company, long working hours and strict discipline were considered as evidence of coercive labour control. However, the company attracted workers, especially unmarried migrant workers, because it offered them relatively high salaries. At the same time, they also took gender into consideration. For example, the migrant girls planned to work at DG for only a few years to get some savings before their marriage. Moreover, many workers felt more secure when working for the state sector, although in fact they could become unemployed like in the private sector if the state company’s business was not going well. Ritual affirmation to ideology could be used to describe management strategies of this company because of the heavily rhetorical nature of its management discourse, which paid more attention to the appearance and business achievements than the actual content and workers’ quality of life. At the MH joint venture, the main management strategy was the daily quota system (scientific management). The coercive element in the labour process was manifested in the tendency of capitalists to further exploit wage labour through their intervention in the work organization. In such a way, the daily quota system in combination with deskilling and modern technology increased the level of job intensification. At the same time it also helped workers to increase their productivity even if they were not so skilled, and hence to increase the level of their wages. While their salaries were rather competitive (in comparison with those of workers at DG), the working time was a bit shorter. In the
beginning, the company planned to attract married female workers and local (suburban) workers who had been working at DG, by means of an advertisement that workers only had to work 8 hours a day like white-collar workers. However, when the company did not keep its promise, many workers quit their job. Even so, the percentage of local workers and married workers out of the total labour force of the company was still higher than that numbers at DG or TT. At the same time, a more transparent mechanism and standardized industrial environment could be considered as the strong points of this company. In general, there are different forms and levels of compensation in the three companies’ management strategies. Compensation not only explains why workers still work under such a labour regime or move to another one, but also introduces a dynamic comparative methodology into labour process theories.
Chapter 2: Skill, Garment Work and the Economic Reforms

Introduction

Before the economic reforms, workers’ skill and effort levels in general did not much affect their incomes because of the system of equalization of remuneration. However, since the economic reforms, there have been not only wide gaps between the rich and the poor (with different occupations, living in different places), but also between workers (employees) with the same occupations and working in the same workshop. As a political correction of the past, one of the items on the agenda of the economic reform is to replace the equalization of individuals’ efforts with a system of merit due to the quality and quantity of one’s performance. The economic reforms through the piece-rate system and some management practices have increased workers’ competition on the production line in general. At the same time, while the piece-rate system disguises the gender difference in workers’ material compensation,¹ the labour organization and labour practices in the workshops reveal discrimination towards female labour. Through the vertical division of labour in the workshop, male skill is still considered as higher and more valuable than female skill. Because of women’s weaker bargaining power in the labour market in general, male labour is preferred to female labour in several garment workshops. Moreover, urban workers have easier access to vocational training and employment and hence have better opportunities to become skilled workers. At the same time, while the piece-rate system is believed to eradicate social inequality through the end of the equalization of skill and effort levels, a different form of social inequality arises through the corruption occurring in the recruitment into a number of factories, especially

¹ Equal payment to men and women means that one’s salary is based on the quantities of outputs the worker has produced but not on one’s gender.
the state-owned ones. Due to the process of deskilling on the production line, workers’ craft skill becomes less important and workers only need to equip themselves with a certain level of skill to be able to catch up with the line. Therefore, the price that workers have to pay to enter a company does not depend only on their skill levels but also on the type of company (for example, social prestige to work for a state company) and the levels of material compensation. This reveals an unequal footing in the competition between state companies and private companies, even in the labour market.

Braverman’s conception of skill refers to the unity of conception and execution in the labour process and deskilling in the garment industry essentially means workers’ loss of conceptual mastery over the traditional craft worker (Braverman, 1974). However, Braverman’s definition of skill is often criticized as strongly focusing on the technical aspect of skills while ignoring its subjective or social components (Rolfe, 1985). Following this criticism, the chapter further elaborates the notion of skill as a socially constructed concept. More specifically, technical skill is also classified through the lens of gender, the labour market and the political or economic position of the company. The technical aspects of skill are interwoven with the subjective experience of skill in the way that class and gender relations are produced and reproduced.

The aim of this chapter is not only to elaborate further different management strategies that have been discussed in Chapter 1, but also to argue that the technical aspect of garment work in its interactions with different socio-economic factors produces a workplace culture that directly influences workers’ subjectivities, which are related to workers’ collectivism. The first part will introduce the piece-rate system as representing the core value of the economic reforms. In such a wider social context, among workers on the same sewing production line, workers’ individualism versus collectivism in
management terms is promoted at the expense of their collective interests from the point of view of the trade union. In the second part, the concepts of gendered skill and the masculine hegemonic workplace will be analyzed. This demonstrates a division between male workers and female workers. In other words, male workers in general had more bargaining power than female workers. In the last part, training and recruitment policies of the three companies will be discussed to demonstrate that workers’ bargaining power at the entry level does not depend on their skills exclusively, but also on the type of company or the social prestige and privileges that attach to the type of ownership that pertains to the company, plus the conditions of the labour market and the compensation level that it offers its workers.

**Competition on the production line**

Collectivism is a complex concept which can be understood in many different ways, depending on how one defines the basic unit, level or scope of analysis. For example, the collective interests of a workshop as an institution are different from the collective interests of the workers in that workshop as a group within the Vietnamese working class. In this part, I will try to analyze new management practices on the production line in relation to individualism and collectivism at different levels: work organization (gang work, production or assembly line) industrial relations (paternalism or corporatism), workers’ solidarity practices (not in terms of employee struggle but in terms of behaviours at work such as helping each other) and the broader context of the economic reforms in general. The aim is to understand how competition at work influences the official relationships between workers.
According to human resource management literature, the fundamental features of new management practices appear to be individualistic but they emerge within a broad framework based on an emphasis on new forms of corporate and plant/office ‘collective identification’ and team-based work organization (Storey & Bacon 1993; Bacon and Storey, 1995). Thus, at the level of workshop, collectivism is identified as rules and regulations of the main institution (the workshop) through the competitive relations between individuals. However, there are two kinds of team-based work organization: micro-collective structures such as gang work, or crew work and production line.\(^2\) Gang work shares some of the social and collective nature of the capitalist process as identified by Marx in his account of the collective worker.\(^3\) The term emphasizes the necessarily cooperative relations between individual workers in the capitalist process. However, going beyond the characteristics of Marx’s collective worker, production line work (teamwork) in new management practices emphasizes competitive relations between individuals in the team or between teams in the workshop. Regarding the system of rewards in human resource management, the piece-rate system also promotes competitive relations between individual workers. While paternalism implies a certain level of collective identification with the workshop (through cooperative relations between individuals), corporate culture emphasizes the hierarchical relations between individuals through competitive relations. In brief, gang work, the collective worker and, to a certain level, paternalism promote cooperative relations between individual workers, and this is in line with autonomous working class identities, while the production line, new management practices, the piece-rate system and corporate culture promote competitive

\(^2\) At MH and DG each team is a production line, so in these cases, production line work also means teamwork.

\(^3\) See note 12 of Introduction.
relationships between individuals, which is at the expense of collective working class interests. In any workshop, there is a combination of these two elements: cooperative and competitive relations.

‘Nhay chuyen’, which translates literally as ‘jumping in the line’, can be considered as a new management practice on the production line. One can imagine the operation of a production line as a flow of water. If one person works much slower than the average line speed to the extent that the worker sitting in front has nothing to do, the foreman of the line will assign an extra worker to the task to support him or her to catch up with the pace of the line. This innovation is designed to facilitate a smoothly running production line and is applied to individual workers to speed up the line productivity. In all three workshops, ‘jumping’ often led to some competition and conflicts among workers.

Competition among workers on the production lines of MH was considered as the highest among the three workshops. In theory, the foremen should not let any worker stay free without work for a single moment. In other words, labour on the line is constantly readjusted or rearranged. As a result, workers become more eager to work faster to complete their own task so that they could ‘jump’ to other tasks temporarily to earn some extra wages. The following conversation was heard between two workers in MH commenting about one colleague who was motivated by ‘jumping’ to work faster at the expense of product quality and worse relationships with other workers on the line.

Ha: She is young but tries to gain advantage over others by pretending to be a fool.
Kh: Yesterday, I gave her so much work that she could not catch up with me. Then she turned back and asked me: “Are you in difficulty?” in front of Xuan (the forewoman). It is quite funny. Instead of working faster, she tried to impress Xuan by scolding me.
Ha: Yes, She enjoys it when others have to run after her but if people push her to work faster, she does not like it. She only wants to receive a moderate amount of inputs from the previous person on the production line. Because she tries to do her job as quickly as possible in order to ‘jump’, her products are often of poor quality. I think that is the reason she has never been assigned to ‘good tasks’.  

When she jumps to other people’s tasks, she is very irresponsible as well. She takes away so many inputs that the main operator of the tasks has to nothing to do. But, when it comes to the time of repairing the unsatisfactory products, the responsibility belongs to the main operator. So once when she was about to jump to my task, I told her directly and said that I didn’t mind someone who was careful but I had some problems with her.

Thus, as demonstrated in the conversation, ‘nhay chuyen’ (jumping) caused conflicts rather than cooperation among workers on the production line. At the end of a batch, when workers had to calculate the total of outputs in each task they had done (in order to calculate salaries), I often observed quarrels among workers (between those who had ‘jumped’ and those who got the support) about how much one person had produced. Quarrels happened when the total outputs of both workers exceeded the fixed quantity of the batch. In a way, through ‘nhay chuyen’, the conflicts between the capitalists and workers were shifted to conflicts between workers and workers. Instead of bargaining with management to gain higher a piece-price for one product so that everyone could earn more, workers only paid attention to those who might get bigger stakes. According to Burawoy (1979), hierarchical conflict was diverted to competition among workers, who lost in the game of ‘making out’, or the manipulation of advancing as quickly as possible.

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4 The tasks that require a high level of skill and also have high piece-rates in comparison with others
At the team level, MH had the daily quota system (as mentioned in Chapter 1) which encouraged workers to work fast to go home early rather than increasing competition between the teams. Once the company announced that it would give a bonus of 6 million VND to the teams which reached an average daily productivity of 650 pieces in a certain period of time. This was too high a quota for any team to reach. None of the teams received the bonus in the end, and perhaps the amount of the bonus was too small to motivate workers. When dividing 6 million VND among 100 workers of the team, each worker would receive only 6000 VND (30 cents). So the quota system with bonus as a new management practice did not work out.

At DG, ‘nhay chuyen’ was also applied on the production line but its effect was not as clear as at MH because the production line at DG was shorter than at MH and the managers were more authoritarian in their decisions. For example, two workers often shared one long and complicated task at DG, while at MH one worker in general was in charge of one task. Often those who shared one task did not note down the detailed outputs they produced each day, but the total labour cost of the task (in one batch) was divided in half at the end. Thus, the two workers often tried to have the same work speed because, even if one worked faster than the other, she or he did not receive a higher salary. This can be seen as a minimum form of gang work. Only when both of them had finished all the products in their task did they get the right to ‘jump’ to others. On the other hand, workers’ skill levels were rather even and stable, so it was rarely happened that one worked much slower than his or her colleagues. At the same time, management staff were very experienced at arranging appropriate labour in appropriate positions in the beginning. Moreover, the foremen at DG could be more forceful in deciding whether or not the worker who wanted to ‘jump’, or was ready to ‘jump’, was capable of managing
the new task. Once I witnessed a conflict between a worker and forewoman concerning her ‘jumping’. In general, workers had to follow the foreman’s decision on whether they were allowed to jump. However, in this case, the girl was very stubborn. When she had finished the task, she asked the forewoman for permission to ‘jump’, but the forewoman refused. Because she was very angry, she herself went to take the inputs in the task that needed extra support and brought them to her position. When she saw that, the forewoman came to her place and took all the inputs back to their original place. Again the girl went to get the inputs once more, and the forewoman also repeated her action. While doing these strange things, the girl kept quiet and the forewoman humiliated her fiercely, saying that she was not good enough to do the task, in order to make her ashamed in front of people. At last, the girl had to withdraw. Many workers thought that the forewoman often only gave the opportunity to earn extra wages to those she liked, and so the decision was not based on who was good enough to do it. In general, competition on the production line at DG was not as high as at MH, partly because of the shorter production line, and partly because it was not easy to earn much more, while they had to work long hours and already had rather high salaries (in their opinion). In other words, there were fewer incentives to ‘jump’. However, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the company also tried to develop ‘collective identification’ through the competition among teams and workshops. In the high season of 2002, the company applied a bonus policy to the whole team. For example, if the total revenue of a team in a month exceeded 8000 US$, the piece price that the team got would double (200% of the fixed piece price). If the amount was between 7000 US$ and 8000 US$, workers on the team would earn more than 70% of the fixed piece price (170%), and in the case of less than 7000 US$, the piece price that the team got would remain the same (100%). Moreover, there was a selection of the
best team among the 12 teams in workshop No.6, based on the team’s total revenue for
the year.

T, the owner of a small private workshop, often compared the piece rate system that
he offered to his workers with the remuneration system of the agricultural cooperatives he
had experienced during his childhood. By referring to the past, he meant that his workers
nowadays were lucky as there was ‘relative equality’ among his workers, because they
were materially rewarded according to their performance. To put it differently,
equalization of the unequal efforts was considered as a source of ‘enormous inequality’ in
the rhetorically egalitarian socialist period. However, T could not persuade his workers
that they were lucky because they had not experienced such a past. The problem at TT
was that there was a big gap in the skill levels between the old and new workers. While
the old workers may have had about five years’ working experience, some new ones had
just started garment work a few months ago and were only at the learning stage.
Therefore, for some small orders for difficult products like jackets, instead of a
production line, a gang system of 4 or 5 skilled workers working together in a group was
organized. Unskilled workers were not allowed to participate in the gang production.
Each member of the gang had the same share of work and income and had the
cooperative character of a collective worker. Normally, in the work organization of the
production line, skilled workers were assigned to do several difficult tasks at once (often
at the end of the line), the new ones had to do one very simple task (often at the beginning
of the line), and many new workers were even assigned to sharing one simple task, even
though skilled workers sometimes had nothing to do. The productivity in the simple tasks
was either too low or the quality was too poor that the new workers had to take off thread
and undo all the pieces. When seeing how a skilled worker refused the manager’s request
to ‘jump’ to an easy task, I was surprised and asked her the reason. She replied that she
did not feel comfortable in her relationship with the unskilled worker, who might possibly
have thought that she was seizing the girl’s meagre income. This happened once to her
(close) friend, a skilled worker, who was also asked by the manager to support that
unskilled girl, and she did. But after that the unskilled one grumbled in a voice which was
low enough for people in the surroundings to be able to hear that the manager did not feel
sympathetic about their\(^5\) miserable situations at all, that their salaries were already very
low, and would become lower. The skilled workers might feel ashamed of their actions (if
they did ‘jump’), and also the close-knit relationships among workers at TT in general did
not allow them to do things that could be considered as too selfish. As mentioned in
Chapter 1, the owners also tried to construct a communal life and quasi-familial relations
in the workshop. In general, such an environment and relationships did not motivate
workers to ‘jump’ to earn more wages at the expense of others on the shop-floor. I often
saw how workers in the same local networks, or close friends in the workshop, helped
each other when one was free (had finished her task) and the other was still busy. Such
support was given without any request or extra payment.

At MH, some workers at the end of the line could not even remember the names of
all the workers at the end of the line, partially because the line was too long (100
workers), the company was newly established and there was sometimes recruitment of
new workers. In fact workers at MH were never seen to help each other voluntarily at
work, even in cutting surplus thread. At the end of the batch, the quantities of outputs

\(^5\) She was referring to her, her cousin and her friends who entered the workshop more or less at the same
time. Sometimes these girls only earned some 200,000 dong (12 US$) per month. They had to ask their
parents for financial support and had to be very economical in daily expenses. However, not every new
(unskilled) worker had such bad conditions. Sometimes, some made quick progress and even earned enough
to pay for their own expenses in the city without asking for help from their parents.
often accumulated and increased dramatically at the end of line when the time for
delivery was coming soon. So workers on the production lines at both DG and TT helped
thread-cutters, whose piece-rates were often much lower than those of machine operators,
for nothing. Line workers at MH also did the jobs if they were requested to do so, but
they earned some extra income from the number of pieces on which they cut surplus
thread.

The deskilling process is associated with scientific management, which can be
understood as any innovations that promise to improve productivity and efficiency of
production. In the garment workshops, one such innovation is wage incentive in direct
and indirect forms. The direct form is clearly expressed in the payment system of each
workshop, like an hour-based payment or the piece-rate system. The indirect form
involves a combination of many innovations in management that aim at financially
rewarding workers who produce more than others or the fixed quotas. According to
Taylor and his associates, the purpose of the piece-rate system is to coordinate the
interests of management and workers through their common interest in the financial gain
that can be secured from extra efforts on the part of labour. It is the monetary incentive
that brings forth the additional exertion (Taylor, 1911). Pursuing the dynamics of that
incentive, Burawoy (1979) argues that piece-work is a game because workers are
compelled to compete with one another in producing at an even faster rate, and this
stimulates management to cut piece-work prices and, in the end they find themselves in
the dilemma that maximizing their own outputs would undermine the workers’ collective
interests (Burawoy, 1979, 86). However, the dilemma that Burawoy points out is actually

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6 This was demonstrated in Chapter 1, in the description of the management strategies of MH.
a contradiction of new management practices in the way they combine individualism and collectivism that Bacon and Storey (1993; 1995) emphasize.

In Vietnam, the piece-rate system is rooted in the history of the economic reform in the general transformation from collectivity to individual responsibility. In the agricultural sector, the economic reforms were initiated with the issue of Directive No.10 in 1988, which allowed the cooperatives to sign contracts with individual households or groups of households to produce a certain quality of yields based on the labour input of the contractors (Kleinen, 1999, p.137-8). The move was very welcome because “to many villagers, one basic problem was that collective farming did not reward diligent work. Whether one worked hard or not, one still did not have enough to eat. Moreover, individuals doing the same task received virtually the same amount of payment regardless of how well or poorly each person had labored” (Kerkvliet, 2001, p.258). Of course, the collectives were not the only reason for the deteriorating living conditions but many villagers believed that the collective system stood in the way of having more to eat, better housing and other improvements.

In the industrial sector, in 1987 the government abolished centrally planned production quotas and gave a large degree of autonomy to state-owned enterprises (Kerkvliet & Sinh, 1997, p.1). However, the piece-rate system had been introduced in several state-owned factories even since 1981, the early phase of the economic reforms. These factories have often been admired as ‘quickly adjusting themselves to cope with the new situations’ and successfully surviving and developing through the difficult time at the beginning of Doi Moi. The shift from a time-based to piece-rate based system in state-owned factories signalled a new approach to ‘social equality’ in the post-socialist

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7 Kleinen, 1999, p.137-8. Following the decision on 13 January 1981 made by the Secretariat of the Central Communist Party (Ban bi thu Trung uong), indicated as Instruction No.100 (Chi thi 100).
era. In the initial years of economic success as a result of the economic reforms, Nguyen Thi Hoa (1995) looked back to workers’ attitudes to work as one of the consequences of stagnant production:

“During the first period (July to December 1976), most female workers worked half-heartedly, many paying no attention to outputs, quality of work, or other matters in the factory. There were many explanations for their indifference. Some were burdened with the stigma of having been with the old regime, knowing only about today and not bothering about tomorrow. But, more importantly, the lack of commitment to their jobs resulted from a pay-by-the-day system, which had the effect of indiscriminately equalizing the production output of both industrious and non-industrious workers who all got the same wage” (Nguyen Thi Hoa, 1995, p.168).

The philosophy of the economic reforms and its criticism of the system of equalization in the past were not only manifested in the state’s policies or in the way people talked about the inefficiency of the subsidizing period but also in popular culture. A radical change in people’s perception of ‘I’ and ‘we’, or individualism and collectivity is displayed in the different ways the public welcomed the drama ‘Toi va chung ta’ (I and We) after an interval of ten years. The drama became popular in 1984 when the economy was still in crisis and the reforms had only been instituted for a short time. The drama, written by Luu Quang Vu, was a strong and direct criticism of the stagnation of the subsidizing system and production process. The story was set in the context of a state-owned factory, where its young director daringly pioneered putting the piece-wage system or ‘the third plan’ into practice. As explicitly indicated in the title, the drama was seen as

\[\text{\textsuperscript{8}}\text{‘The third plan’ meant the plan for production outside the state command system. After fulfilling the quotas of production assigned by the state, the state-owned factory could use the state’s available machinery}\]
a representation of the changing dialectics between the self and collectiveness. There
were some statements by the main character which even sounded like the rhetoric of the
economic reforms: “The lazy and the hard-working were treated equally; the talented and
the stupid were entitled to the same level of benefit. Even those who did nothing but talk
were respected more than those who worked hard. Why was socialism so strange?” or
“What was correct yesterday, can be an obstacle today”. The drama was so well received
that in 1984 tickets were always sold out for each performance. In 2003 it was rewritten
as a TV drama, a classical masterpiece about the philosophy of the economic reforms at
that critical point of time. So the piece-rate system was undoubtedly welcome by workers
due to their social and political experience of collectivities in the past.

The conflicts on the production line between co-workers exposed the worker’s
dilemma or the contradictions between individualism and collectivism in new
management practices, the collective worker and collectivism in the sense of autonomous
working class collective identities. The social and political experience of declining
collectivism during the years of the economic reforms together with specific experience
of individualism and collectivism in the new management practices promoted
competition and individualistic behaviours among workers on the same shop-floor.
However, such a division occurred in different ways in the three workshops. At MH there
was a high degree of competition among individual workers on the same production line
due to the promotion of ‘jumping’ as a new management practice. At DG the competition
between teams and workshops rather than between individual members of the teams was
emphasized through a bonus system for the whole team and the selection of the best team
in the workshop. In a way, the benefit for an individual worker was closely connected to

and facilities to produce for private customers. The benefits from the ‘third plan production’ would be
divided among workers and managers to supplement to their formal salaries.
the benefit for the whole team or the whole workshop. In the corporate culture, hierarchical relations between management and workers facilitated ‘jumping’ on the production line at MH, but the same did not always happen at DG because of the overpowering authority of the manager who acted in her own discretion. Nevertheless in general the corporate culture at both MH and DG promoted division rather than solidarity among workers in the sense of collective working class identities. However, at TT paternalism somehow motivated the brotherhood and sisterhood among workers, and this was to the advantage of autonomous working class identities. At both TT and DG the ‘gang systems’ which were based on cooperative relations between employees were more evident (especially at TT). Thus only at TT was the constructed collective identification with the workshop (paternalism) coherent with the team-based work organization (gang work), and in combination they both promoted collectivism in the form of workers’ solidarity practices. In short, management practices (jumping and the quota system) in combination with work organization (production line) promoted individualism in the form of workers’ solidarity practice at both MH and DG.

**Skill, gender and garment work**

Garment work is often seen as an example of gendered jobs. Historically, needlework in Western societies was considered as feminine work, devalued and unsuitable for men (Entwistle, 2000, p. 146). Organizational theorists assume that the connection between workers’ genders and their jobs often mirrors the commonsense view that men and women hold different sorts of jobs because of differing physical capacities, psychological orientations, and family responsibilities. There are numerous popular

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9 This point will be elaborated further in Chapter 5.
conceptions of women in the clothing industry such as women having ‘nimble fingers’ (Elson, 1984), ‘fine eyesight’ and as workers who are ‘more docile’, ‘willing to work long hours’, ‘don't need to earn as much as men as they will be taken care of at home’, ‘able to undertake repetitive work’ and ‘uncomplaining’ (Entwistle, 2000, p. 213; Norlund, 2000, p. 43). The term ‘men’s work’ has several implications. It can be described as hard physical labour, dangerous or dirty work (Willis, 1977). It can also be understood as important, highly skilled, responsible, and powerful which are all defined as masculine (Cockburn, 1985). Specifically, in the garment industry, “men’s skills include the ability of the worker to imagine how things would appear in final form, and are acquired through apprenticeship, and training – a feature evident from the long involvement of male workers in the industry. In contrast, female workers employ the skill demanded by specific jobs, namely the ability to perform detailed assembly operations.” (Simmons & Kalantaridins, 1995, p. 298). As Acker (1990) argued, such a social construction of gender is built into jobs by work organizations as a pre-condition before men and women enter the shop-floor.

In Vietnam, Angie Ngoc Tran (2002) also argued that the gendered division of labour is deeply imprinted by notions and practices that are common in this highly globalized industry (Standing, 1989). It has also introduced the highly casualized and unstable labour relations such as subcontracting that are so dominant wherever this industry is found throughout the world (Steedman, 1997).

At the same time, Alvesson and Billing (1992) also identified problems with the social constructivist perspective, warning that using ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ as tools in organizational analysis may serve to reproduce stereotypes about what men and women are. “The tendency to see gender everywhere” implies an understanding of
subjects as carriers of static, predictable gender characteristics. This warning called for a deconstruction of the stereotypes of the gendered work. Following Derrida’s (2001) post-structuralism, Harlow & Hearn (1995) analyzed gender as a text, which can be read in different ways. In other words, the meanings of gender inequality and difference are produced historically through class struggle and are not based on pre-capitalist ideology or fixed interests (Ava Baron, 1992).

Within the garment industry, cutting and pressing are historically considered as men’s jobs which are more skilled, more responsible or heavier and hence deserve higher payment than sewing, which is considered as a women’s job. In fact, the technical developments in the garment work were often cited as an example of the concept of ‘gendered skill’ or gender inequality, which is rooted in the work organization of the job. Frances (1993) described the development of a detailed division of labour in England during the period 1890-1939. By the late 19th century, there were already three important divisions within the craft of tailoring, namely cutting, tailoring and pressing. With regard to changes in the level of mechanization of tailoring firms, by the 1880s sewing machines were increasingly powered by steam (1893 Factories Inquiry, p.29, 110, 125, 138, cited in Frances, 1993, p. 98). Until World War I, cutting in factories was generally done with a knife through numerous thicknesses of cloth. This was called as cutting machine, which made it possible to cut out fifty to seventy layers of cloth at once. However, there was no significant change in the way cutting was performed. The cutter still had to use his discretion to determine the most economical layout of the pattern, while allowing for any stripes, naps or piles on the fabric. Cutting was considered a men’s work because women were portrayed as the “weaker sex, unfitted for lifting heavy bolts of cloth used for making suits or incapable of cutting through many layers of cloth with the knife” (1935
Like cutting, pressing used to be a heavy job, involving the manipulation of hot irons weighing up to 32 pounds, and so was claimed as men’s work. However, after the introduction of pressing machines of different kinds, which were appropriated for different stages of production and for different kinds of garment (heavy or light), women were only kept out of heavy pressing. Thus, as pressing was subdivided and mechanized, only heavy pressing was considered as men’s work. Cutting was also mechanized but not subdivided, and cutters retained their position as the masculine elite of the clothing trade.¹⁰

At TT, although cutting machines were mechanized, they were not yet automated like those in big factories. In other words, they were more or less the same as those in England in the 1900s that Frances described above. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, all four cutters were male, of whom two were close relatives of the owners. The cutting section existed even before the workshop was opened, when T bought the material, had it cut at home and distributed the cut pieces to households in the neighbourhood. The workshop’s owner said that in Co Nhue cutting was often managed by relatives or by people the owners could trust, because a stranger could easily sell or reveal the designs to competing workshops. Cutting was considered as the core section of the TT workshop and it was easy to understand that male cutting workers were more privileged than female sewing workers.¹¹ In the cutting section of both MH and DG, cutting became both more automated and subdivided. This meant that cutters did not have to lift heavy bolts of cloth and use a knife to cut through many layers of cloth, but computerized machines did the job and the cutters only had to push a bottom after checking the specifications. However,

¹⁰ For example, in a number of medium and small-scale garment enterprises in rural Greece, the enterprises employed workers who originated from the reservoir of skilled labour left over from the decline of the bespoke tailoring trade and moved to the cutting section (Simmons & Kalantaridis, 1995, pp. 296-7).
¹¹ See more on how the boys were treated in Chapter 1.
workers still had to put layers of cloth into piles, and after cutting they had to leave some marks on different piles of details about the category so that sewing workers could easily receive the inputs. In general, while the main cutters were male workers, the auxiliary workers, who put layers into piles, categorized the details and distributed them to sewing workers, were women. For example, in the cutting section of MH, the number of male workers was 16 out of 38 in total. Male workers were the main cutters who managed the main job of the team, while women were in charge of the auxiliary work like unfolding the piles of cloth, numbering, collecting all details of a product and so on. The cutters received higher piece wage rates than auxiliary workers but could finish their jobs earlier. At the same time, workers in the cutting team had shorter working hours every day than those on sewing production lines. It was also more difficult to be employed in the cutting team, even in the position of an auxiliary worker, than on the sewing production line. The two women in the cutting section in the interview hesitated to talk much about their recruitment to the factory, but they often implied that ‘you’ needed to know ‘someone’ in the company to apply for the cutting team. They themselves had moved from H, the Vietnamese partner of MH. At DG the majority of main cutters were also men. Workers in the cutting department worked in shifts. Hence their working time, which could not exceed 10 hours a day, was much shorter than that on the assembly lines. At the same time, while there were high rates of turnover of labour on the assembly lines, few workers in the cutting department quit the job. This somehow showed that workers in the cutting section were in more privileged positions than those on sewing production lines. In the sewing section, although women were in the majority, it was not impossible to see a single ‘precious’ man. For example, in team 12 of workshop 6 at DG there were 8 boys assembling garments out a total of 50 workers. In team 8 of MH, there were around 15
males out of its 100 workers. I observed that boys were often assigned to the operation of specialized patent machines like buttoning, overcasting or zigzagging, which were more mechanized and had higher speeds. Although the workers did not have to exercise much more physical strength than normal to operate these machines, they were considered as masculine jobs because men were more used to working with modern technology. Of course, one still could see women as operators of these machines. In team 8 of MH, for several months, the two male workers, who operated buttoning and zigzagging machines, earned the highest incomes. At the same time, the most skilled workers in the operation of normal sewing machines like stitching the upper hems to the pants, who were female, earned less than the two boys. But at DG those who earned the highest incomes belonged to the female workers who stitched collars and zips to the jackets. Hence, whether the operators of specialized machines or the most skilled workers operating normal machines would receive the highest incomes in the production lines depended on many factors and this was not yet clearly fixed. Even so, while the operation of specialized machines might require some physical strength, or some extra training, it took a worker many more years to become a skilled operator of normal machines. At both DG and MH, people who stayed at the end of the line and were considered as the most skilful ones in the line, often had more than seven years’ working experience, and all of them were women. The male operators of specialized machines only had on average two or three years of working experience.

While girls often did ironing at TT, only men were seen to work in the ironing section at both MH and DG. Workers at TT still had to use irons for pressing collars like in the old days. In general, girls who did not yet have sewing skill and did not want (or
did not have money) to pay for tuition fees to learn the skill,\textsuperscript{12} were often given work in the auxiliary jobs at the beginning for a period of time. Ironing (both pressing and ironing details and ironing the final products) was among the auxiliary jobs and had lower piece-rates than sewing workers. For example, Tu, Thom, Oanh and Truc had to do ironing for one year before they were allowed to sit on the line. In return, they did not have to pay for the tuition fees. In the big factories, while the use of pressing machines made the task simple and easy, ironing was still very important for finishing products. It was also considered to be a heavy and stressful job, because the workers always had to cope with the heat from the ironing machines. Although the rules for the control of absenteeism were in general strict, I observed that some ironing workers could easily manipulate the rules. For example, Thuan worked in the ironing section for the whole seven years of his employment with the company. At the beginning of the order, when outputs had not come out in big quantities, he could get out of the workshop (of course not through the official gate, but illegally through a hole in the fence) around ten times a day, to have a drink, to eat and even to sleep. His foreman knew about it and sometimes warned him, but he replied that as the job was exhausting he felt thirsty and hungry all the time. In the end, the foreman got used to it and ignored his absence. However, if workers on the assembly line went to the toilet for too long, they would easily be discovered by the foreman and could be scolded immediately for creating a traffic jam on the line. Once he asked the foreman for leave, but the boss did not approve it because the reason was not very convincing. Thuan was very disappointed and went out to drink beer for two hours during work time. When he came back to work, the team leader gave him the permission. Thuan

\textsuperscript{12} Those who could pay for tuition fees were put on the sewing production line immediately.
explained to me that he was so stubborn that the foreman was tired of him. However, I saw that Thuan was in a position that had more bargaining power than other workers.

As mentioned early in this part, garment work was often considered as feminine work. However, in practice the relationship between the industrial skill and domestic or female skill was rather vexed. In Vietnam, the discussion of the traditional ‘*tu duc*’ (four virtues) of a good woman was still a valid debate in contemporary society. One of the virtues of a good woman related to labour: she should master cooking, embroidery and sewing. Thus, sewing as a domestic skill discursively signified the feminist character of women. As a result many girls who entered the garment work often expected that the job would improve their domestic skills. When asked why they wanted to become garment workers, several replied that besides the need to have a job to earn a living, they wished to make themselves and others better dressed and more beautiful. However, after working for a while, they realized that the industry could not make their wish come true. In general, most of them went to tailors to have their clothes made or bought ready-made clothes.\(^{13}\) This reflected Marx’s alienating tendency of consumed products from production in a capitalist society.\(^{14}\) Some replied that they had opted for the job because they thought it was rather relaxing work for women so that they could combine housework and career. They also changed their opinions after working for a while, saying that the garment industry could not be considered as a light industry but rather a heavy industry, because it was not a ‘light job’ at all.

Male workers had contradictory views about their own jobs as garment workers.

When I asked the vice-director of workshop 6 of DG whether he could assemble

\(^{13}\) As mentioned in Chapter 6, very few skilled workers could tailor clothes for themselves. Some others asked these skilled co-workers to cut the materials and assembled the pieces into clothes themselves.

\(^{14}\) This point will be further elaborated in Chapter 6.
garments himself, he replied that he could check if the job had been done correctly but could not actually do the job himself. He added that making garments was women’s work and if men had to do it, this showed that those men were useless and had no other choice except becoming garment workers. As a vice-director, he was mainly in charge of discipline in the workshop. However, he said that the duty of a foreman was different. A foreman was required to have excellent skills at assembling in order to instruct workers from the beginning of a new order. Later on, I was told that he himself had been the foreman of team 12 for several years and had been promoted to vice-director only recently. Thus, as a man, he felt ashamed to admit the fact that he knew how to sew like women. Angie Ngoc Tran (2002) quoted the interview with a male worker who assembled shirts and attached buttons at a state factory to show that hidden behind the internalization of gender stereotype was the fact that men were not disinclined to do the job just because of low wages, long working hours and strict discipline:

“This job does not suit me well because I am a man. While this job is not heavy, I do not like it because the wage is very low, and it is time-consuming and very restricting. I am looking for another job in a ceramic and brick company, which is now accepting applications” (Tran 2002, p.63).

However, a boy at MH said he had quit the construction work before entering the garment factory because the job was too heavy for him. At TT, Bao, a young male worker from Dong Anh, talked about how he came to be a garment worker:

Since I was small, I was very good at making delicate and trivial things manually. I often went to a neighbour who was working as a garment worker and helped her to operate the overcasting machine sometimes. After finishing high school, there was a time when I followed the motorbike and television repairing courses, but then I
quit the classes because I did not like these jobs. Then my dad sent me to Dong Anh Vocational Training School where I leant garment work. At that time, I did not know that I would follow this job for the rest of my life.

However, in the same workshop (TT), there was a girl from Ha Nam who was notorious for her clumsiness. Although she had already taken a training course for a few months before entering TT, she could not manage the simplest tasks and was removed to the auxiliary section by the manager. T, the owner of TT, often cited the example of the two male workers who seized the Rewards of the Golden Hands to show that the most skilled workers in the garment industry were male workers and not female. In fact, both men and women could become skilled garment workers. As in any other occupation, the influence from the family and the surrounding environment played an important role in shaping one’s capacity to master his or her job in the future. Co Nhue workers were usually more skilled and productive than their co-workers from other places because they had been born and grown up in the environment of the clothing trade.

In spite of the fact that the majority of garment workers were women, most of the employers and managers told me that they preferred to recruit men rather than women because men were stronger than women and they did not complain about work as much as women. However, female workers often used family duties or women’s problems as excuses to avoid or to reduce workload. For example, one male manager at DG said he did not know how to reply when a girl asked for permission to take a rest because of menstrual pain. The owner of TT often complained that his female workers could not concentrate on work because their minds were always occupied with their relationships with boyfriends. In any case, although management’s preference for male workers

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15 Legally, women workers in factories should be given time for hygienic matters. In other words, it is a matter of right, but the manager still wondered whether it was an issue of discipline.
acknowledged the difference between men and women, they treated men and women equally in terms of payment and working time in normal conditions. On the other hand, such preference also showed the employers’ wish (if it was possible) to avoid giving workers extra benefits which women were legally entitled to according to the law.

The scarcity of male workers in the garment industry also meant that management wanted to employ more men, but few men wanted to work in the industry. Alongside this and behind men’s own internalization of gender stereotype in choosing occupations as mentioned earlier, men had more alternatives in finding jobs. The pattern of sex segregation in a number of jobs that migrants often take in Hanoi reflects the notion of men’s work and women’s work. For example, very few women can do the jobs of ‘cuu van’ (casual labourers who were hired to do heavy, dirty and dangerous jobs on a daily basis) (Nguyen Van Chinh, 1997), while most domestic workers are women. Men dominate in the construction and wood-related sectors, while more women than men work as street vendors and garment workers. The 1996 census by Hanoi Police Department shows that 67% of street vendors in Hanoi are women (Le Thi Quy, 1996). Among manual jobs that migrant female labourers often take up, garment work is considered as a respectable one but does not require much training. Although there is a high demand for domestic workers who are even better paid than garment workers but have a relaxing time with many urban families, the job is still considered as low class. The success of the revolutions which eradicated the master-servant relations more than 40 years ago makes it more difficult for young people to accept this job. While being hairdressers or bar and restaurant waitresses might give the unmarried girls a bad reputation or cause misunderstandings, street vending or having a small business might be unstable and physically exhausting. Thus, in comparison with other jobs, garment
work is a still a good choice for many migrant girls, in spite of low wages and long working hours. While many newly established companies in industrial zones in the South lack even unskilled workers all the time, most of the garment companies in the North in general or in Hanoi in particular did not experience a severe lack of workers. Despite the fact that there are fewer garment factories or industrial areas in the North where the unemployment rate is higher than in the South, migrating a long way to the South is not an easy decision for many people to make, especially women. Especially if one has some skills and some opportunities to be employed in big companies like DG or MH, one would decide to remain in Hanoi. And so although it is difficult to conclude that women have fewer choices than men with regard to employment, it is certain that women are more subject to social stigma as well as being more constrained in mobility. In such a sense, women have fewer opportunities than men in finding jobs outside the garment industries or of moving out of the garment companies which they think have bad working conditions. This also partially explains why women in the garment factories in Hanoi have less bargaining power towards their employers than men.

During my eight months in the TT workshop, the maximum number of boys in the sewing section was only three. The owner often said: “It is very difficult to keep boys in the workshop. They come, to work for a while and leave.” The boys were called lovely names such as ‘my chinh canh’ (seasoning) by T or ‘cau am suc vo’ (the porcelain pot with a broken spout) by Aunty Truong, the female shop-floor manager. In order to compensate for the reputation of doing women’s work, sewing men were also more

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16 See note 1 of Introduction.
17 During the time of economic difficulty, meat was so scarce that people had to use a lot of seasoning to make food tastier. In the end, the seasoning too became rare and precious.
18 The term refers to the spoilts sons of rich or powerful families, who are either naughty or dull. There is a play on the word ‘am’ which means both a teapot and is a title that the kings used to grant to sons of the dynasty’s high-ranking officials.
privileged than women and had better chances for promotion at work. For example, at TT, while all workers had to go back to work at 1.30 pm after lunch, Bao, one of the sewing boys said that he could always come at 2.30 and Aunty Truong did not say a word to him. When work started again in the afternoon, the shop-floor managers at TT often gathered in the living room to have a cup of tea before going to the workshop, and if Bao went to work on time, he also often joined in drinking tea like the managers before starting his work. Another sewing boy, Tu, who was the son of a former boss of T’s wife and had just entered the workshop, also enjoyed certain privileges. Nobody cared if he went to work or stayed at home because he was off work for quite a few days in a month. Many workers in the workshop told me that he went to work just for fun and not for the money. Sometimes, even if he had some work to do, he would still leave his position to sit next to some of the girls and chat with them. Management staff also did not warn him to go back to his place. In researching the experiences of men in female-dominated occupations, Simpson (2004) argues that men benefit from their minority status through assumptions of enhanced leadership by being given differential treatment and being associated with a more careerist attitude to work. At the same time, they feel comfortable working with women. Despite this comfort, men adopt a variety of strategies to re-establish a masculinity that has been undermined by the ‘feminine’ nature of their work. However, it should also be noted that both Bao and Tu came from the neighbourhood of Co Nhue. Bao was the only son of a middle-class family in Dong Anh. Tu’s father was the former director of a department in a state company producing leather shoes. Thus, it is not clear that they were given special treatment because they were boys, or because they were urban workers and came from established families. In the same manner, Thuan, the ironing worker at DG, was privileged because he was a male worker or/and because he
had long working experience in a position which was considered as a heavy and unhealthy job. However, it is possible that these two factors (status and gender) intertwine with each other to produce a masculine hegemonic workplace. In other words, gender and class are mutually constituted in the production of the power process in the workplace; one can only make sense of class when viewing it in the interaction with gender and vice versa\(^\text{19}\) (Peter Winn, 2003).

In general, skill is a gendered or a socially constructed concept. Although technology has transformed several heavy jobs like cutting, pressing, buttoning into simpler and physically less demanding ones, the main task like sewing or garment assembling has continued to be time-consuming and even become more intensified because of the higher speeds of the machines. In other words, all the jobs in the garment industry become industrialized and no longer have anything to do with domestic work or feminine skills. However, the perception of gendered jobs is still produced and reproduced in the workshop and gender inequality is derived from this. Although women were gradually accepted in the cutting section, the main cutters remained the elite masculine jobs. While ironing was considered as an auxiliary unskilled job, which was undertaken only by women in one workplace, it was considered as a heavy job or men’s work in other workplaces. There was also a tendency that men were often assigned to the operation of specialized machines, and often had relatively high piece-wages, but the operators did not need to have long working experience (because of their high level of automation). The masculine hegemony of the workplace was produced not only through the vertical division of labour between men and women in the work organization but also through the scarcity of male workers in the industry. As in many occupations,

\(^{19}\) Winn (2003, p.1) used the term ‘mutual constitution’ to express the intertwining of gender and class.
management preferred male workers to female workers, not only because garment work had been transformed into industrial work but also because they wanted to avoid their extra obligations towards female labour. The rarity of male workers in the industry could be partially explained by the internalization of gender stereotype in choice of occupation among the workers themselves, but also by the fact that men had more alternatives than women to get better jobs (better paid or better working conditions). Women were constrained by social stigma or mobility in their choice of jobs, especially in the setting of northern Vietnam. Thus, a masculine hegemonic workplace arose partially because men workers had more bargaining power than women workers vis-à-vis management, and management used this to legitimatize their hierarchical rule over women. However, one could never be sure whether gender was the only factor leading to such a workplace culture. As demonstrated in this part, gender always has to interact with other factors such as class to produce a power process in the workplace.

**Skill, vocational training and labour recruitment**

In the first part of this chapter, I have already explained that skill is an important factor deciding workers’ wage level. In general, workers also need to have a certain level of skill to be able to be employed in garment workshops. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, each company required a different level of skill as a starting point. In this part, I will try to argue that a form of social inequality arises from different strategies and methods of recruiting new workers. Corruption in the state-owned factory reflects not only the privileges of the state sector (in relation to the private sector) and the perceptions of ‘good jobs’ in society, but also the imbalances in the supply and demand in the market for intensive labour.
Before *doi moi*, working in the state sector, which was referred to as *bien che*, was considered as the only form of employment. *Bien che* not only provided job security for life, entitlements and basic services ranging from housing, dining services, kindergartens, guest houses and clinics, but also social prestige. The economic reforms have broadened the perceptions of employment, which encompass all the varieties of income-generating opportunities in Vietnam. In the city, many young graduates preferred to work with the foreign companies and joint-ventures, local private businesses and self-employment because of better income, matching abilities and skills to jobs and work that is more challenging (Nguyen Phuong An, 2002). At the same time, while only very few positions of *bien che* are available in the state sector, most young people are first employed as contract workers, implying a dramatic reduction in job security. Usually there are a limited and fixed number of *bien che* in a state office. To fill the demand for work, the state office can always recruit new people as contract workers. When an old employee retires, a position of *bien che* becomes vacant and contract workers can take an exam, which is known as the civil-servant exam (*thi cong chuc*). When one passes such an exam, one is officially called as state employee. This recruitment procedure is more prominent in administrative offices than in production or business sections within the state sector. In the state enterprises, this is applied only to administrative workers, while most production workers are employed as contract workers. In other words, the concept of ‘life-time’ employment in the state manufacture sector, associated with benefits such as free housing, is gradually disappearing.

Although lifetime job security and stability are less attractive to young people in the city, and despite the gradual administrative reform in the state sector, the old perception of employment (the state sector as the only and the best employer) still remains strong in
the rural areas, particularly among the older generation. As a result, cheating and corruption can easily happen at the time of entry to state factories and even in the process of vocational training and apprenticeship. Workers and their parents are willing to pay an extra amount of money to be employed in the state sector. The following is what a garment girl at TT said about how she started garment work:

*People from the Manpower Centre To Vinh Dieu in Hanoi even went to my village one day to advertise a training course for garment making. They said that they would bring me to Hanoi, and promised to give a job in a military garment workshop with a starting salary of 500,000 VND per month after I finished the course. My parents were quite happy about their plan and agreed to my leaving. They had to give them two million dong in advance. But they were ‘bon co moi’ (decoys). When arriving in Hanoi, they took me to the vocational school X and left me there and went away for good. Less than three months later, the school pushed us to go to the factories. The school offered us to any garment workshops that came to recruit labour. It was a very irresponsible attitude. They did not care whether we could manage the jobs in the factories. Before we left the school, people there had told us if we had any difficulties at work, we could come back after that. Actually, we did come back once but the guard did not allow us to enter. Perhaps they were afraid that we would speak ill about the school to those who were studying inside.*

As a populated country, Vietnam certainly has a high share of young people trying to enter the job market. The Vietnam Living Standard Survey 1997-1998 (VLSS 1997-1998) conducted by the Vietnam General Statistical Office (GSO) revealed that the group of population aged 15-19 accounted for the largest proportion (21.07%), and the group aged 20-24 the second biggest (14.06%) of the total population. In other words, young
school leavers or dropouts were the most vulnerable group to face unemployment (Le Xuan Ba, Cu Chinh Loi & Nguyen Thi Kim Dzung, 2000, p. 20). These growth rates put great pressure on the labour market to create new jobs. In such a context, the garment industries seemed to have opened up some space to help solve the unemployment and underemployment problems. However, as in many other industries, there was a shortage of skilled garment workers. It has been claimed that the system of education and vocational training in Vietnam was detached from practice, production and the whole economy in general. According to letters sent by garment workers to the ‘Labor and Society’ Newsletter, vocational schools were of such bad quality that the graduates of these schools could not pass the exams to enter the factories. Often they had to undergo several months of training on the job at the beginning of their employment in the factories. Moreover, vocational centers are mostly located in towns, and it proved to be costly and inconvenient for rural people to go to towns and cities to undergo the training. The top ranking economic newspaper in Vietnam (Thoi bao Kinh te Vietnam) emphasized the poor quality of the labour force from vocational schools by citing the low percentages of workers successfully recruited by foreign employers in Ho Chi Minh out of the numbers of candidates introduced by the manpower centers: 30 percent in 1994, 28 percent in 1995, and only 15 percent in 1998. At the same time, the vice-director of the Management Unit of Industrial Areas in Ho Chi Minh complained: “We had to run all around to find human resources but very few vocational centres could meet our demands” (Thoi bao Kinh te Viet Nam - Vietnam Economic Reviews, Issue 100, Wednesday, 16 December 1998, p.6). On the other hand, in spite of their poor quality, the number of vocational schools was also limited. For example, in the whole province of Binh Duong, which has attracted the biggest numbers of foreign investment projects in recent years,
there was only one technical training centre, sponsored by the Singaporean Government to supply technical workers for industrial areas of Binh Duong. As a result, although garment work was still considered to be a low-paid job, it was still a bumpy road for many girls from rural areas to become a garment worker (Labor and Society, January 1999, p.16). Due to the demand for skilled labour on the labour market and the encouragement by the government of the establishment of agencies that facilitated job creation, vocational training under a loose framework of control and regulation by the Government became a fertile area for individuals to jump in and make profits from poor farming families.

As was mentioned in the Introduction, DG was among the few state-owned companies that provided stable employment and offered competitive wages to workers. This reputation resulted in ‘a price’ that a worker had to pay if he or she wanted to enter the company. In theory, the candidates had to take a skill test and if they passed it, the company would recruit them. But only those who were already skilful or had long working experience somewhere else could pass the exam. However, in fact, new workers with moderate levels of skill had to pay rather high tuition fees for a private training course to be employed in the company.

DG did not have an ‘official’ vocational school of its own. Its neighbouring state-owned company had a big training centre in which only those who completed a two-year program were allowed to take the recruitment test to the company. Although the expense of the two years’ schooling was a huge investment for many farming families (just the tuition fee was 220,000 VND per month), the policies reflected some transparency in the recruitment procedures. However, such an official school or centre did not exist at DG. As an unwritten rule, the candidates had to go through a ‘special vocational school’
which was owned and operated by a private person, a cadre who was currently working for DG. The training course was programmed for only a few months but its fees were surprisingly high. Hang had been working at DG for only two months. As a new worker, she was assigned to do auxiliary work. Last month, she received 300,000 dong (20 US$). She entered the company through the vocational school where she had to pay 4 million dong (275 US$) as a ‘lump-sum’ package. However, she said that she was lucky. Her elder sister, who was currently studying at that school, had to pay 5 million dong (330 US$).

Thus, the ‘tuition fee’ was not a fixed amount at all and implicitly covered a fee for bribing the whole ‘channel’. Of course, this price fluctuated from time to time depending on how many new workers the company wanted to employ at that time. Consequently, it would take a few years for these workers to recover from this initial investment. During this time, the girls often dared not take the risk of quitting their jobs because they would otherwise lose the total investment. Although DG did not collect deposits\textsuperscript{20} from new workers officially, this ‘under the table’ amount functioned as a non-refundable deposit, aiming at keeping workers with the company for a few years. One male worker said:

\textit{The company did not care who came in or who went out. There were no policies to keep skilled workers. As a result, many skilled workers moved to newly established companies.}

By chance, I met the former director of one workshop of DG at MH where he was occupying a new role as the assistant of the General Director of MH. He was sacked from DG because he had opposed an order from DG’s General Director to send him to a joint

\textsuperscript{20} The system of deposits was applied in many garment workshops, especially in local private workshops, to avoid the situation where workers might move to new factories after having had some training in these workshops.
venture in another province for a period of three years. Clearly the man felt bitterness towards his former company. He said that sometimes the ‘corruption mechanism’ did not work well, and this was manifested in the cancellation of the test even when production demanded new workers. This could possibly imply that the ‘private vocational school’ did not feed the ‘mechanism’ enough cash. However, as long as this duty was fulfilled, the test was renewed.

Workers also complained to me that their piece-wages were very depressed because they had to carry the burden of an over-sized administrative staff. They called the administration section ‘the kindergarten for the children of big cadres from the centre’, who had the degrees but did not do anything, or who ‘worked little but earned a lot more money than us’. These remarks showed workers’ negative attitudes towards corruption in labour recruitment in the company.

With the flows of foreign investment into the country’s manufacture, some jobs in the foreign invested sector were also considered as ‘good jobs’, although people worried that the business could go bad overnight due to market volatility. In the garment industry, a big gap in terms of income difference between the state sector and the foreign investment sector was not observed. As there were several newly established joint-ventures, the opportunities to get employment in these new enterprises were not as limited as in the state-owned companies. Moreover, the fear of sudden closure of the business also made employment in the foreign investment sector become less attractive to many workers.

When I began the fieldwork at MH, the workshop had only been operating for ten months. Thus, as the company did not have any workers to start with, it had had to recruit a large number of workers all at once. In general, the company’s policy was to attract
skilled workers from state and private garment workshops like DG and NT in the neighbourhood. Most of the workers who entered the workshop in such widely advertised recruitment said that they did not have to pay any fees for application. No deposits as well as no training fees were required. The company encouraged those who were already working in the company to introduce their friends and acquaintances to apply for jobs at MH. The applicants only had to submit a set of documents, which did not have to arrive before the deadline but were still accepted for consideration.

For the first three months, production was not carried out immediately. A scheme of ‘training-on-the-job’ was designed for both managers and workers to get used to the new machines and long production lines. During this training period, workers still received a minimum wage level of 300,000 VND (20 US$). More attractively, the managers announced that workers only had to work from 7.00 am to 4.30 pm, just like any other state white-collar employees. As a result, during this period many skilled workers from DG moved to MH, causing the so-called crisis of labour at DG. In response to this, DG implicitly negotiated that those who left the company could go back without paying any ‘tuition fees’ like the beginners. In order to keep those who were still working, DG devised a quota system with bonus, which was mentioned in Chapter 1. However, this policy did not last long. It was implemented during the high season of DG in 2002. When it turned to the low season, and MH did not need to employ many workers, the quota system in DG also ended.

At MH, the ‘easy-going environment’ also ended after the first three months. When production started, workers had to work until 7, 8, and then 10, 11 pm or sometimes overnight. Feeling they had been cheated, many skilled workers, who were mostly urban women, moved out again. Only in team 8, where I often conducted in-depth interviews,
workers told me that around half of the workers had left during ten months since its
establishment. However, MH still tried to keep the workers by competitive piece rates.
The manager, who had moved from DG to MH, told me that for the same short pants, DG
only paid workers 3000 VND per piece but MH paid 5300 VND. However, DG workers
could still receive higher salaries than MH workers because they produced different kinds
of products and the proportion of skilled and experienced workers at DG was still much
higher than those at MH. In order to become competitive in the labour market, a member
of the administrative staff of MH revealed to me that the company even accepted making
a ‘loss’ during the initial period in order to guarantee a minimum wage level of 500,000
VND per month for workers. However, long working hours every day seemed to be
unavoidable, although the working day at MH was normally one or two hours shorter
than at DG and there were more Sundays off at MH than at DG.

As a result, when I conducted my fieldwork at MH, the company had already
created a good reputation among garment workers in the area. One girl who entered the
company during this time as an auxiliary worker told me that she had to pay around 2
million (130 US$) to a person who helped her to work temporarily for a few months. She
did not know how to operate sewing machines so even after the contract for the auxiliary
position ended, she would not be able transfer to the sewing section. One day, when I
entered the management room, I heard a rather unpleasant conversation between the
shop-floor director and the person who was in charge of personnel. Afterwards, the shop-
floor director explained to me that she had decided to recruit some new workers and only
reported it to the general director, without going through the personnel section. I could
not further clarify this complicated situation but the atmosphere revealed some tension
among management staff regarding who hold should more power in the recruitment of

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new workers. Thus, when production became stable, at the factory gate one’s skill level was not as important as knowing the ‘right person’ or paying some unofficial entry fees.

In the local private workshop, workers did not have to pay any unofficial fees to enter. Instead, they had to pay for the tuition fees (if they started from scratch) and deposits, which were considered as a financial sanction if they left the workshop before a certain period such as one or two years. Due to a lack of skilled workers, many garment producers in Co Nhue had to accept employing unskilled workers, who were sponsored and trained by the skilled ones in the workshops. The sponsors and the ones sponsored often had village relations or kinship links. The fact that the village badly needed skilled workers caused the owner of TT to come up with the model of ‘training on the job’. The official aim of the vocational centre was to provide skilled garment workers for Co Nhue garment producers. Those who were granted a reduction or exemption from the tuition fees in the centre were villagers’ children, and children of war invalids, or martyrs no matter where they came from. This recruitment policy was clearly stated on the board hung outside the workshop. In return for this ‘pro-poor’ policy, the authorities of Co Nhue village let him a part of the village’s primary school for a cheap price so that he could quickly set up the centre.

At TT, workers paid 300,000 VND (less than 20 US$) as a deposit which would be refunded by the owners after one year working in the workshop, and 100,000 VND (6 US$) as tuition fee per month for a shorter period such as two or three months. After a short time like one month on the training program, apprentices could participate on the production line by undertaking simple operations under close supervision of the managers and technicians. T paid the apprentices only half of the piece rates which were paid to skilled workers because the former produced less while consuming more electricity. The
apprentices also did not have to pay tuition fees and deposits straight away. The first few salary payments of many apprentices could be used to pay off the debts. This arrangement reduced the burden for their parents at home and encouraged the girls to continue their jobs. In fact, the rules were rather flexible at TT. For example, Lien and Hien, whose uncle was a friend of T, had to pay only the tuition fees. In Hue’s case, it was agreed that her salary would be reduced by a small amount each month to pay for the deposit and the tuition fee. Tu, who was an absolute beginner when entering the workshop, had to do auxiliary work (ironing) in the first year. She was allowed to sit at the sewing machine only in her second year in the workshop. Instead, she did not have to pay both deposit and tuition fees.

In this way at the point of factory entry workers had to pay quite different prices to enter different companies. However, these prices depended not only on the skill levels of the workers but also on the companies where they wanted to work. One of the social factors that shaped this difference was the traditional attachment to the state sector as the best employers. Such a popular perception could be understood as the legacy of the subsidizing period. As the private sector, including foreign investment and local entrepreneurship, was growing rapidly in its size and numbers, it was harder for such illegal channels of recruitment to exist in the private sector.

**Conclusion**

As a critique of Braverman’s thesis on skill/deskilling, the chapter focused on the subjective aspect of skill. In other words, skill was analyzed as a socially constructed concept. First, skill/deskilling related to workers’ individualism and collectivism in management terms, vis-à-vis autonomous working class identities in the form of workers’
solidarity practices such as supporting each other at work. In management terms, collectivism was identified with the competitive relations between individuals within and between teams and workshops. ‘Nhay chuyen’ (jumping) as a scientific management method, derived from deskilling and the piece-rate system, aimed at promoting the competition between workers themselves in order to increase the line’s productivity. Thus ‘nhay chuyen’ is among the new management practices that individualize employment relations in order to promote the team’s collective identity through its shared benefits (a team’s daily productivity or monthly revenues). At MH ‘nhay chuyen’ was applied in the most radical and effective manner, and as a result, workers became the most individualistic at work in the sense that they did not help each other. At DG workers were less motivated to ‘jump’ because work was less and there was a less defined division of labour on the production line, but the competition between teams and workshops was given higher priority. At TT ‘jumping’ was the least welcome because of the uneven skill levels of workers and the communal and quasi-familial environment in the workshop. Thus, at both DG and TT (and especially at TT), there were more cooperative relations among workers, which were seen not only in less clearly defined divisions of labour and incomes but also in more support between workers at work without an exchange of benefits. In the context of the economic reforms in Vietnam, which encouraged the piece-rate system and a system of rewarding performance, management’s rearticulation of individualism/collectivism in new management practices like ‘jumping’ was also welcome as a political correction of the equalization of efforts in the past. However, to what extent it was put into practice effectively and radically depended on the levels of the deskilling of the production line and the levels of skill of individual workers.
Second, skill is a gendered concept and men’s work and women’s work are socially constructed on this basis. While garment work is considered as women’s work in general, cutting remained exclusively elite masculine work, although the technological innovations made the jobs much less heavy and complicated. Although women also joined the cutting section, they mainly undertook auxiliary work in the cutting section due to the technical subdivision of this job. Although women filled most of the positions in garment workshops (except main cutters), and proved that they could do the jobs as well as male workers, men (if there were any) were often given higher priority in tasks like ironing, buttoning and zigzagging which were considered as heavy or dangerous due to the heat, high speed and heavy weight of the machines. In fact, as the machines were highly mechanized, the high speed and heavy weight of the machines did not make the task heavier (so that workers had to use more strength to operate them) but only increased the intensification of the job. Although these tasks did not require long training or long working experience for workers to become skilled, they often had relatively high piece rates in comparison with normal sewing tasks. As demonstrated in this part, men in these operations often had greater bargaining power than sewing women. At the same time, male sewing workers were also given more privileges than women and were promoted to management positions more easily than women. The chapter also argued that a masculine hegemonic workplace in the garment industry was produced not only when male managers supervised and controlled female workers. A male favoured environment could also exist when there were fewer men than women in the workplace but management still preferred to employ men rather than women. While men liked to choose the jobs which were in general considered as men’s work, the main reason why men did not like garment work was the low wages and long working hours. More importantly, they had more
alternatives or choices than women who were often constrained not only by limited opportunities, but also many social factors such as mobility, social prestige and stigma. At the same time, management preferred male workers because they could avoid some extra obligations towards female workers. In the context of a high rate of unemployment and underemployment and women as the main source of the labour force, the preference for employing male workers on the grounds that men were seen as more skilled and had fewer family responsibilities represented discrimination based on sex at work. The fact that male workers had more bargaining power than female workers in general was not always evident or clear-cut because gender always interacts with other factors like experience and capacity (to stand heat in the case of Thuan) or with class and place of origin (as in the case of Bao and Tu). However, there was a system of power relations in the workplace that was embedded in gender.

Last but not least, a system of skill levels (vocational training and skill tests to enter the companies) is connected with social inequality through the different recruitment procedures and requirements used by the companies. The obstacles and difficulties that migrant garment workers might face in job entry depended on a combination of their skill levels and the type of companies where they wanted to be employed. Corruption in the recruitment of new workers could happen most easily at DG and least at TT. As the state managers were given more power and autonomy in any decisions relating to the labour force, the mechanism of recruitment in the state company was more susceptible to corruption. At the same time, alongside the high level of material compensation in this company, the perception of the state company as being the best employer in terms of stable employment and job security was also one of the reasons why workers were willing to pay some fees under the table in order to obtain employment in this company. More
employment opportunities in the private sector in general made it more difficult for corruption to happen at both TT and MH. Moreover, private companies had to pay more attention to their competitiveness to survive in the market. In general, corruption in recruitment was a form of social inequality that garment workers had to suffer in the context of the economic reforms and it reduced their bargaining power vis-à-vis management.
Chapter 3: Misbehaviour, the uncontrolled part of management

Introduction

Workers’ everyday life resistance to management or indirect and covert forms of resistance is a hot topic in labour and management studies. The core of the controversy lies in the definition of what resistance is and what qualifies as an act of resistance. Instead of trying to answer such controversial questions, this chapter will attempt to examine workers’ forms of misbehaviour as their reaction to management strategies in relation to the extent of individualism and collectivism in such acts. Although workers’ misbehaviour such as gossiping, absenteeism and theft are also considered as indirect and covert forms of resistance that can produce some power effects in the organization, there has not yet been any discussion of the extent to which they are important to workers’ collective working class identities.

The studies of workers’ resistance involved many difficulties in its conceptualization because the term had an ambiguous meaning. According to Ludtke, a behaviour is only seen as an act of resistance when the social actors strategically optimize the effectiveness of such behaviour (Ludtke, cited in Marcel van der Linden, 1995). Thus, there is some misbehaviour which does not fit into the binary logic of resistance and obedience because they happen without any calculation of effects or outcomes. Ackroyd and Thompson (1995; 1999) use the term ‘misbehaviour’ to refer to the full range of employee practices in a highly developed control-resistance model. In other words, the study of resistance turns out to be one of informal organization, informal practices or organizational misbehaviour. Thus, in each of the misbehaviour, there is a certain level of resistance, which can be located at a certain point in the control-resistance model.
Offering the criticism that this focus on informal practices in the organization would result in a tendency to individualize workers’ resistance, Tebbutt & Marchington (1997) and Mulholland (2004) suggest that the concept of the collective worker can provide a better analytical framework to understand the complexity of workers’ resistance. In this way, workers’ misbehaviour will be analyzed with reference to the extent to which they would contribute to the furthering of workers’ collectivism in its broader meanings.

Collectivism here should not only be identified with formal institutions or regulations, as discussed in Chapter 2, but should be understood in the wider sense of the collective function of individuals in the capitalist labour process (the collective worker) and the social and political experience of collectivism which feeds into different forms (union and worker practices) (Martinez & Stewart, 1997, p.70). On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge the powerful effects of misbehaviour in the workplace, which not only causes trouble and headaches for management but also influences management’s behaviour toward workers. On the other hand, although most of misbehaviour takes an individual form of resistance, it is important to point out whether or not (and if so in what way) the individuals who misbehave perform their collective functions in producing and disseminating misbehaviour or how and to what extent the misbehaviour is rooted in the whole structure of antagonistic relations arising from the social relations of production.

The chapter is divided into six parts and each part covers one kind of misbehaviour. Being categorized as work avoidance, some misbehaviour such as deception in cutting surplus thread is intended to reduce the workload. However, in some misbehaviour, it is difficult to know whether workers just want to “retain their need for individual freedom of movement, for a certain aloofness from others, and for a sense of being on their own”

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1 See the explanation of the complex nature of collectivism in Chapter 2.
(Ludtke, cited in Marcel van der Linden, 1995, p.290), or it comes from an intention to appropriate time for themselves instead for productive work. In the second part, some workers keep a distance symbolically and physically from managers in order to emphasize their working class identity and dignity in relation to management, while in some other cases, the misbehaviour in the same category does not provide any clues or connotation of a counter culture. The third part is about jokes, a subject which is rooted in reality and is constructed out of the engagement of (un)conscious desires for outright resistance. The process of making jokes and telling jokes also involves several persons. Like jokes, gossip and rumours also have a collective dimension in the way they were constructed and transmitted among workers. Gossip about the private life of managers and management styles of different managers is considered as a kind of workers’ misbehaviour. Although in this gossip workers often attribute gender characters as the main explanation for management behaviour, ultimately the antagonistic workplace relation is found to be the origin of the employee struggle. In other words, gender becomes the medium or the weapon for the employee struggle because of its effectiveness in terms of culture. On the one hand, workers have a tendency to personalize employment relations based on their own experience with their managers. On the other hand, from such personal narratives about workers’ relationships with managers, the logic of the collective working class and gender identities are also constructed. In the fifth part, the misbehaviour is the lies that workers tell to obtain holidays without being punished. Management also tolerates such a game to a certain extent. However, such toleration often works on individual bases, depending on workers’ skill level and their individual bargaining power. Thus, by allowing workers to win in such games, management manufactures consent at the expense of collectivism. Last but not least, managers also have misbehaviour, which reflects their
ambivalent and shifting class positions as management staff. In other words, the management job is designed to be part of the system of Marx’s collective worker, whose benefits and responsibilities are tied to the whole labour process. As a result, their misbehaviour often has a high level of intention and calculation of outcomes or effects. Specifically, their acts of resistance take into account the calculation of, for example, when and with whom alliances can be made to make unexpected attacks or an attack from behind on the employers or superiors.

**Misbehaviour and Collectivism**

Informal interaction in organizations is an important topic that attracts a great deal of attention from sociologists, historians, and feminists. Moving away from quantitative surveys based on limited interviews or questionnaires, the research, which focuses on day-to-day informal interactions and networks, produced much useful ethnographic material. However, scholars from different disciplines interpret workers’ misbehaviour in different ways. Studies of resistance of the weak tend to overstate and/or romanticize oppositional practices. An exaggerated radicalism is often imputed to their class analysis as the dominant explanation (James Scott, 1985; Willis, 1977). By emphasizing workers’ subjectivity, Burawoy (1979) takes the initiative in dismantling the binary meaning of coercion and consent, or resistance and cooperation. He introduces the concept of the game of ‘making out’, which instantly expresses workers’ resistance. However, when workers lose in the game and are incorporated into the corporate culture, consent is manufactured. The sociology of deviancy in industrial settings from the late 1960s renews its efforts at industrial anthropology to produce studies of the unofficial life of institutions. Detailed studies of particular work situations suggest that ‘fiddles’ in the
Patterns of resistance are sought in the nooks and crannies of the day-to-day situation such as acts of sabotage, absenteeism, theft, dragging one’s feet and so on (Robin Cohen, 1991, p.33). The picture drawn is of workers being active and innovative in attempts to survive in employment, recurrently breaking rules and actively renegotiating them on a continuous basis, while management frequently tolerates and accommodates such behaviour (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995, p.616). Using a Foucauldian framework on power and the subject, Knights and his colleagues argue that subjectivities are the effect of power and that workers’ resistance is found in the form of subjectivities. For example see, Knight, 1990; 1998; Jermier, J.M, Knights.D & Nord,W.R.,1994; Ezzy (1997; Knight & McCabe, 1998; 2000; 2003). Resistance to coercive control is understood to be highly circumscribed and individualized and is the only possible way for individuals to seek ‘spaces for escape’. Dissatisfaction, anxieties and insecurities are the medium and outcome of the subjective search to craft one or more selves through interwoven practices of control, resistance, compliance or consent. The problem with this approach is that any kinds of responses by workers to management could be interpreted as resistance.

Feminists have contributed a great deal to such ideas by arguing that women do not often resort to the same deliberate and overt resistance as male workers, but have different ways of dealing with authority, such as praying in a private room (Aihwa Ong, 1987), gossiping (Tebbutt, M, 1992, 1995) and so on. However, this approach also tends to overemphasize the ‘feminine’ nature of resistance, whereas in fact both men and women can gossip about their boss or can pray, depending on their cultural background or personal character rather than their gender. Even so, one cannot deny the gendered nature
of resistance in the workplace, which includes both working class masculinity and femininity (Collison, 1994; 2000).

As mentioned above, there is always an ambiguity in the extent to which misbehaviour can be seen as simply a response to managerial initiatives or as an act of resistance to the hierarchical power of the organization. Defining resistance as the behaviours that are intentionally designed to produce certain effects or outcomes, Ludtke did not take into account workers’ agenda or priorities but focused more on the deliberateness of the actions. In this case, some misbehaviour like ‘eigen-sinn’, a person’s pigheadedness or stubbornness, and ‘keeping distance’ cannot be counted as resistance. According to Ackroyd and Thompson, all kinds of organizational misbehaviour imply a certain level of resistance. However, due to the workers’ hidden agendas or priorities or the calculations of risks and costs which might be involved when one misbehaves, the workers have to select different forms of resistance, direct or indirect, individual or collective. The term ‘misbehaviour’ is used to capture the full range of employee practices that are located within the control-resistance model (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995, p.617). Thus, in general, misbehaviour is individualistic behaviour in opposition to the collective identification with the teamwork, and resistance is often understood as arising from such opposition to power. However, Martinez Lucio & Stewart (1997) argue that such a narrow identification of collectivism with formal institutions’ regulations will undermine the aim of the broader project, which is to identify the origins as well as the mediation of employee struggle.

“The politics of the labor process requires a constant realization of the structural constraints and experience of work and employment, including the ways in which the labor process is premised historically on distinct types of micro-collective
structures such as gang work or crew work, which emerge out of the social and collective nature of the capitalist labor process identified by Marx in his account of the character of collective worker.\textsuperscript{2} The combination of these distinct levels contributes to the social and political experience of collectivism, which feeds into different organizational forms (union and worker practices), which in turn accommodate varying political practices” (Martinez Lucio, 1989).\textsuperscript{3}

In other words, individual practices of misbehaviour should be analysed in a way that is rooted in antagonistic workplace relations or sees them as the medium of workers’ solidarity. For example, deception to avoid work or lies to get some extra holidays comes from the coercive labour regime that controls labour physically. Keeping a distance from management physically and symbolically expresses working class identity and dignity. Jokes, gossip and rumours, while enhancing workers’ solidarity through a network of transmission, express the (un)conscious desire for direct resistance. The content of these stories has some material which is rooted in reality, and this reflects the structural working conditions and labour regime as the collective points of reference. Collectivism also arises from the tendency of gendering and personalizing employment relations. Managers’ misbehaviour also reflects their collectively shifting and ambivalent positions in the labour process. In general, in analysing workers’ misbehaviour one has to pay attention to the contexts and situations that it is embedded in, in order to see whether the misbehaviour is merely an individual response to management or it contains some collective dimension.

\textsuperscript{2} See note 12 of Introduction.
\textsuperscript{3} Quoted from Martinez Lucio & Stewart 1997, p.70.
**Work avoidance**

Workers often find a way to avoid doing or to reduce the amount of work which they think is not their duty, or from which they can not earn income. However, officially not a single person dares to protest about it. Instead, they find their own personal way to deal with the system. In any team of both MH and DG, there was always a group of around five girls who only cut surplus thread on the products which were coming off the production line. Cutting thread was the last task on the production line, before the products were moved for ironing and packaging.\(^4\) However, depending on the type of product\(^5\) and the date of delivery, those girls sometimes could not finish their work on time and often needed assistance from the whole team. Because sewing workers did not want to stay later than 9 or 10 pm, the foreman decided that each sewing worker had to complete three pieces during lunchtime. This happened at both MH and DG. However, the difference was that MH’s production line workers got a payment for cutting thread from three pieces a day, but those at DG did not. This meant that thread cutters at MH would lose an amount from their salaries, which would go to production line workers, while production line workers at DG only supported their colleagues for nothing.\(^6\)

It should be mentioned that lunchtime at DG was reduced from 45 minutes to only 30 minutes. Walking from the workshop to the canteen and back took at least 15 minutes. In fact, workers only had less than 10 minutes for lunch, a speed that I could never imitate. They explained to me that they had to eat very fast in order to have a short nap, even for five minutes, before working again. At the most, they had only ten minutes to cut

\(^4\) At TT, the division of labour was not so clear. Each worker on the production line after finishing their task had to cut surplus thread in their own operation. Auxiliary workers, who did packaging and even managers who checked the quality of final products, also had to cut thread.

\(^5\) Some products have many small details and hence require more effort in cutting thread.

\(^6\) This was already mentioned in Chapter 2, arguing for more competitive relations among individual workers on the same production lines at MH.
thread from three pieces. If they could not complete doing three pieces during the lunch break, they had to remain after work, which meant after 10 pm, to do the rest. So it is easy to understand that they just did the job roughly and quickly. This meant that there was still a lot of surplus thread on the completed products and they were often returned by the quality checking workers to undo the task (thread cutting). Even worse, some only cut thread on one or two pieces, and mixed up the finished products with the unfinished ones to stealthily reduce the workload. When the foreman blamed the thread-cutting girls who had to recheck all the products for working slowly, the girls reacted immediately that the production line workers had done the job badly and that they had to redo all the products carefully. Hung, the foreman of team 12, wearily said: “They try to cheat even in cutting thread”. However, it was clear that the deception was a result of coercion.

According to Ludtke, deception at work to reduce workload can be considered as a clear example of a covert form of workers’ resistance, because workers aim to maximize the outcomes of their acts. Such misbehaviour is called by Thompson and Ackroyd (1995, pp. 615-616) recalcitrance, and this is most commonly associated with work limitation. In particular, it emphasizes the economic rationality of the responses of workers to industrial regimes, and the way that practical behaviour at work aims at adjusting wage-effort exchanges in favour of the employee. The argument is used in support of a workplace antagonism rooted in and directed against the social relations of production. However, the workers did not make a further move to protest and also did not argue with management that they were being forced to do something irrational. Instead, they quietly made the job messy. The advantage of this kind of deception was that the foreman would not be able to trace which worker was responsible for the mistake and in the end the foreman might abolish the system because he saw that it did not work. Although there could be many
other reasons why workers did not protest in this case, at the individual level personal calculations of costs and benefits were significant considerations for not taking collective action but only being a recalcitrant worker. In other words, the recalcitrant worker is a product of opposition to the collective worker, whose benefits and responsibilities are tied to the whole collective labour process.

In another example, although workers also resisted authority and discipline, it was more controversial if the misbehaviour could be seen as an act of resistance. At TT, after Aunt Truong quit the workshop, Mr Dung was appointed as the new manager to replace her. Workers did not like him much, partly because he was an alcoholic, and partly because they were used to Aunt Truong’s way of management. When Dung saw one worker sewing her own clothes while she still had some work to do, he came to her and said: “If you still continue doing that, I will tear the cloth”. The girl mumbled something in her mouth but then put the clothes into the bag. Her face did not show that she felt guilty or was afraid of the warning. When Dung went to the other end of the workshop, the girl got the clothes out again and went on with her private work. She was not bothered by Dung’s anger.

According to Ludtke, the girl’s refusal to listen to a manager can be called ‘eigen-sinn’ because the worker was expressing her stubbornness and ignored management’s words without taking account of the consequences. The term ‘eigen-sinn’ was first introduced by Alf Ludtke, a German historian, to denote that one has one’s own feelings, self-willed behaviour, obstinacy, intractability and pigheadedness. Ludtke stresses that eigen-sinn is a concept that does not fit into the binary logic of obedience or resistance. To Ludtke, resistance means “strategically optimising the effectiveness of behaviour”, whereas ‘eigen-sinn’ signifies pleasantly spending time on the spot “without any
calculation of effect or outcomes” (Ludtke, cited in Marcel van der Linden, 1995, p.292).
However, it was not clear whether she refused to listen to the manager because of her own stubbornness, or because she disliked him as her new manager. According to Thompson and Ackroyd (1995, pp. 615-616), the girl could be considered as a ‘recalcitrant’ worker because there was some appropriation of time, when the worker used time for herself instead of for productive work. Time-wasting at work was considered as a typical example of recalcitrant activities.

**Keeping distance**

Like work avoidance, keeping distance is a form of workers’ misbehaviour that represents the ambiguous meaning of resistance. Several organizational theorists have noticed workers’ intention to ‘distance’ themselves as much as possible both symbolically and physically from managers, the organization and from shop-floor job requirements and considered this as the medium and outcome of a deeply embedded counter-culture (Goffman, 1959; Collinson, 1994; p.32). Centre to this counter-culture is a specific emphasis on working class masculinity that provides a primary sense of shop-floor identity and dignity for its members (Collinson, 1994; p.32). This is expressed in the way Thuan saw a borderline between him and management:

*Although Hung likes me and he is even nicer to me than the others, I cannot feel completely comfortable with him because ‘chung no’ are still managers anyway.*

*They treat us differently from the way they do to each other. At work, they are very straightforward and very strict, but outside the factory walls, they are gentle and sweet to us. That is the method that they use to placate us.*

7 *Chung no* means ‘they’, the third person plural pronoun. The words express the author’s contemptuous attitude towards a group of people that he or she does not belong to.
Although sometimes Hung might invite him for a glass of beer and talked with him in a friendly way outside the factory walls, Thuan saw these acts as emotional manipulation by the manager. However, keeping distance is not something peculiar to masculinity. Rather, in the psychological logic, both male and female workers shy away from things or persons they dislike or they feel uncertain or uncomfortable in having contacts with. In such a sense, it is an exaggeration to describe the behaviour of keeping distance of some women in the workshops researched as counter culture, because they simply did not aim to impress managers with their dignity. They neither wanted to get the attention of management nor refused special relations with management. They neither liked nor disliked their bosses. They were quiet in the workshop and did not talk much with anyone about their life before coming there or what they were thinking about their work. In fact, many workers did not want to have any kind of talk that was not related to work. For example, at TT, when the electricity was suddenly cut off and workers had to wait for a while, the owners called some girls to have a chat, but the girls tried to shy away. One avoided the workshop party at the beginning of the New Year on the pretext that she was busy. The girl also told me that she would not be working long at TT. The girls only wanted to stay at TT for a short time to improve their skills before moving to bigger factories. In fact, two months later, she had already moved out. So in these cases it was very difficult to know whether the girls intentionally wanted to distance themselves from management or not. It is impossible to put up a clear argument in support of the emergence of a counter culture in the workshop. In general, like work avoidance, not all misbehaviour in ‘keeping distance’ express a counter-culture and at the same time a sense of collective identities.
Jokes

In his study on the informal practices in an organization, Gabriel (1995) writes:

“Fantasy can offer a third way to the individual, which amounts to neither conformity nor rebellion, but to a symbolic refashioning of official organizational practices in the interests of pleasure, allowing a temporary supremacy of emotion over rationality and uncontrol over control” (Gabriel, 1995, p.479).

Gabriel sees fantasy as an unmanaged part of the organization, or a part that management has lost their control over. Talking about the role of myth in the individual construction of stories, Samuel and Thompson (1990) argue that myth and reality are not easy to distinguish when myths are part of the created reality. However, they also recognize the collective nature of such kinds of myths or stories.

At MH, after several workers were called to the management room to have a short training course on how to answer the questions for the SA 8000 interviews, one female worker told me the story of how they even made jokes about the interviews.

During lunchtime, we made fun of the interviews. I encouraged the girls to volunteer to be interviewed to get 50,000 dong to buy sweets. Suppose that we are asked if we have to work on Sunday, we will say “yes” at once, but then scratch our heads and say “no”. When we are asked whether we have to work until 9 pm, we will reply yes, but then scratch our heads and say “no”. “How are the toilets?” “Wonderful.” “Can you sleep over there?” “Yes, but before going to sleep, you have to take a deep breath”.

In the same way, workers at MH sometimes made jokes about physical exhaustion or collapse in the workshop. One day, Kiem, the vice-foreman of team 8 at MH, suddenly fell down. A male worker standing beside quickly dragged him off and put him into a big
plastic basket used for garments\(^8\) to carry him away. Workers said jokingly to each other that that was the only way they could take Kiem to the medical room because of his big body. One worker told me that such a joke was actually relevant to real incidents that happened in the workshop:

> For a while, we had to work until 10 pm quite often. One day, several accidents occurred at the same time: one person had a finger pierced by a sewing machine needle, and two others had fingers cut by knives. Because they lost a lot of blood and were rather weak, they almost fainted. We brought them to the medical room for emergency treatment. The whole workshop was in uproar. Then we were allowed to go home at 9 pm. We told each other that if one more worker fainted, we could go home at 8 pm. Since then, management has not dared to ask us to work up to 10 pm any more. The women fainted because they had to take care of their sick children the night before. The next day, they were so tired and sleepy at the end of the working day that they fell down and the needles ran over their fingers.\(^9\)

After the accident, even Kiem, who was not a mere worker but the vice foreman of team 8, pretended to faint so that managers might allow workers to go home early again. The woman who told me this story very much enjoyed the bit of drama that Kiem played. They even continued the joke by imagining that Cuc, who was a bigger and taller woman than the average girls in the workshop, also fainted. This time, they would not lift a finger but call the fat man who was in charge of electricity to carry her to the medical room. The outcome of the joke was only jolly laughs among the women.

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\(^8\) Workers put their outputs (especially at the end of the production line, when products are almost completed and become bigger than those at the beginning of the line) in the big basket so that the products will not fall on the floor and get dirty and the workers in the next task can receive their inputs easily.

\(^9\) This detail demonstrated the high level of intensification on the production line of MH, as was mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2.
In both cases, the jokes were constructed by the workers with the main aim of cheering themselves up. The girl who told the story in the first example admitted to me: “It is just for fun. We know very well that if we are not careful with our words, we will be sacked.” In the fantasy, the workers emerged partly as idiots, and partly as heroes. With regard to outcomes of the misbehaviour, one can argue that the workers just wanted to have some fun on the spot without any calculation of the serious effects. In this way, the story could be considered as an act of ‘eigen-sinn’. However, from another point of view, although the fantasy was fabricated, its material was rooted in reality. In the first example, working on Sunday, working late until 9 pm, and dirty toilets are all a part of reality in the workshop. In the second example, accidents at work really happened at MH. More importantly, the jokes or stories were constructed out of the engagement of (un)conscious desires with organizational life and the desire for outright resistance. In the first example, it was the desire to speak directly with the interviewers from the inspection delegation about actual working conditions in the workshop, which would be in favour of workers’ collective interests. One can also argue that the calculated outcomes were not only fun at the time but also the expression of the desire for resistance. However, because of some hidden agendas like the calculation of risks and costs involved, the workers who were in a weaker bargaining position dared not express the desire in a direct way. Therefore, the misbehaviour can be considered as an act of resistance. Further, story-work is not an individual matter (Samuel & Thompson, 1990). It is a process that involves several persons. Thus, the exchange or transmission of such desires, to a certain extent, has strengthened workers’ solidarity. The subjects could emerge from the story as the survivors, as the idiot or the hero, but the game was played in a way that blurred the boundaries between reality and fantasy. While none of the elements of resistance or
compliance in their binary logic completely fitted here, the jokes, which were often told by an individual, had a collective dimension because they dealt with collective experiences and were transmitted through networks.

**Gossip**

Gossip is another form of ‘stories, myths and legends’, the individual or collective construction of both reality and imagination. Moreover, gossiping about another person or a manager is a dynamic form of tale-telling, which can provide a useful guide to how management reputations are created and diffused among employees (Tebbutt & Marchington, 1997, p.726).

In the garment workshops studied, I often heard garment workers gossiping about their managers. However, the stories were contradictory from time to time. The first type of gossip was about the private life of managers. The second type of gossip was about issues relevant to changes in the management staff. Gossip is often used as a typical example of women’s language. In other words, gossiping becomes an inherent character of women (Tebbutt & Marchington, 1997). While criticizing this overemphasis on the feminine characteristics of gossip, (because both men and women can gossip and can enjoy gossiping equally), I want to argue that at first sight gender seemed to be the most important factor influencing management’s behaviour. Gender was also considered as the main factor influencing the different male managers and female managers. However, the main purpose of making and telling gossip was not having fun on the spot but more a kind of revenge or opposition to management’s unfair behaviour. Thus, antagonistic relations can be the origin of the gossip, but the resistance is gendered in nature. This can be cited
as an example of the ‘mutual constitution’\(^{10}\) of gender and class: without one, the other can become meaningless. The workers used the informal networks to transmit the information or the stories. The network helped employees to make sense of the world around them and consequently provided a release from emotional stress (Samuel and Thompson, 1990). Therefore, like jokes, gossip to a certain extent reinforces workers’ collectivism in the sense of a trade union.

The first story was about the forewoman of team 8 at MH. As a single woman in her thirties, Xuan found herself vulnerable in front of 100 workers. As the company had just been established for 8 months, all the company employees had only known each other for such a short time. During the whole period, Xuan had created a mysterious and secretive atmosphere around her personal life. Although knowing that people were curious and made all kinds of guesses about her marriage status, Xuan never made any announcement or correction about it. At the first party of the team, after the establishment of the company for a few months, she brought a small boy with her and introduced him to everyone as her son. But when she was ill and workers went to visit her, they reported that she was living with her parents and the boy was her elder sister’s son. Hien, whose health was not so good, and so often had to visit Xuan at home in order to ask for permission to take sick leave, had the chance to talk to her parents. She said Xuan was not married but had a boyfriend, who was living in Canada but would come back to Vietnam for the New Year and they were going to get married. Another young girl said Xuan had an unhappy marriage before but was now divorced. Xuan’s boss, the workshop’s vice-director in charge of techniques, while giving instruction on some new techniques to the workers of the team, said to the ones she was working with: “If she (Xuan) is as terrible as this, no

\(^{10}\) See note 19 of Chapter 2.
one would dare to marry her”. One day, while sitting with Yen to help her to disassemble some defective products, Xuan asked Yen if the girl was married or not. Yen replied that she was not. Then when Xuan asked her how old she was, she said she was already 28 years old. Xuan told her: “I thought that you were as young as X. Don’t imitate me.” She talked about it briefly and then left without giving Yen a chance to continue the conversation. In general, there were all kinds of stories around Xuan’s personal life. In team 8 of MH, the first thing about Xuan, their forewoman, that workers often told me, was like: “She belongs to the group of women without a husband and children so it is understandable that she often insults workers that much.” They associated her management behaviour with the common idea that unmarried elderly women are often difficult. So the workers did not see Xuan’s behaviour as coming from her management position but from her position as an unmarried woman.

It should be mentioned that not only women workers used gender as an instrument in their struggle because of its cultural effectiveness. Management also used gender as a weapon to attack the workers. In the same manner, Xuan used the marriage of one girl as an obstacle to her promotion. As the team needed another vice-foreman, the company encouraged anyone who felt themselves capable enough to take the promotion exam. Chieu was one of the workers who registered to take this exam, without reporting to Xuan. At the official meeting of the team, Xuan officially rejected Chieu on the grounds that she had just been married and would not be able fulfil the duty of a vice-foreman. However, it is possible that Xuan was angry because Chieu dared to ignore Xuan in her move to become Xuan’s junior colleague. Chieu told me: “She (Xuan) would like Lua to be the new vice-foreman and has already promoted her to Mrs Dieu. But Mrs Dieu said that Lua was too slow and could not be a leader. If Lua comes to power, this team will be
in big trouble. One ‘ba co’\(^{11}\) haunting this team is enough, let alone two ‘ba co’\(^{11}\). It is worth noting that Lua was the oldest unmarried woman in the team. On another occasion, while Xuan was talking cheerfully with a young man in charge of the laundry, Chieu told me: “Look at her! When single old women see young boys, they will approach these boys and will try to have intimate physical contact with the boys’ bodies while talking to them. She is just like my former foreman at DG. When they get older, they will be difficult to us, but to young boys, they behave differently”. On Chieu’s wedding day, although Chieu invited the whole team to her party, which was held at 5 pm at her house in the neighbourhood of the company, Xuan allowed only 6 out of nearly 100 workers to attend. Women workers saw that Xuan could not understand how important it was to a women’s life and the bride’s psychology to want to have as many friends surrounding her as possible. Workers enjoyed passing such cynical remarks as: “Because she doesn’t like weddings, she’s still not married.” “If she does not let workers to go to Chieu’s wedding, no one will attend hers”. In fact, in the team there were only Xuan and Lua who were unmarried and in their thirties. There were also Lien and a few others in their late twenties, but these women were never the target of gossip and rumours among the women workers, and of course they also did not have to hide the fact that they were not yet married.

Women workers saw their gossip and rumours about Xuan’s private life and marriage status as a way of taking revenge for her unfair treatment of them. It was rather common for workers to take the view that gender played a role which was more than a mere correlation with labour management relations. However, the outcomes of such gossip about her private life were quite clearly intended to ruin her reputation and to

\(^{11}\) The word refers to a single woman who has already passed the normal marriage age.
shake her psychologically so that she might become gentler to the workers. So while
antagonism arising from the social relations of production may be the origin of the
employee struggle, gender becomes the medium of this struggle. In other words, the
workplace antagonism flowing from the social relations of production was found to be a
factor underlying the verbal fights surrounding the marriage status among the women.
Although such stories could not shake her authority in the team officially, in a way they
could constraint her behaviour to a certain extent and make her management job tougher.
However, besides such battles, there was also some evident solidarity between the
workers and their forewoman.

In spite of Xuan’s hot temper, she still received some sympathy from workers.
Some workers also understood that it was not actually her wish to insult workers or make
life hard for them. Yen, a married woman, who was so afraid of Xuan that she had to take
a deep breath before asking Xuan if she could get a higher piece rate for her task\(^\text{12}\), said:

\textit{In workers’ psychology, no one likes his or her own foreman or forewoman. She is
also a woman like us. When she insults us, we are very angry. But actually we feel
sorry for her because she has just to been put in a position of \textquote{tren de, duoi nat’
\textit{(between the hammer and the anvil).}}}

After Xuan confided with Ha, who was close to her in the team, about her mannish
character, Ha also sympathized with Xuan:

\textit{Xuan even asked me if she was a terrible woman. She said that several times after
insulting workers, she felt as if she was crazy. She did not know what she was
doing. She went to see a fortune-teller, but as soon as she entered the gate, the
fortune-teller said that she had a man-like character. Some time ago, when
\footnote{\text{12} Because she saw her colleague on the other team who was doing exactly the same tasks receive a higher
piece rate.}}
someone paid her the compliment that she was a nice person, she burst out
laughing. She also admitted that she was rather a bad-tempered person.

Ha also added:

Xuan told me that although she earned a lot of money, she could neither save much
nor give a part of it to her parents. All her money went to the medical treatment for
her chronic stomach problems. You can see that she does not look healthy at all.

From one angle, one can observe the politics of production relations, where surplus
labour is expropriated from the direct or immediate producers from the interviews. The
forewoman in spite of her management job is still a mere immediate producer. The
workers constructed the solidarity with their forewoman based on their collective working
class identities. So there was some ambiguity in workers’ reactions to her authority. On
the one hand, they resisted her power as a manager. But on the other hand, they also
displayed sympathy towards her as a working class woman.

While attributing the severe management behaviour to the unmarried status of the
female foreman, the workers also did not forget to criticise their male foreman. In the
beginning when I met Thu, she clearly showed her dislike for Hung, her foreman:

Our foreman is a man but he does not behave better than a woman. He only thinks
about himself but does not care about workers’ benefits and rights. He always
forces us to work as much as possible so that he himself can earn more. The more
outputs we can produce, the higher responsible salary he will receive. But we can’t
earn much more. He also never tries to socialize with workers. Therefore, workers
on our team hate him very much. On other teams, when the foremen are ill, workers
come to visit them at home. No one in our team visited him when he was sick. Some
boys in our team never invite him to bars to drink beer. They said that it was better to throw money out the window rather than to offer him beer.

In fact, in my presence Trung had just scolded her for some mistakes before I held the interview with Thu. She even spoke rather loudly about her frustration and so I had to remind her that Hung might hear it while he was passing by. But one month later, her view seemed to have changed. I was very surprised to hear that Thu got permission from her boss to have one day off the next day whereas she was not sick at all. When I asked Thu how she managed to get this permission, she revealed that she had paid a visit to the foreman at his house the night before. In order to convince me that she did not do something very wrong like ‘giving bribes’, she explained: “I just brought some fruit, a kilo of mango. He is so aggressive and rude at work, but at home when you have a normal talk with him, he isn’t that bad. He is rather nice.” Visiting the boss and giving gifts was probably a common practice among a group of workers who wished to build up a better relationship with shop-floor management. Some visited their bosses at their private houses on special occasions such as before New Year without any specific agenda except to express their ‘affection’ towards the managers, but some came with some specific purposes like asking for permission to take leave. Also after the lunch between her, Thuan and the foreman on 8 March, International Women’s day, she told me: “He (Hung) looks cold and unfriendly but when you talk to him directly, that feeling goes away”. On that day, Hung accidentally met Thu and Thuan in the restaurant and asked them to join him for lunch. He even invited Thuan to have a beer after lunch and said, “Since the New Year holidays, we have made many technical mistakes. We should drink to drive the bad luck away.” In fact, the team had produced a number of products with wrong specifications under his instructions, which would detract from the team’s leading position in the
workshop. In a way, the foreman knew when he should be tough and when he should be soft to his workers. To the workers, the authoritarian foreman could be a nice man sometimes. Thu’s inconsistent views about her foreman somehow showed the contradictory nature of labour-management relations. Conflicts and solidarity are interwoven in the same way as consent and coercion.

Workers complained about both the male and female foreman’s management behaviour and attention was paid to gender relations. Thus there was a tendency to gender employment relations, and workers expected that female managers should behave in a more caring and gentle way, while male managers should behave in a more generous and easy-going way, just as men and women are often stereotyped. However, such different expectations with respect to male and female managers ultimately expressed the same wish or the demand that management should treat workers better. In the stories of one female worker about her male manager, one could notice the tendency to personalize the employment relationship. Instead of seeing the relation with the foreman in the context of production relations, in practice the worker took it as how the man treated her personally, and then based her reaction on her personal experience. However, at the same time, she also talked about the individual function of the manager as a collective worker (his income also was linked with the productivity of the whole team). Workers’ keeping a distance from him was not because they hated him as a person, but the misbehaviour resulted from the antagonistic workplace relations. Finally, the manager’s dissatisfaction with the team’s performance and workers’ sympathy with him also express their collective identity not only as a team in management terms but also in the traditional meaning of autonomous working class identities. So by personalizing the employment relations the female worker also put the relations in a broader collective framework.
The gossip about the changes in management staff and the difference in the management behaviour of one male and one female manager revealed more than the specifically gendered behaviour of managers. Mr. Ben, who used to be the director of workshop No.6 before, now became an assistant to the general director of MH. He was also the one who told me a lot of the secret information about the corrupt mechanism of recruitment of new workers at DG. Workers told me the story about how he had been fired from the company where he worked for 13 years. As he was opposed to the decision of the general director who assigned him to a newly established company in a province for three years, he was sacked. He lost all his employment benefits for unilaterally ending his permanent contract and his party membership was removed as well. Some workers told me: “Actually, it was the turn of Ly (who replaced him as the shop-floor director of workshop 6) to go, but she might do something under the table, so that in the end he was the one to be called. He was such a nice guy so they wanted to bully him.” Workers said that the decision was unfair because he had already spent three years in another company of DG in Thanh Hoa and then came back to Hanoi only two years ago. On the one hand, his absence was not favourable for his family situation, as his second child had recently been born, his mother was sick and his house was being built. Not only did the workers disagree with the general director about the unfair way that he treated Ben, but they also implied that corruption was occurring in the company. The workers also talked about the difference in their management behaviours as follows:

_In Ben’s time, no matter how urgent the delivery was, he always allowed workers to go home at 5 o’clock on Saturday and Sunday. But in Ly’s time workers had to work until 6 at least. Otherwise, we had to work till 7 or 9 pm. At the Mid-July Festival, when she had just become director, the whole company closed at 5 pm_
except workshop no. 6. We had to work until 10 pm. Workers got sick of her and we did not want to work so hard for her. In the first 6 months of last year, when Ben was still in the office, our workshop’s revenue was the highest in the whole company. But in the last 6 six months, the figure has dropped to the low ranks. She is very greedy. She always wants us to compete with workshop no. 4, the top in jacket production. She forces us to overtake our competitor. Only when there is no one else left to beat, does she allow us to breathe.

Workers could cite quite a number of examples to show that Ben was a nice person who understood workers’ psychology, while Ly was quite a terrible woman who only pushed workers to work harder. In a way they tended to attribute the difference in management styles to the gender roles of the managers. At the same time they also added that as her salary was based on the total outputs of the workshop, it was to her advantage to further increase the workshop’s productivity. So workers also recognized the problem of the competition between workshops and between teams as management strategies in the corporate culture. However, instead of identifying their individual interests with the collective interests of the workshop as expected by management, the workers showed that they understood this kind of trick and refused cooperative relations with management (the female manager). In this way, in any stories or gossip attacking a particular person, one could always see a certain level of collectivism, which also expressed a certain level of resistance by workers.

Lies to get more holidays

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the control over absenteeism was very strict in garment workshops in general. While the workshops created all kinds of rules and regulations to
punish the absentees, workers often told lies to cope with the mechanism of absence control. At DG, as mentioned in the previous chapter, if workers were absent for a fourth time without very special reasons, they would be fired according to the company’s rule. Some even had to invent a story like a grandparent passing away, when actually her grandfather had died a long time ago, or the wedding of a sister or a brother. Her co-workers cynically asked her what the next excuse would be after she had used the death of all her grandparents and the weddings of all her brothers and sisters. Her grandparents could not have died for a second time. I was told of another story about a male worker I had not seen for a few days. The boy reported to management that his mother had had a car accident. According to his friend who had been working at DG for 10 years, it might have been an invented story. He might have had an opportunity to work somewhere else but was not completely sure about it, so he wanted to take leave. In order to get leave, he had to tell a lie. It reminded me of another story told by a girl in workshop no. 4 about her co-worker. The girl asked for leave of one month without salary in order to take care of her father who was seriously ill. The request was accepted because of the legitimate reason. Actually, she wanted to have some free time to prepare for the entrance examination to the college. According to her plan, if she did not pass the exam, she would go back to the garment company. Fortunately, she passed the exam and left the company for good. Taking the life and death of their beloved elders like parents or grandparents as a matter for jokes is considered as taboo by people in Vietnam. However, this kind of lie seemed to be accepted among workers at DG and was not made an issue of morality any more.

Non-compliance was increasingly linked to practices beyond the sphere of formal or informal bargaining. At TT, workers reacted to the owners’ breaking their promise about
the holidays. For example, regarding the control of absence, there was a rule from the beginning that workers could have two Sunday holidays in a month. Later on, because of intensive production, T and H said that workers could save these holidays for special occasions when they desperately needed to go home like wedding ceremonies, or important family events, instead of wasting two fixed holidays. But when workers asked for permission to go home for such special occasions, they met tremendous opposition from the owners. Some cried when asking for permission to show that they desperately needed holidays, but were still refused on the grounds that the reasons did not sound ‘good’ enough. In response, workers blamed the owners for not keeping their promises and repaid management by cheating. Often T and H could not refuse the request for holidays made by their parents who called from the countryside. On the occasion of the mid-year Festival, one girl asked me to help her with a call. Of course, I could not call myself so it was suggested I should ask my retired uncle to help by making a call to T in the name of the girl’s father.

T’s idea was that only a few workers who had not had holidays before could be allowed to go, but the rest had to stay at work. Some girls who were tired of begging the owners or playing tricks to get holidays even sabotaged the business for a few days without saying a word to the owners in advance. Some, who were given only one day off, took the opportunity to stay at home for three or four days and then when they came back they made some funny excuses such as their mother got sick or they missed the bus or the train back to Hanoi. Some played an even trickier game. They intentionally chose an ‘appropriate time’ to ask T for permission to take leave, for example when he was very busy with some business issues. In such circumstances, he often tried to find an excuse to postpone a decision: “Let me see later” or, “Please ask Aunty H”. When H asked them
why they were absent, the workers would complain with something like “We did ask T and he approved it already”. In the beginning the owners only scolded workers, but later on, when they found out that leave without permission was more and more rampant, and the workers seemed to be becoming more defiant and open in ‘committing such crimes’, they decided that workers would have to pay a fine of 20,000 dong for an ‘illegal’ day off. To a certain extent this incident confirmed the assumption of Thompson and Ackroyd that resistance was good for management (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995), because it showed that the current mode of labour control was no longer appropriate and formed a motivation to find a new mode. In other words, workers’ forms of misbehaviour do not follow but lead management’s actions.

Skilled workers could be aware of their bargaining power in their negotiations for absence. The strict rules seemed to be applied only to inexperienced workers and newcomers. An exception was often made for skilled female workers for the sensitive reason of ‘going home to solve family problems’. Dung sat at the end of the assembly line, which meant that she was a skilled worker. She told me that her salary this month was low because she first took 14 days off without salary and then asked for 2 more days. To my surprise, she said:

There was some reason that the company could not refuse. In fact, my father wanted me to go back home to get married. I told Trung that if you allow me to take holidays without having salary, I might come back to the company. Otherwise, I will have to quit the job. So, Trung had to give me the permission to keep me. At home, I explained to my parents that I was not ready for the marriage yet and was determined to go back to work.
On the other hand, I constantly saw new workers in the thread cutting group, the simplest task that did not require any skills. Low salaries and strict discipline were the reasons why they moved in and out in a short time. They did not dare to negotiate the rule for absence control in the way skilled workers did.

In general, in spite of strict control for absenteeism, workers can always find some way to ‘escape out the gate’. While some accepted the fines or punishment in a direct way, many played the game of cheating and lying. However, as demonstrated in the last example, management also tolerated such games to a certain extent. The owners accepted the fact that girls did not go to work in the evening, without applying any severe measures to them. The factory managers gave the young girl some holidays to go home for ‘some special reasons’. The male ironing worker continued going out of the factory when he finished his work. Thus, besides the formal rules, there were constantly some informal negotiations between management and workers on an individual basis, which reflected management’s attempt to individualize labour relations. Consent was manufactured when workers won or were allowed to win in the individual negotiations.

**Managerial misbehaviour**

Within Marxism, there has been considerable debate about who is and who is not part of the working class (Lewis, 1995, p.489). Class location has alternatively been identified in four different strata: (1) part of the ruling class or new ruling class (Poulantzas, 1975; Becker, 1973-4; Bell, 1973), (2) new middle class (Carter, 1985; Burris, 1981; Carchedi, 1977), (3) new working class (Freedman, 1975; Braverman 1974; Thompson 1988), or (4) an ambivalent and shifting group within the class structure. 

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13 The detail was mentioned in Chapter 2.
Management’s shifting and ambivalent class position is also connected to the notion of Marx’s collective worker, in the sense that managers’ individual interests are tied more closely to the benefit-making mechanism of capitalists than normal workers. Because of their ambivalent and shifting class positions, managers’ misbehaviours often take indirect and individual forms of resistance because of the hidden agendas, priorities and calculations of risk involved.

At TT, the conflict between Aunt Truong and the owners started from the latter’s failure to fulfil their promise to increase her salary which, she thought, was low in comparison with her management level and the amount of her work. The owners seemed to be privileging a younger technician and promoted the girl to the level of management. In the last month before moving out of the workshop, she refused to instruct new workers on the grounds that she could not handle more workload. When she saw workers receiving their small salaries, she shared with me her sympathy for the workers: “They can only survive through the month if they eat just noodles”. As one who knew better than most about how much owners of private workshops and directors of state-owned factories could put into their own pockets and how much salaries the employees, including herself, were paid, she understood very well the unequal nature of the employer-employee relationship:

No matter where the state-owned factory or private workshop is, there is always inequality. Everywhere, the owners and the directors are always those who ‘eat most’. No matter how hard the worker works, there is a limit to the salary that he or she cannot exceed. Salaries of workers cannot be higher than those of directors.

If the salary for this month is high, it will be adjusted to be lower next month.
Although what she said showed that she was conscious of exploitative production relations and capitalists’ intervention in reducing the piece-rates, she only spoke out about it at the end of her employment because she was disappointed about the way the owners had treated her. At the same time it was only an indirect form of resistance because she only spoke about it to me, but not to the owners directly. So her ‘misbehaviour’ in the end reflected shifting and ambivalent class positions as collective features of managers.

Dung was the one who took over the management position from Aunt Truong when she left TT. At the beginning of his career, Dung taught politics at a military institute. After teaching for 10 years, he decided to move to a state garment factory, partly because garment-making was his family’s occupation. Then he became the shop-floor manager of a workshop with around 100 workers in a state-owned factory in Bac Giang. Feeling that he was being excluded from the networks of power in the state-owned enterprise, he decided to leave the state factory to work for private entrepreneurs. As a teacher of Marxist-Leninism, Dung acknowledged the unequal relations of power between the proletariat and those who possessed the means of production. He also believed that technology could fundamentally change the material world as well as social relations, as material compensation could create false consciousness among workers. As a result, instead of paying attention to bureaucratic discipline, he focused on devising some technical tricks that helped unskilled workers to complete their tasks more easily and quickly. In a way, he opted for a temporary alliance with the employers by helping them to control labour by techniques. While Aunt Truong revealed herself as the wife of a military officer and saw her income as only being supplementary to the household economy, he adopted quite a simple lifestyle, sharing a small rented room with a male worker and owning an old motorbike. As an alcoholic, his salary as the main technician
was not even enough to maintain himself, let alone to support his family. He always had to borrow money from T and even from workers. As a new employee, he never showed explicitly his resentment or anxiety towards his employers. However, I could observe how he deceived his master once. The conflict between the owners and some workers occurred when the latter did not go back to work after the funeral of the father of the machinist. The owners decided that the girls deserved some punishment for having some days off without salary, but the girls thought that the punishment was too severe and unfair and did not want to make any apology for the mistake. While the process of negotiation was going on, Dung visited the girls, but not in the role of conflict resolution. In spite of my presence, he said that he knew some workshops which were in need of new workers, and if they wanted they could start working at the new place from tomorrow. Evidently, it showed that he could easily betray his employers when he found a chance. Mann (1986) proposed the term ‘outflanking resistance’ to express the unexpected attack or an attack from behind on the opponents. Clegg (1989; p. 222) has developed this term by arguing that outflanking is the result of two quite extreme and contrasting situations. Either subordinates have too little information and knowledge or they possess highly accurate predictive knowledge concerning the future outcome of the action. Thus, in the case of management staff, outflanking resistance is possibly the result of having extensive knowledge of with whom and when alliances could be constructed. Dung’s ‘outflanking resistance’ also showed his ambivalent and shifting class position. Although identifying himself with working class masculinity, he had more to lose than normal workers when taking a direct form of resistance. Therefore, he might choose ‘outflanking resistance’ as the form of his misbehaviour.
In general, management’s resistance could be far more effective than that of workers because of their higher level of awareness of the nature of production relations and their possession of much more knowledge and information within the organization. While the female manager only showed her resistance at the end of her employment, the male manager quietly chose an attack on the employers from behind. As demonstrated in the section on gossip, managers were also incorporated into the governmentality of teamwork in the corporate culture, even more strongly than workers were, because they enjoyed a higher percentage of benefits within the total income of the team. As a result, it was more difficult for managers to resist directly. On the other hand, outflanking resistance enabled managers to cooperate with the employers when they found it was necessary.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined different forms of workers’ misbehaviour in everyday life in the garment workshops. In general, we should not cling to a clear-cut definition of resistance as the opposition to obedience. There is a whole range of misbehaviours with different levels of resistance. Although they take the form of individualistic practices, they are related to individualism and collectivism, which can be understood in different ways. However, instead of identifying collectivism only with the official rules of formal institutions (in management terms), which would result in the tendency to individualize acts of resistance, this chapter has expanded the understanding of collectivism as referring to the collective function of individuals in the capitalist labour process (Marx’s collective worker), and as the collective organizational forms of workers’ solidarity practices (in trade union terms). In other words, workers’ misbehaviour is seen as not only
individualistic practices in opposition to the collective formal institutions (teams, workshops, or companies), but also the experience of individual employees working together, which can lead to a spectrum of collectively held orientations and narratives, as well as the experience of an individual in relation to different collective social groups such as the working class, women, managers and so on. It should be mentioned that these individual meanings are always added into these narratives, which are constructed from individual experiences. In general, collectivism provides a dynamic, complex and even contradictory framework to analyse workers’ misbehaviours and resistance. In this chapter, I have only picked up and examined a few forms of workers’ misbehaviour, which are embedded in their circumstances in order to find out the origins, medium and effects of the workers’ struggles. However, it was controversial whether some forms of misbehaviour could be defined as acts of resistance (depending on one’s definition). They did not fit into the binary logics of resistance and obedience.

First, workers could have different ways of avoiding work in general. The chapter cited the example of production line workers at DG who had to cut surplus thread, or mixed up the finished products with the unfinished ones to reduce their workload. According Thompson and Ackroyd (1995), any worker who tried to limit work to take time for themselves instead of for productive work is called a recalcitrant worker. However, in the example of the girl at TT who repaired her own clothes during work time and continued doing this in spite of being warned by the manager, according to Ludtke’s definition the girl’s refusal to listen to the manager might not be considered as resistance because she may only want to keep the sense of her own independence, her self-willed behaviours and pigheadedness. In other words, it could be a mere individual act in
response to management and not emerge from a broader collective context. However, the act of doing private work during working time was an act of recalcitrance.

In the category of keeping distance, the story of Thuan (the ironing worker at DG) about his relationship with the foreman showed clearly the reason why he did not want to have a close relationship with his boss in spite of the fact that he was privileged. His attitude clearly expressed working class masculinity and dignity for its members. However, in several other cases which I observed, workers might not have any specific reasons for keeping themselves from close relationships with their managers. There was no evidence for a counter culture.

Thirdly, jokes in the organization can be also considered as a type of organizational misbehaviour because they reveal a pervasive feature of organizational life, they become the medium for communicating serious messages, and become a means of coping with their own daily problems at work. The two examples of jokes in this chapter both revealed the physically exhausting working environment, job intensification, long working hours, and the unhygienic environment on the shop-floor. The first joke also implied that because they had to lie to the inspectors about their working conditions, they chose jokes as a middle way to reveal the truth and to express their cynicism and disenchantment. The desire for outright resistance also became apparent from such fantasy. The second joke provided the workers with a way to cope with their high level of intensification at work, by having a pleasant time together during work. Although the joke targeted their colleagues (the big lady) and did not display any opposition to management, it could send a serious message to everybody who heard it: workers were fainting on the shop-floor because of fatigue. The transmission of such jokes might increase workers’ collective working class identities.
Fourthly, gossip was another kind of narrative, which was also constructed from a mixture of reality, myth and fantasy. The gossip surrounding the marriage status of a forewoman had the clear aim of breaking her reputation as a woman. As mentioned in this chapter, the women, particularly the girl whose promotion to the team’s vice-foreman was opposed by the forewoman, used this gossip as a weapon to take revenge on her. However, by associating the management behaviour with her gender role or unmarried status, the workers tended to personalize or engender the employment relations. It should be noticed that in the cultural and social context of Vietnam, where marriage is often considered as the most important thing for women, this kind of gossip became a most efficient weapon. Even the forewoman had to question her own behaviour in a conversation with a worker. However, some workers also expressed their sympathy for the forewoman in the same position as working class woman and could also vaguely understand that workers’ dislike towards her was rooted in the workplace antagonism as a structure, but not towards her just as an individual. The gossip about male managers also tended to personalize the employment relations through the workers’ contradictory comments on him at different points of time. This showed that individual meanings and interpretations were always present in such stories. However, underlying them one could see how the new corporate forms of collective identification (through the competition between teams) were implemented on the shop-floor and how such a competitive system attached more benefits as well as more responsibilities on the foreman. The gossip about the changes in management staff at DG revealed not only corruption but also workers’ oppositional attitude towards unfairness in the organization. Although the narrators still tended to engender the employment relations, unlike in the previous story, they

14 How important marriage is to women will be further elaborated in Chapter 7.
recognized the nature of the game of competition between workshops and teams and the incorporation of management staff into such corporate culture. The story expressed workers’ uncooperative attitudes toward management’s strategies.

Fifthly, due to the strict rules on absence, workers often lied to obtain more holidays. In general, lies or deception are considered as individualistic practices that are aimed at overthrowing or manipulating formal or informal rules. In such a way, they are considered as an act of resistance, which even leads to management’s behaviour. At the same time, management tended to tolerate such misbehaviour on an individual basis. This could also be seen as the intention of management to individualize labour relations, which was at the expense of workers’ collective interests (in trade union terms).

Last but not least, managers also engaged in indirect and individual acts of resistance towards employers. Because of their ambivalent and shifting class positions, managers often have calculations of when and how to perform an act of resistance. The female’s refusal to instruct new workers and the clear expression of her attitudes towards the employers only happened at the end of her employment at TT. The male manager, who took over her position, was very subordinate to the employers and was active in his role on the shop-floor, and could easily ‘sell his soul’ to the employers’ competitors. Their acts of misbehaviour reflected not only knowledge about the workplace but also a high level of consciousness of the politics of production. However, because they had more to lose than workers, they dared not attack the employers head-on but had to wait until the right time to express what they wanted to say.

In brief, it is important to recognize that most of workers’ forms of misbehaviour originate from antagonistic workplace relations and become instruments to convey some serious messages and weapons of resistance. Although they often take individual forms or
even tended to be individualized by management, they are related to collectivism in
different ways. This chapter certainly does not imply that workers’ everyday resistance is
always covert and subversive. Many acts of day-to-day resistance are outright and direct.
They will be examined in Chapter 4.
Chapter 4: Overt resistance, illegal strikes and trade unions on the shop-floor

Introduction

Although labour conflict is still a new concept in Vietnam, it has started to become quite a common column in social affairs in any official newspaper. In 1997, thousands of workers in Nike factories in Vietnam went on strike and rioted against working conditions.\(^1\) About three thousand workers were involved in the walkout, making the strike the largest in the recent history of Vietnam. The strike was organized and supported by Vietnam Labour Watch, a US-based NGO established by Vietnamese overseas, rather than a trade union. The situation where workers organized outside the party-state structure and official trade unions, primarily through illegal strikes, was quite prevalent in Vietnam after doi moi (Eva Hansson, 2003, p. 154). According to a report prepared by the Law Department of the VGCL (Vietnam General Confederation of Labour), from 1995 (when the implementation of the new Labour Code began) to 1998, there was a total of 222 officially recorded strikes. On average, about 20 percent of the strikes took place in SOEs, between 50-60 percent in foreign-invested enterprises, and about 30 percent in the indigenous private sector. All the strikes were considered to be illegal because they did not follow the procedures stipulated by law. In none of the cases did the local trade union branch play an active role in organizing the strike. As part of the scene, labour conflicts in many garment factories also shared the same characteristics as the general situation. Conversely, an understanding of the general situation of labour conflicts in Vietnam can also shed light on the labour conflicts in the garment workshops in particular.

In the previous chapter, I have already examined the indirect and covert forms of resistance exercised by workers in their daily interactions with management. In this chapter, I will look at more overt labour conflicts on the shop-floor. The structure of trade union organizations at all levels will be examined to argue that without a proper role for trade unions, it is difficult for labour conflicts to become a more durable and patterned form of collective action. At the same time, the chapter will analyse workers’ overt resistance in the three companies in the light of state-society relations. The emerging civil society possibly plays a role in influencing workers’ overt resistance. The chapter also argues that the mass media’s focus on strikes and labour conflicts in the foreign investment sector might be seen as a reflection of the negotiation between the state and society. Such biased coverage on the mass media might somehow support a stronger overt resistance of workers in the foreign sector in comparison with other sectors.

Women’s outright resistance in a patriarchal society like Vietnam is considered to be improper behaviour in speech and acts. Men are often expected to take the lead or the initiative in any kind of movement directed against the dominant stream. Evidence showed that men and women both took overtly resistant action, but women were more hesitant in taking a leadership role in collective action.

**The Vietnam General Confederation of Labour and Labour Conflicts**

The Vietnamese trade union, in general, can be considered as a variant of the Leninist model of the dual function of trade unions. The dual role can be conceived in terms of two sets of functions: the first concerned with the mobilization of labour production, the second with the protection of members’ rights and interests. Inherent within the model is a bias towards the mobilization of labour production and against the
defence and representation, let alone promotion, of workers’ interests as understood in a Western context. This functional bias stems directly from the concepts of interests that underlie this dualism. Since no ‘antagonistic’ social conflicts exist within a socialist society, neither can any fundamental cleavages of interests divide the working population as employees from the state as employer. This theoretical edifice rests, of course, on the assumption that a consensus of socialist interests already exists. Not only is power within the union movement highly centralized, but it also becomes subject to the control by the Communist Party at all levels. Key union positions come within the party or state and vice versa party executives get most of the important union appointments. After all, unions are conceived of as ‘transmission belts’ between the party and the masses, conveying party policy to labour (and theoretically also sending information from the shop-floor to the party hierarchy). Thus, trade unions remain closely subordinated to the party, yet organizationally distinct from it. This distinction affords a degree of administrative latitude but excludes policy neutrality, let alone union autonomy (Pravda, A., and R. A. Blair, 1986, pp.1-21).

Organizationally, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) is organized under Mat tran to quoc Vietnam (the Vietnam Fatherland Front), an umbrella organization that includes all the mass organizations in Vietnam. The VGCL is the largest mass organization in terms of the number of its members. It has 17 component industrial unions, which represent various industries or professions. Organized parallel to the national industrial unions are 53 province or city federations. At the grassroots level, the union is organized within each enterprise. According to the official organizational scheme, the unions at different levels cooperate with the party and government at the corresponding level. In fact, a union at the grassroots level may work with both its
corresponding province/city level VGCL and one of the 17 national level trade/professional unions that it is affiliated with. In some grassroots level unions, the leaders claimed that they were organized directly under the local People’s committee (Hasson, 2003, p. 157).

As the VGCL is a member organization of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, led by the Communist Party of Vietnam, it is unofficially under the control of the Party. The role of the VGCL and its relations with the party-state are also seen in the Constitution, the Labour Code and the Trade Union Law (Norlund, 1996; Chan & Norlund, 1998). For example, the VGCL as a component of the party-state structure is cited in Article 10 of the Constitution. The dual role and its participation in state management are also expressed in Article 2 of the 1990 Trade Union Law. The new Labour Code, which was enacted by the National Assembly in June 1994 was Vietnam’s first coherent labour law.

There are a number of changes in the role of trade unions as a result of the economic reforms. In the pre-reform system, trade union leaders participated in management in the workplace, together with party officials, directors and leaders of the Youth Union. However, from the mid-1990s, the old system of ‘collective management’ was abolished. Managers or directors were not obliged to consult with other parties and were held to be responsible for the results of their production units (Eva Hansson, 1996, p.1981). Before doi moi, trade unions played an important role in distributing social welfare such as housing allocations, schools and kindergartens for children, the management of pensions, unemployment benefits and medical benefits. They also arranged social activities such as vacations, bought gifts for birthdays and weddings and visited sick people. Thus, the membership of trade unions gave them automatic access to social security, which made entry into the union a condition but not an option (Chan &
Norlund, 1998, p.205; Evan Hansson, 2003; pp, 160-161). After the economic reforms, the role of trade unions as welfare distributors decreased. A new role of the VGCL was to be responsible for checking the implementation of the Labour Code at the local level in collaboration with the local people’s committee. In many companies, even foreign-invested ones, union membership was a must when the workers signed their labour contracts. While trade unions were not actually a threat to management, the companies, especially foreign-invested ones, would be heavily fined if it was found that there was no trade union organized within the enterprises. In fact, many trade unions in foreign companies were management-dominated. Trade unions do not normally negotiate wages. In the past, the wages of most employees were set by the government in the formal wage system. Nowadays, the minimum wage system follows the ‘market’, which treats each worker equally, irrespective of individual needs (family obligations, for example) (Norlund, 1996, p. 171). In 1999, the minimum wage in the foreign sector was set at 45 US$, while in the state sector it was as low as 15 US$ (Eva Hansson, 2003, p.161).

In general, the implementation of the Labour Code was weak. Many workers, even trade union officers, were not aware of their rights (and obligations) under the Labour Code. There was still little understanding of the trade union’s role within the market economy. Although labour disputes and conflicts became more frequent, the VGCL had no organizational structures to handle such conflicts. Trade unions at the grassroots level

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2 See note 3 of this chapter.
3 During the first seven months of 1999, 473 companies operating in Ho Chi Minh City were inspected (of which 35 were SOEs, while the rest were local private and foreign-invested companies). One of the committee’s reports concludes that violations related to the signing of labour contracts, working hours and rest time; overtime payments and the payment of social insurance are common problems in many private companies (local and foreign). However, only one out of the 473 companies inspected did not have a trade union.(Eva Hansson, 2003, p.166).
4 In the new economic zones like Tan Thuan near Ho Chi Minh City, the zone’s deputy manager is simultaneously the head of the zone’s trade union. Under such a personnel set-up, the 14 unionized foreign enterprises out of 34 in the zone were likely to be management-dominated (Chan & Norlund, 1998).
dared not deal with the problem, nor did they have competence to resolve conflicts (Tran Thanh Ha, 1999). In most of the cases when a strike broke out, officials from the VGCL headquarters, or from the provincial or city federations or from the local People’s Committee tried to conduct negotiations between workers and employers or to persuade workers to get back to work. Conflicts were largely dealt with in an ad hoc manner.

Mediation in Vietnam in general involved workers, employers, union representatives and local governments. At the same time, a representative of striking workers would also be part of this process. Informal labour associations could be behind the strikes. In fact, in many companies, the presence or absence of a formal trade union had little impact on whether or not a labour dispute would result in a strike. Even when a strike occurred, the trade unions had nothing to do with its organization.

As mentioned above, while the number of strikes increased dramatically every year, most of them were considered to be illegal because they did not follow the procedures stipulated by law. In 1993, before the right to strike was sanctioned by law, in a statement to the Seventh VGCL National Congress, the then president of the Confederation used the term ‘collective actions against management’ to replace strikes. The unions generally characterized strikes as ‘spontaneous reactions’, denying the possibility of organization behind them. Some trade unions admitted that strikes were normally an undesirable part of a market economy. One even claimed that all the strikes were illegal and the control of strikes must become stricter. He said: “We must create an environment for foreign investment and so strikes have to be stopped”. All informants agreed on one thing, that the VGCL had never been involved in or helped workers to arrange a strike. Their obvious knowledge about the situation in the labour market in combination with the sort

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of arguments presented and the VGCL’s passive role in strikes indicated that there was a state-imposed agenda embraced by the VGCL which made it reluctant to use strikes as a legitimate means to redress workers’ grievances, even when they were acute. This forced workers to rely on their own sources to settle their disputes with employers.

In spite of this organizational and structural weakness, the Vietnamese trade unions were increasingly autonomous from the party-state. Although the law was criticized as not giving enough attention to the protection of labour rights including the right to organize strikes, the Labour Code opened some possibilities for workers to form their own unions. For example, taxi drivers in Ho Chi Minh City, after participating in industrial actions and strikes, set up their own unions in 1996. By 1996, 492 labour associations totalling 21,800 members had been organized by cyclo drivers, cooks, market porters and the like in the non-state sector (Greenfield, 1995; Chan & Norlund, 1998). The VGCL gave them moral support but no money. Underlying the Labour Code there was an intention to make a clear distinction between ‘employer’ and ‘employee’, who had all previously been referred to as ‘working people’ (Norlund, 1996). Finally, the right to strike was finally granted in the Labour Code, which was newly amended on 2 April 2002 (Labour Code of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam). Although workers had the right to strike, they must give two weeks’ notice of any industrial action to allow time for mediation.

Greater union autonomy from the Party was reflected in Vietnamese media reports, which showed that the VGCL held different positions from the government. For example, the VGCL negotiated to put pressure on the government and on joint-ventures with

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6 Lao dong (Labour), no. 27/96 (3 March 1996); no.33/96 (17 March 1996). A year later the taxi drivers’ union merged with other unions under the Ho Chi Minh City Federation. Information from the VGCL based on March 1996 field research by Norlund.

7 Article 1 in the Labour Code.
foreign investment. In 1994, Mr. Nguyen Van Tu, the VGCL chairman, called the minimum wage rate of 45 US$ unfair.\(^8\) The Lao dong (Labour) newspaper reported that Nguyen Van Tu’s demand could be refused by the government because of its concern for the country’s competitiveness,\(^9\) which was often cited as the evidence that “the state’s interest did not coincide with workers’ interests, and that these might even sometimes be in conflict” (Greenfield 1994, pp. 220-23, Chan & Norlund, 1998). Hansson (2003) found that the VGCL at provincial level might in some cases behave in a more autonomous manner vis-à-vis the party-state institutions, while in other cases they might be totally intertwined and inseparable. In spite of many ambiguities about the VGCL’s independence which could be found in the labour laws as well as at all levels of trade unions, workers took actions to protect their own interests against their employers. These activities were organized through the official channels to voice their concerns and demands, but in most cases they could be dispersed and unorganized, as described in the following sections. As Hansson argued, these illegal strikes happened as a challenge to the monopoly of VGCL structure.

**Labour conflicts in the garment workshops**

As mentioned in the introduction, there was no trade union in any private workshop in Co Nhue, even though the Labour Code stipulated that a trade union must be established in a company with more than 10 employees. Either the local authority did not sanction the workshops where trade unions were not established, or the workers did not

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\(^8\) The VGCL fought for several years to raise the minimum wage from 35 US$ to 50 US$ a month in Ho Chi Minh City, but without success, Vietnam Investment Review, 23-29 May 1994, p.5. Finally, in 1996, it was increased to 45 US$ a month.

want to become trade union members. Partly this was because they only planned to work temporarily in Co Nhue. While some wanted to move to bigger companies after obtaining a certain level of skill, many thought that they either had to change workplace or to go back home after getting married in the near future.  

Workers also told me that a private insurance company visited the workshop in 2002 and offered the owners and workers a security package. The amount of the monthly payment was 30,000 dong. Only after 5 years of payment could workers receive an amount of 5 million dong. In the beginning T agreed that he would pay half and the workers pay half of the monthly insurance fees. This plan somehow was a big move towards what was stipulated in the Labour Code about the employers’ responsibilities towards their employees’ security funds. From the owners’ point of view, this was a good way to keep a worker for a maximum of 5 years. However, many workers wondered whether they could easily receive back the whole amount they paid if they quit the job within the period of 5 years. At last, while workers were still hesitating about the offer, T’s wife decided that she was not willing to pay half of the social insurance for workers. After this announcement, the project for security insurance totally collapsed and the workers did not regret it at all. While the workers had got used to the idea of a trade union as the agency to distribute welfare, by telling the story they meant that it would still be a long time before the Labour Code was effective in such small local workshops and before trade unions could be established in such small enterprises.

At TT, even illegal strikes did not happen. Labour conflicts were often solved by compromise on the part of either the employers or/and the workers or the voluntary

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10 It is common for women to follow their husbands but not vice versa.
11 The social insurance policy came into effect in 1994 and it is stated in the Labour Code that the employer and the employee are responsible for paying 15 percent and 5 percent respectively of the employee’s wage to the Social Insurance Fund.
withdrawal of workers from the job. For example, when the group of Huye came to the
workshop late after the funeral of Chien’s father-in-law, the owners punished them by not
allowing them to work for a few days. The workers saw this as an unfair decision and did
not return to work even after some days. Their action could be interpreted as a strike.
After that, the owners sent some workers and a manager to Huye’s house to mediate the
conflict and all the workers involved in the case were invited to the owner’s house to
have ‘a serious talk’. In this way the employers indirectly made the first move toward
compromise.

At TT, I found that there was little verbal fighting in the workshop. Most of the
girls kept quiet until they moved out. There was a kind of implicit agreement between the
two sides that if they liked the place they remained, and if they did not, they could move.
This explained why there was a high rate of turnover among workers. The threat to move
out of the workshop expressed the highest level of resistance, and quitting the job was the
last resort. Actually, very few workers dared confront the employers directly. Even when
Huye, who was not a new or young worker at all and had not been home for a quite a long
time, was not allowed to take leave, she could only cry. As Thuy, an older worker said:
“They (the owners) have got used to the girls crying. When the girls were not allowed to
go home, they did nothing but just cried. Even when workers were oppressed, they dared
not say a word”. Every time when Quyen and Thao asked for permission to go home, they
often cried because things never went as easily or as smoothly as they wanted. One day,
T’s wife, after hearing Quyen crying, said: “I am tired of both of you. You should do
something so that I don’t have to see your faces any more.” The girl stopped crying
immediately and said in anger: “We will work for you until the end of this year. So you
won’t have to see our faces next year”. According to Thuy, T’s wife did say something
stupid in anger, because they had worked at TT for 3 years already and were quite skilled workers. H also knew very well that they reached the age for marriage and that they already had a plan to go soon. However, the girls felt so insulted not because the owners did not want them to work at TT any more but because of the woman’s rude behaviour which betrayed her own emotional management approach, despite their commitment and emotional attachment to the workshop for many years. The girls did not return to the workshop after the New Year holidays.

Some workers dared to fight with the owners directly. The owners were actually not used to aggressive reactions from workers, so when suddenly a worker became quite assertive, she (the owner’s wife) was shocked. Duyen did part of the job for Tinh on the days when the latter was absent. However, Tinh got the whole salary without giving Duyen the amount that Duyen should have earned from her extra work. When Duyen complained to H (the owner’s wife), H went to talk with Tinh. Then Tinh raised her voice and started shouting at H first.

Tinh: I don’t want to fight with you for only a few thousand dong. I don’t get richer or poorer for only some thousand dong.

H: I only reminded you about Duyen so why did you want to quarrel with me and say such impertinent things?

Tinh: I did not say any impertinent things at all.

The conversation went on in such a way that the noise drew the attention of every worker in the workshop. Such two-way exchanges of harsh words rarely happened, so the workers told me immediately when I asked them if something really inflammatory had happened in the workshops during the last few days. The example also showed that the language between workers, managers and the owners was much softer than in the two big
workshops. Conversations like the above could be observed daily in these two big workshops. This supplements the argument that a more relaxed and gentler labour management relation was used to compensate for low salaries and low-standard working conditions at TT.12

In fact, when the workers became stronger in their arguments and more assertive in their behaviour, the owners dared not be so tough in their response. They also had to compromise with the workers to a certain extent. When Ly asked for permission to go home to attend the wedding party of her cousin, T would not allow her to go and implied that she was not the aunt of the girl (her cousin) or someone important in the family so her presence at the wedding was not really important. He even joked that if she was there, she could not help anybody but would even cause some trouble to the organizers. In response, Ly got angry and said: “If you don’t give me leave, I will go home for good. I can leave you but I cannot leave my parents.” Then she went home in anger. After that, the owners had to ask someone to call her to come back to the workshop to make a compromise. They said that they would allow her to go home but she could take only one day’s leave. Of course, Ly did not come back the day after that. She stayed home for several days. By not coming back on time, Ly showed her opposition to the owners directly.

Sometimes workers did not receive their salary for almost two months. Usually workers at TT did not receive salary on a fixed day of the week or month. They could only get money from the owners after the delivery of an order. If the production of one order lasted two months, this also meant that workers did not receive their official salaries before the end of the two months. However, in such cases, workers could ask the owners

12 See Chapter 2.
for an advance payment, which would be deducted from the actual salary later. Sometimes, after the deduction, the workers could not receive a single cent because all the salary had to be paid toward their debt or the advance payment. In order to survive until the end of the next order, the workers had to ask for another advance payment. In this way they were constantly in a condition of indebtedness to the owners. The owners, in turn, used the advance payment as a way to keep workers from moving to other workshops. As a result, they had to continue to work to pay for the debts. In general, except some few skilled workers, new workers had very small salaries that could hardly cover all their living costs, even if they got their money on time. However, many of them, especially young workers, dared not ask the owners to give them an advance when an order would take too long to complete. Lan was in her mid-thirties and was the oldest worker in the workshop. Having 10 years of working experience in garment factories in the South, she was considered as the eldest sister and a skilled worker as well. When she heard that the girls dared not tell the owners, she went to talk to T and H immediately about the issue. She said that the owners should pay attention to the fact that the order was taking too long and that workers did not have enough money to survive. H replied that she was too busy to remember everything and next time the workers should remind her. No one could really know if she did not care about how her workers survived, or had simply forgotten to give the advance payment. However, at least there was someone who dared to stand up to protect the rights of the workers.

Thuy was the second oldest sister in the workshop. She originally came from Xuan Dinh, the neighbouring village of Co Nhue. She had worked as a garment worker in Co Nhue for many years. Minh, one of the few boys in the workshop, invited the whole workshop to his wedding at 5.30 pm. The workers planned to leave at 4.30 pm to go
home in order to have a shower and change their clothes before going to the wedding. But they only talked to each other about this plan and did not ask the owners for permission to leave the workshop at 4.30 pm, because they were so certain about getting the permission. The owners had already prepared the joint gift from the whole workshop and would undoubtedly go to the wedding together with the workers. When the workers started to stand up to go at 4.30 pm, H was so surprised and decided that they all would not leave the workshop before 5.30 pm. In such a situation, Thuy said directly to H: “It is an absurd demand. If they leave one hour earlier today, it won’t take them the whole day of the next day to go to the party. You must be glad because we are not invited to the party the next day”. As an unwritten rule at TT, all the workers were allowed to take a whole day off to attend the weddings of their co-workers and the workshop often closed on that day. However, as Minh had only been working at TT for a few months, workers did not feel obliged to attend the whole day ceremony. At MH, the forewoman only allowed six out of one hundred workers to go the wedding party after 5 pm. This is another example to show that older and skilled workers are in good positions to protect workers, especially the younger ones who have recently arrived from the rural areas.

On another occasion, Thuy was also the one who engaged in arguments with the owners to protect the girls. A few days before the incident happened, Chi and Thao had already asked T and H for leave to go home for the three-year death anniversary of Chi’s grandparent, which was considered as the biggest ceremony after death. However, T did not give them permission on the grounds that they had to deliver the products very soon. On that day, the two girls came to the workshop with heavy faces and red eyes. It seemed that the girls had been crying the night before and continued to cry in the workshop the next morning. Thuy advised them to talk to T directly:
You should not cry. Just go over there and directly ask for permission to take leave. Every family has some affairs, and in your case it is really an important event. The workshop is busy all the year round. None of the deliveries is not urgent. You can say that ‘if you don’t allow me to take leave, I will quit the job’. There is nothing to fear here. You should not fear anything because you’re going to leave the workshop soon.

The girls did not do as Thuy advised but just cried. In the afternoon, Chi’s brother called TT to inform them that Chi’s father was already in a very bad condition and asked if Chi could go home immediately. H was the one who took the phone call but she underestimated the situation and said to Chi: “Chi, why did you have so many calls? Your brother called and it seems that your father is seriously ill”. After hearing this, Chi who was already crying, cried louder. Then, Thuy angrily shouted at her: “Stand up and go to ask for permission. You have to go home by all means.” Only then did Chi go to ask the owners. Feeling ashamed because of their indifference to the girl’s emotion, H told Chi: “What you did was like to slap in my face. You have a father. I also have a father. Why didn’t you ask me at the beginning instead of crying all the time so that Thuy looked at me as someone terrible? You can work for me for the whole year but not for one or two days only”. After that, H herself took Chi to the bus station on her motorbike. The next day, T called Thuy to come to their room and said: “You are mature already. You should behave in a mature way. They are young so they can have quick and strong reactions after listening to you. You should not talk with them in such a way. If I had been home at that time, I would have slapped you. The things that should have been said you did not say. The things that should not have been said you said.” Thuy angrily fired back: “Tell me which things should be said and which should not. I did not say anything that hurt your
dignity. I did not say ‘because they are terrible owners, just leave them’. I only said ‘you should not cry. Just go and ask for permission’”. Seeing the conversation was becoming quite tense, T retorted: “If you continue to talk in such a way, I will ask Chien to give you a lesson.” However, this made her angrier: “Chien is not my parent or my relative. He is not my husband either to teach me. You don’t have to use Chien to threaten me.” Thuy was a divorced woman and often talked with Chien, the married mechanic of the workshop. She felt that the divorce made her status quite vulnerable and became more furious when T used it as a weapon to attack her.

We can conclude that although there was no organized trade union or labour association at TT, workers’ interests were somehow protected by elder sisters who were more mature and experienced in labour management relations. Unlike the ‘common sense’ trade unions in Vietnam, these elder sisters were not active in the role of mediation between the employers and workers but more in protecting weaker workers in specific day-to-day situations. Although these skilled workers had secured stable positions in the workshop, their actions were considered to be brave. Even so, overt resistance of some brave and skilled workers was only voluntary and occurred spontaneously. In the future, some form of women’s or labour association, which is based on such solidarity at the local level, may possibly be formed to protect women workers’ rights. More importantly, they need assistance from the local authority and local trade unions to have better coordination between workers in these small local private workshops in the same area. In fact, some employers in Co Nhue coordinated with each other to sanction workers who left one workshop with a bad reputation. For example, when Ly and Oanh left TT, several workshop owners refused to take them, possibly because they had made some kind of agreement with each other about punishing stubborn workers.
DG

At DG, the trade union existed since the company was established. Although the company’s business was rapidly incorporated into the global commodity chain, the trade unions remained unchanged as a typical trade union in the pre-doi moi period. This meant that the trade unions mainly functioned as the distributor of social welfare, while it was never present in or supported any labour conflicts in the workshops. The trade union did not have any role in labour management either, and was not consulted by managers in labour issues. In such a context, it is not easy for labour conflicts to turn into strikes. Although the local women’s union, which was established by the company, operated alongside the trade union, its existence proved to be rather superficial because it did not serve or listen to women’s concerns or demands. There was also no coordination between these two organizations in protecting workers’ rights.

In comparison to TT, open and direct resistance at DG could be observed much more regularly. During the high season, workers often had to work until 11 pm. After being informed of the day’s working time, one woman worker spoke out rather loudly: “Having to work until 11 or 12 pm, we are being treated like buffaloes and not human beings any more”. However, she did not realize that Ly was standing behind her. Despite having a big body, she walked so quietly that one could hardly hear her footsteps. Hearing the complaint from the woman worker, she came up and tried to intimidate her: “What are you saying about buffaloes? If you don’t want to work, you can stay at home”. However, the woman worker was not scared and mumbled something like: “No one can bear to work until 11 or 12 pm.” Although a big verbal fight between the two women happened after that, it was quickly calmed by other management staff.
Strikes, which were even considered to be illegal in the eyes of trade unionists, rarely happened at DG. Thu, who had worked at DG for 7 years, said that she had witnessed only a very small number of strikes during this period. The most recent conflict happened on the last work day before the Tet holiday of 2001, when the general director announced that workers would have to work until 4 pm. As usual, on that day, employees in most of the workplaces in Vietnam only had to work for the first half of the day. Understanding that workers could not easily concentrate on work and might sabotage it, the general director ordered the guards to lock the company gate. Any one who wanted to get out of the company before 4 pm had to show the guard a letter of permission with the signatures of three persons: the foreman, the director and vice-director of the workshop. At 3 pm, all the foremen in the Workshop no.6 went to have a meeting in the director’s room. Immediately after that, without saying a word to each other, all the workers in workshop No.6 stood up, cleaned the sewing machines and went in a group towards the gate. As the workers gathered in a big crowd in front of the gate, it looked as if they were going to strike. At last, the guards had to open the gate for the workers to go out, because the company was also afraid that the crowd would attract public attention.

After the incident, the general director punished Ly by withdrawing her bonus for the Tet holidays, which was said to amount to 8 million VND (530 US$). The workers had already received a bonus the day before the last working day but the workshop director had not. On 5 January of the Chinese New Year, the first working day after several holidays, as a rule workers were supposed to relax and go home early. However, only workers of workshop No.6 had to work until 8 pm, while others were allowed to leave the company at 5 pm. At 7 p.m, only when Hien, the forewoman of team 12, went to Ly’s

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13 Workers had to clean the sewing machines at the end of every week.
house to persuade her, did she allow the workers to go home. Workers saw it as a mean retaliatory act on the part of the workshop director.

On another occasion, the workers showed resistance to Ly not only by reducing productivity or by verbal fighting but also by holding a small strike.

In the high season of last year, we produced trousers. To reach the target of 160 pieces, other workshops had to work until 10 pm, but at only half past eight, we had already done 180 to 200 pieces. Even so, she asked us to do thread-cutting for 10 pieces after that. We told each other that we could not finish 10 pieces before 12. After lunch-time, the whole team 13 stood up and left the workshop. The foreman of team 13 had to run after them to persuade them. At last, they decided to remain at work. However, Ly had to compromise after the incident. She changed the rule that only the team which still had a big quantity of unfinished products had to do thread-cutting collectively after reaching the target. Thus, instead of the director, the foreman could decide whether or not the workers of the team should stay late in the factory to do thread-cutting.

We see that workers’ collective action was rather spontaneous reaction to what they considered as ‘extremely unfair decisions’ of the general director. However, workers on different teams in the same workshop did not coordinate with each other to organize the strike. According to Thu, the strike which happened in 1997 was much more organized. Trung, the current vice-director of workshop 6 at DG, once organized workers to strike when he was still a foreman. However, he was soon co-opted by the company. From this case one also could see how ambivalent class positions of shop-floor management staff were. The following is what Thu said about Trung:
In 1997, when Trung had just become the foreman of our team, he took the lead in our team’s strike. We stayed off work for even a few days. The reasons for the strike were low salaries and long working hours. By holding the strike, we wanted the company to increase our salaries and to reduce working hours. The company sent a person from the administration office to the shop-floor to explain to us that the company had to pay salaries not only to the direct producers but also managers, administration and logistics staff. In other words, besides the piece-rates that we, the workers, received, the company had to pay many kinds of other expenditures and costs to make production run smoothly. The cadre also implied that workshop No.6 was the only one that held a strike. If a strike occurred in the workshop again, Trung would be the one who took all the responsibility. At that time, a foreman’s salary was still low, only a few hundred thousand dong higher than that of workers. Nowadays, they have salaries that are almost double our salaries. Especially in Trung’s case, since he became the workshop-vice director, his salary has become much higher. At the same time, he did not have to supervise production lines technically any more, just put his hands behind his back and make tours around the workshop. So why would he take the initiative to hold a strike to lose the good position he has now?

Thu told me the story about the strike to give some evidence to demonstrate the important role of management staff in organizing workers to conduct a strike. She also emphasized the importance of collective action to avoid the risks involved if only a few individuals joined in. She said: “It does not make sense if only one or two persons hold a strike. All the workers must be organized to have a strike. On the other hand, someone
has to stand up to take the lead”. She did not mention anything about the role of the trade union in organizing workers.

Thu also mentioned that it was quite difficult for workers to hold a strike without any support from the outside. Instead of referring to trade unions, she thought that the mass media were even more active in protecting workers, because she often read news about labour conflicts and strikes in newspapers, and in many cases the employers and managers lost and had to compromise with workers. Several times Thu and her co-workers wanted to write anonymous letters to complain about the harsh working conditions at DG. However, it just remained an idea. In fact they did not have time to write and did not know to whom or where such a letter should be sent. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the company tried by all means to prevent information on working conditions and strikes from spreading outside. Thu was afraid that the company also might bribe the journalists in the same way as they did the labour inspectors, or the journalists might be allowed to talk to managers only.

All the workers at DG were members of the company’s trade union. Although in theory they could choose to become trade union members, in practice an amount for the fee for the trade union membership was automatically deducted from their monthly salaries. So the question of whether they wanted to be trade union members or not, never occurred to them. However, the amount of this fee depended on the official skill level of the worker. In other words, the higher the skill grades workers had, the higher the fee for trade union membership that workers had to pay. As mentioned in Chapter 1, a worker’s basic income depended on his or her official skill level and it accounted for only a very small part of the total salary. Workers could have an increase in their official skill levels recognized by participating in the competition of skill which was organized every two
years. The competitions used to be lively campaigns in socialist factories to promote the quality and quantity of production and many skilled and energetic socialist workers came out of it as a hero. However, nowadays most of the workers say that they do not want to participate in the skill competition. The workers said that they did not gain much higher incomes from the official increase in their skill levels, but instead lost more money in paying higher trade union fees, which accounted for a fixed percentage of their salaries. While the competition campaigns in the traditional socialist context had lost their momentum, the workers did not see any benefits in becoming members of the trade union. However, they took the ineffectiveness of the trade union for granted, and even did not question it.

The functions of the trade union at DG did not change fundamentally over the last 13 years. When the workers were very sick and had to stay at home, trade union cadres would visit and give them some small presents like cans of condensed milk and sugar. When there were weddings, funerals or the birth of new babies, it was also the trade union cadres’ responsibility to pay visits to the workers’ families on behalf of all workers and the company. The visits were also accompanied by small sums of money for the workers’ families, which came from the trade union’s fund. On some special days, like International Women’s Day or Children’s day, women workers and their children were also given some small presents, which were bought with money from either the fund of the women’s union or that of the trade union. Women workers also said that the women’s union was not active at all. Unlike in the past, the women’s union no longer gave the women courses on cooking and certain household skills. The women union’s was also not involved in mediation between the wife and the husband in serious family conflicts. In other words, the trade union and the women’s union withdrew completely from the
workers’ private lives. However, the entitlement to vacation was still available through the channel of the trade unions. In principle, one or two workers in a team were selected every year to take a short vacation at the Guest House of the Vietnam Confederation of Trade Unions in Quang Ba, a district in the suburbs of Hanoi. In some recent years, as the production became busier, the company offered workers an alternative. If the ones selected remained working in the factory during their vacation time, they would be given the same amount of money as should have been spent on them. In fact, most of the workers chose this option. The first criterion for the selection of workers was bad health. Ironically, those who were needed holidays most did not take holidays, as they also needed money. During the period of one and a half months I did my fieldwork at DG, I did not see any extra activities of the trade unions like meetings or discussions alongside the above-mentioned welfare distributions among workers.

In team 12, Chin was the trade union cadre of the team. She was chosen by the workers but under the approval of the foreman. She was among those who had the longest working experience in the team. She often sat at the end of the production line, which signalled that she was a skilled worker. In her early thirties, she was considered as an elder woman in the team. She was a rather kind woman and never had a fight or conflict with anybody. She was not considered as one of the ‘stubborn figures’ in the team like Thu and Yen. She had no management power in the team. On the production line the quality-checking worker was even more powerful than her, because he had the right (also his duty) to return the unsatisfactory products to workers. Her work was to go to trade union meetings sometimes and to report all the information she got to the workers in the team. One day, Chin asked me to make a copy in handwriting of a letter of application to become a party member. In this selection in the party cell of the company, Chin and
several other trade union cadres of the company were invited to become party members. They had to take a short course to study about the Party and Marxist-Leninism in general. After the course, they had to write a motivation letter to explain why they wanted to become party members. However, they borrowed such a letter from someone and copied it one by one. When Chin got the model letter in her turn, she asked me to copy it in handwriting because she had to work (while I was just there to help anyone with anything that I could). In a way, Chin saw it as a formality and did not want to invest her time and effort in it. On the side of the company, offering the trade union cadres party membership did not deviate from the traditional relation between the local trade union and the party. In other words, the links between the company, the Party cell and the trade union at the factory level were still maintained.

In such contexts, although labour conflicts happened in the workshop, there was no collective bargaining between the workers and management. While the shop-floor trade union retained its traditional function as welfare distributor, trade union cadres were no longer allowed to be involved in management. The women’s union had no activities except for International Women’s Day, while the trade union and the party cell had interests in common. Under the system of autonomy in responsibility, the company’s management board controlled all these organizations. In other words, even party cell and the trade union had to cooperate with management to serve the company’s common goal in production. To a certain extent, the emphasis on the mobilization of production in the ‘two-pronged’ objectives of the communist trade unions did not change much. The ‘spontaneous reactions’ of workers showed that workers needed a more independent leadership (from management staff and party officials) in organizing collective action.
The inefficiency and lack of action of both the trade union and the women’s union left an empty space on the shop-floor.

**MH**

A trade union was set up when the company was established. In fact it was quite rare that a foreign-invested company dared to exclude a trade union. As mentioned in the first of part of this chapter, the trade unions in the newly established private companies were often set up in line with the management board, which guided them to develop in the traditional forms of the socialist trade unions. Under the control of management, these trade unions could easily become ineffective.

At MH, the trade union also worked under the umbrella of the company. Each team elected one trade union cadre. However, all these trade union cadres worked together with an employee in the personnel department, who was considered as the representative of the workers. In other words, this representative was chosen by the company’s management board, not by the workers. While the trade union cadre of the team did not have any power in the decision-making of the trade union at the company level, they were the implementers of the company’s welfare policy on the shop-floor, rather than the representatives of workers’ voices and interests in bargaining with management. In this way strikes occurred as the result of the workers’ disappointments and anxieties without the participation of the trade union. When the labour conflicts happened, the trade union did not even play the role of mediator.

Since the establishment of MH, team 8 had been involved in two strikes. The first one happened during October 2002, some months after the workshop went into operation. Workers saw that the piece rates were low so they wrote a letter to the personnel...
department to ask for an explanation for the ‘cheap’ piece prices. Then the whole team signed the letter. They sent the letter in the afternoon of the day before the strike but could not get any reply the next day. At 4.30 pm, teams 7 and 8 decided to leave the workshop. Workers on the other teams also joined teams 7 and 8 in taking part in the strike. They told me about the rationale for the strike: “It was written in the contracts which we signed with the company that we had to work until 4.30 pm only. If the piece-rates for overtime are too low, we have the right to refuse to work”. At lunchtime on the day after the strike, some people from the personnel department went to the workshop to explain.

_They talked too much about things we can’t remember now. And then they asked us to express our opinions. In the beginning, no one in our team dared to say a word. They were afraid of being sacked. Many were very cowardly because before some workers in teams 1, 2, 3 and 4 had spoken straightforwardly and they were then sacked. Later on, some in team 7 started saying that they were receiving only 200,000 or 300,000 dong per month but still had to work until 7 or 8 pm._

_Gradually, we all spoke._

As the result of the letter of complaint and the strike, the piece-rate increased a little bit. After the incident the general director announced that if the whole team took part in a strike, the company would sack all of them. Later on, knowing that the workers of team 8 were the ones who had taken the initiative for the strike, the guards even joked with them: “Will you dare to take strike again?” The girls said: “Now, because the salaries are not too bad, we don’t. But if they become too low, we are not afraid of being sacked. We will hold a strike and then quit the company for good”.

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The second strike happened in December 2002, the high season in a year, when workers had to work until 9 or 10 pm continuously. Long working hours together with stricter disciplines made workers tired. The workers already had to work for several Sundays, and the strike happened one Sunday. Although workers were allowed to go home at 6 pm on Sunday, they stood up to go at around 5 pm. They could not stand the stress any more. The girls in team 8 told me that this time the workers in other teams initiated the strike and then team 8 followed them. Although all workers waited in front of the gate, the guard did not open the gate until 6 pm exactly. The next day, 7 persons in team 8 only were called to the management room. Xuan, the forewoman of team 8, guaranteed that three workers were completely innocent. Lua, the trade union cadre of team 8, was among the three persons. According to the workers, although Lua was chosen by the workers, any selection in the team should implicitly get the approval from Xuan. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Xuan was on good terms with Lua so her appointment did not meet any opposition from Xuan. The four remaining persons were Van, Huy, Thuy cao and Nhanh. Several workers said that they were all innocent because they stood up after the others in the team. Some said maybe they looked stubborn and seemed to have a big mouth or had the faces and appearance of leaders of a strike so they were selected as examples for punishment. Some said that maybe management wanted to punish team 8 because it had initiated the strike last time. Although the accusation was wrong, the four dared not say a word. Van, who was a notoriously tough woman, who would fight with any co-workers on normal days, also had to keep quiet. They knew that if they started arguing, they would be fired immediately. They had to write a kind of self-criticizing report and had to stay off work for 10 days. Thuy cao even went to the general director of the company to explain their innocence. The workshop director accused Xuan, the
forewoman, for ‘standing there watching workers leave the workshop’. Actually Xuan
was not on the shop-floor when the strike happened. She had gone to the canteen with the
forewoman of team 7 to get something to eat by that time. When she came back, the
strike was already happening. That is what the workers told me after the strike. I tried to
talk with the four persons involved. However, they tried to shy away. I realized that they
were afraid to talk to me about the event.

As at DG, workers at MH did not want to become trade union members. After the
probation period of a few months, workers were asked to sign official contracts with the
company. The mass media often complained that many joint ventures did not want to sign
contracts with workers, so that they could fire workers at any time and did not have to pay
for extra costs besides salaries like security and health insurance. In the case of MH, the
company forced workers to sign the contracts whether they liked it or not. One of the
reasons why the workers did not like to sign the contracts was because they did not want
to pay for security, health insurance and membership fees of trade unions. This showed
that workers did not have any faith in what was called their rights being protected or
having any security when unemployed or retired. At the same time, many also had doubts
about their long-term employment at MH, the reason for this partly being a common-
sense perception of unstable employment in the private sector.

As at DG, the trade union did not play a role in any of the strikes that occurred at
MH. Lua was the trade union cadre of team 8. When workers received their salaries,
Lua’s duty was to collect the membership fees from the workers every month and then
hand them over in total to the company’s trade union. At MH, workers paid two percent
of their monthly salary as the membership fee of trade unions. Every month, Lua also
received a certain amount of money from the company’s trade union to buy birthday
presents for all workers who had their birthdays in the month. Sometimes Lua forgot to buy presents, but workers even appreciated it more when they received an envelope with cash instead of gifts on their birthdays, and they could buy for themselves whatever they liked. For several workers it was a practical way to get a partial refund of their payment of trade union fees. At DG, there were no birthday presents for workers from the company or the trade union. At TT, some workers also organized small drinks or parties on their birthdays and invited friends and the owners. The owners often gave them some cash as a gift, which even accounted for one tenth of their salaries. However, not all workers organized big parties and invited the owners.

At MH there was no women’s union as at DG, but some groups of workers organized a fund called a ‘ho’, which can be literally translated as ‘rotating saving association’. This kind of fund originally came from the community, where every member of the group contributed a sum of money to the fund. In return, members of the group, one by one, had the right to use the whole collection of cash in one month. This fund worked as a kind of savings account, so that the workers could afford to buy something while they still did not have enough money. In the context where the trade union functioned as welfare distributor, the workers felt that this kind of fund was more practically helpful to them.

Thus, although the strikes which occurred at MH were still illegal and unorganized, one could observe that the collective actions were more vigorous at MH than DG. In spite of the ineffectiveness of the trade unions, workers at MH were more willing to hold strikes. In other words, they dared to collectively confront and challenge the management about working conditions without waiting for somebody or ‘a man’ to take the lead. The first strike was more than a spontaneous reaction to bad treatment by management. There
was some coordination, preparation and discussion among the workers. It can be concluded that workers’ collective action was the most evident at MH.

**The civil society and the emerging discourse of strikes in Vietnam**

There are often three interpretations about state-society relations in Vietnam. The ‘dominating state’ interpretation emphasizes the Communist Party and other official agencies and institutions, and finds that groups or activities in society have little or no influence on the political system or national policies (For example, see Vasavakul, 1996, 1998; Carlyle, 1992). This argument is often used to explain a weak labour movement in Vietnam, which cannot grow independently out of the umbrella of the party-state to represent the workers and to protect their rights. However, as demonstrated in the first part of this chapter, the interests of the party-state and those of the VGCL did not always overlap. This school of thought might ignore the efforts in and outside the VGCL that pressed for a reform of this organization for many years. Not only did the VGCL cooperate with the international trade union movement to learn from the experiences of others in operating in a market economy, but also the ILO (International Labour Organization) and a number of NGOs were implementing several projects on labour relations to improve the capacities and skills of trade union cadres and workers in the tripartite bargaining and negotiation. Although the Labour Code was established in 1994, TT, which was established in 1995 and 1996, had not had a trade union so far. The same situation could be observed in 40 or 50 private workshops in Co Nhue. Either the local authorities of Co Nhue and the VGCL branch at district level ignored the issue, or they were inefficient in enforcing the implementation of the Law Labour Code at the local level.
The second interpretation belongs to the ‘mobilizational corporatist’ school, which highlights the role of organizations that the state itself dominates. State agencies use such organizations to mobilize support for their programs. But those organizations can also be channels through which citizens influence authorities. In the victory over the Americans, it is essential to mention the mobilization roles of the Women’s Association, Peasants’ Association, Youth League and the General Confederation of Labour of these groups and the party itself in keeping up citizens’ determination to join the war and to reunite the country in the period 1960-1975. However, such an interpretation cannot explain the fact that workers were organized outside the official channels. Workers in many state-owned and private companies went on strike in the early 1990s before such actions were legal. Besides seeking better pay and working conditions, the strikers also demanded ‘workplace democracy’. By 1994, these and other public demonstrations by workers had pressured VGCL leaders to champion the right to strike and contributed to the National Assembly’s decision to legalize strikes that conformed to certain guidelines (Greenfield 1994, pp. 226-28; Kerkvliet 2003, pp.17-19). In 1997 thousands of workers in Nike factories in Vietnam went on strike and rioted against their conditions. However, the group behind these workers was not the VGCL but by Vietnam Labour Watch, organized by Vietnamese-Americans. In a letter sent to the VGCL newspaper *Laodong*, a Nike official suggested that the campaign against Nike, which was supported by the Vietnamese-Americans, was motivated by political objectives to destabilize the country (Thomas, 2001a). In other words, state-sponsored organizations were not the only channel through which workers raised their voices. Moreover, as Chan and Norlund (1998, pp.173) suggested, in most of the cases, the VGCL, known as the transmission belt, could
only transmit top-down information and directives, but scarcely had a chance to perform this bottom-up function.

However, David Koh (2001b) argues that it is improper to follow the debate on the dichotomy of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ in Vietnam, because at the central level it can be said that the party-state dominates society and eliminates all sorts of overt political opposition. However, at the local level, the inefficiency of the local party and state administrative offices reduces the effectiveness of the party-state and makes for a more accommodating state than the appearance and structure of its operation would suggest. Yet, if necessary, the local machinery can become an effective tool to achieve the aims of the party-state. In other words, as many social scientists on contemporary Vietnamese politics argue, there was always a negotiation between the state and society at the local level (David Koh, 2001a, 2001b; Mandy Thomas, 2001a; Andrew Hardy, 2001).14 While the negotiation was rooted in the feudal system, which was expressed in the old saying: ‘Phep vua thua le lang’ (The emperor’s rules cannot supersede the village’s rules), this is now transformed into a new saying ‘Dang co sach, dan co canh’. (The Party has policies, people have ways to manipulate these policies). David Koh (2001a) concluded:

“Negotiations usually take place at a lower level and in a disorganized and dialogical way, in an ebb-and-flow pattern. This process of negotiation and tolerance, rather having everyone come together for a sit-down and an exchange of views, generates pressures for change and it becomes a formidable force when it snowballs” (David Koh, 2001a, p. 280).

14 David Koh (2001a) cited the example of how the state administration at the ward level was organized and operated. Mandy Thomas (2001a) argued that the state compromised for non-state crowd formation because popular culture has provided the public with the means to transcend the constraints of official, authorized codes of behaviour in public space. Andrew Hardy (2001) argued that such a negotiation provided limited room for people to manoeuvre around the household registration system even before the economic reforms.
In the case of the labour movement in Vietnam, such a negotiation between the state and the society was also observed. Although limited, one still can notice such a negotiation at the central level. The 1994 Labour Code could be considered as a result of the negotiation between VGCL leaders as the activists and the party state. Although the VGCL was reformed, this was done in a half-hearted way. As more actors besides the state became employers, the party-state also saw an emerging need to protect workers against capitalism. At the same time, it did not want to lose its attractiveness as a good address for investment in the eyes of businessmen. The latter was no less vital than the former to the maintenance of the legitimacy of the system. In other words, there was a constant negotiation between the doubled tasks which were in most cases were exclusive to each other within the party-state and the VGCL. At the local level in the companies researched, the negotiation between the state and the society was expressed in different aspects.

First, there was a negotiation between the state and the local private entrepreneurs. In the case of karaoke shops, David Koh (2001a) argued that although the policemen and the local ward officials knew that there were several karaoke shops which were the disguised caves of ‘social evils’ such as prostitution, illegal porno movies and unwholesome music, such shops still existed in the local areas after several ‘crack down’ raids. Ward officials often let offenders off with a summons and fine. Such ‘letting go’ was quite a common occurrence and there were a number of motivations of local administrations behind it. First, the ‘letting go’ was in exchange for a bribe from the offenders. The second motivation arises from the competition between wards to become the best ward in maintaining law and order. So there was incentive for local administrators to reduce the numbers of cases in court. Third, if a karaoke shop closed
down, then the ward would lose a valuable source of income. With regard to taxes, the state allowed the ward to keep a portion of tax monies collected. In addition to such sums, there were regular charges that the ward collected from businesses. These included the security fee, the sidewalk fee, parking fee, market stall fees and so on. This explains why the wards that had markets and more business entities would be in a better financial position than those that did not (David Koh, 2001a).

The same could be applied to many local private workshops in Co Nhue in general and TT in particular. The third motivation in the case of the karaoke shops was the one most relevant to the violation of the labour code in the private small workshops. If a workshop had to be closed because its workers were found to have signed no contracts with the employers, the ward or local authority of Co Nhue would lose all kinds of official receipts from the enterprise, let alone getting bribes. More importantly, supporting the development of the traditional trade of the village also coincided with the policies of the party-state, and this differed from the case of the karaoke shops. The owners of TT often told me that they had very good relationships with the chairman of the people’s committee because his wife and the chairman were the former classmates. Such former relationships were constantly consolidated by the invitations to birthday parties, restaurants or bars. The owner’s wife said that one day they went with the chairman’s family to visit an exhibition. When they saw that the chairman liked one of the paintings very much, they decided to buy it as a gift for the chairman. The painting was worth a few hundred US dollars. Moreover, T said he was always among the pioneers in Co Nhue who contributed first and more than others to some charity projects, like helping people in the areas of flooding in the Centre of Vietnam or repairing some village roads. In the
same way, David Koh (2001a) wrote about how ward officials and businessmen cooperated in implementing various projects of the ward:

"With more income and businesses becoming sponsors and major payers, the wards can launch more socio-economic projects that party-state funds usually are insufficient to cover. The more projects a ward has, the better it appears to be looking after its residents. For instance, a ward may want to organize a summer camp for children of schools within the wards, and usually the wards would call for donations from businesses and individuals who are known to be relatively well-off. The ward officials also gain material benefits by being the implementers of the projects and getting extra payments from project money" (David Koh, 2001a, p.295).

Understanding the importance of businesses to the socio-economic projects of the local authority, T opened a vocational training school, which provided apprenticeships for orphaned children or children of war invalids or martyrs for free. In return, he could rent the space for the garment school in Co Nhue’s primary school for a low price. There was another vocational school for garment workers, which was established by the local authority of Thanh Tri district, the higher state administrative level of Co Nhue. Children from poor families in the whole district could also receive free training. Thanks to the personal relationship between the director of this school and T, students of this school were taken to visit the TT workshop at the end of the training course to see how production actually took place. TT was also willing to employ any students from this school who wanted to work at TT. In ways like this the interests of businesses and the local authority were interwoven, making it a win-win game. In other words, both could benefit from the exchange.
In terms of labour issues, although the local authority ignored the workshops’ violation of the Labour Code, it was not the case that the local authority totally lost their control over labour in the village. Migrant workers had to register their temporary stay with the local police under the sponsorship of the employers. It was not clear if workers could really benefit from it but when a labour conflict happened, no one would think of bringing it to the local authority to be solved or mediated. However, pregnant migrant women workers could go to the village clinic for a regular check-up. Sometimes, the propaganda and educational team of the village went to each workshop to give some lectures or training at sites about the family planning program, HIV/AIDS or other social evils. From the point of view of the local authority, temporary registration was still an important tool to keep a record of population mobility. While small fees for registration could contribute further to the funds of the local authority, a yearly labour tax per capita had to be paid to the state through the local authority where the temporary stay was registered. Although they were small fees, the local authority was supposed to keep a part of the collected monies. Thus, rather than protecting migrant workers, the temporary registration was more a tool to force them to fulfil their duties as citizens.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the owner of TT also acted in the role of a trade union. He paid the hospital fees and medicines for sick workers who had to be hospitalized. In the summer of 2001, for the first time he organized a vacation for all the workers at Sam Son beach for two days and covered all the expenses of the trip. When there was the wedding of a worker in the workshop, T even arranged for a car to take all the workers to the province to attend the wedding. Envelopes of money as a gift to the worker’s families or for weddings were also considered by the owners as the expenses for the role of a trade union. Therefore it can be said that the negotiation between the local state and private
entrepreneurs was unofficial. There was a non-verbal dialogue of give and take between the state agencies and the private business actors.

The implicit negotiation of give and take between the state and the society was also expressed in the conditions that make the discourse become more salient in one sector than the others. As mentioned in the introduction, most of the labour conflicts which were covered by the mass media, or even reported by the inspection committees organized by the local trade unions, were happening in private companies, the joint-ventures or foreign invested companies. In particular, a high rate of strikes, both legal and illegal, occurred in the companies invested or jointly invested by South Koreans or Taiwanese. For example, the total number of strikes recorded in enterprises in Vietnam from January 1991 to September 1995 was 56, of which 43 occurred in foreign-invested enterprises. Most of these problematic enterprises were South Korean and Taiwanese companies. Although the reasons behind strike actions in foreign companies were various, the most dominant problem was described as ‘cultural misunderstandings’ in the mid-1990s (Nguyen Gia Hao, 1997, p.204; Eva Hansson, 2003, p. 164). In explaining the problems in relations between the South Korean managers and Vietnamese workers, Nguyen Gia Hao (1997) argued that as most of Vietnamese workers were not workers by origin, they were not so familiar with industrial discipline. Moreover, the egalitarian spirit that people had experienced under the democratic socialist regime in the last fifty years made for a culture of social relations in Vietnam in which people cannot accept any impolite or rude treatment, even by senior persons to junior ones. The generation of older managers in South Korea had to work very hard in tough conditions after the Korean War. Moreover,

15 Nowadays, the problems were more identified with the violations concerning wages, working hours and payment for overtime, and the complaints focused on rude treatment of workers by foreign managers, including physical abuse.
many of the South Korean managers working in Vietnam came from small and medium-sized enterprises in South Korea. These managers normally had little or no experience of doing business in foreign countries. They might have thought that Vietnam was similar to South Korea in the early 1960s and that the Vietnamese workers, under pressure of poverty and unemployment, would agree to work nine to ten hours a day and accept harsh treatment from their employers and managers. In particular, as South Korea had a stronger Confucian culture than Vietnam, South Korean managers took it as normal to treat their Vietnamese workers with rude manners. However, the Korean side (Sung-Yeal Koo, 1997) said that the socialist work habit had made the Vietnamese workers become inexperienced and inefficient. These South Korean small and medium-sized firms often invested in the labour-intensive industries. Because they lost their international and domestic competitiveness by relying too long on labour intensive technologies, they chose Vietnam as their last resort in the hope that cheap labour could compensate for lower productivity, competitiveness and profit.

In the case of Nike, Mandy Thomas (2001a) argues for the good impact of Nike on Vietnam, saying that the company created many jobs and there was considerable prestige given to workers who were employed there. Nike in Vietnam provided conditions for workers that were envied by those working in the state-own enterprises. However, in 1997, Vietnam’s official press also highlighted cases of Nike factories in Vietnam – most of which are run by Korean or local managers. The employment of South Korean managers was based on the idea that “Korean management practices might suit Vietnamese conditions, as well as the assumption of a uniformity of Asian business practices” (Mandy Thomas, 2001a). However, the accusation made by the Vietnam Labour Watch put pressure on Nike and the international outcry over the treatment of
workers by the Korean sub-contractors forced Nike to work with local trade unions to remedy the situation. Norlund (2000), reporting on a Korean owned company, as a supplier for Nike in Vietnam, stated:

“Today, the company can boast of having the best environment conditions of the shoe factories, because of a new type of water-based glue invented by Nike.

Training, education, and cultural programmes of the Koreans to learn the Vietnamese culture and for Vietnamese to learn the Korean culture have taken place, there are sport activities, special treatment of pregnant women who are not allowed to work in polluted air etc. A grievance council is even set up, where the employees can deliver grievance messages” (Norlund, 2000, p.58; cited in Mandy Thomas, 2001a).

As Ong (1987) has argued, a local concept of patriarchal authority, which is often found in societies like Korea, easily articulated with corporate hierarchies and reinforced the power of managers over workers. What complicated the case was not only the accusation that third world workers were being exploited by global capital, but also the refusal to do business in communist Vietnam by the anti-communist overseas Vietnamese elites and the culturally layered and complex situations. In the beginning, many South Korean investors preferred 100 percent ownership to joint ventures. Later on, seeing the disadvantage of a lack of information on local labour law, work habits, human relations and the language, several South Korean investors chose the type of joint-venture in which the Vietnamese took over all the management positions. In such a social context, MH was established as a joint venture between Vietnam and South Korea. However, the Koreans did not participate in management with control over workers in production. Regarding
production, they were only in charge of designing at the beginning and checking products at the end of production.

Thus, the problems in the discourse of labour relations in Vietnam focused on the foreign investment sector, and within this sector the complaints focused on misunderstandings and the rude treatment of women workers by South Korean managers. This raised the question of whether working conditions and labour management relations in the companies were actually worse than those in state-owned companies or local private ones, and/or whether cultural difference represented the biggest problem. The results of my fieldwork showed that the working conditions and labour relations at DG, the state owned company, were worse than those of MH, the joint venture, and even when cultural differences had been solved, there were still more labour conflicts in the joint-venture than in the state-owned company. Mandy Thomas (2001b) also argued that what actually shaped the discourse of labour relations in Vietnam did not have much to do with reality. Rather, one should trace the question back to how the discourse was formed. One should not forget that Vietnam has had a history of thousands of years of struggling with foreign invasion, making any foreign element a sensitive issue. The multinationals were easily seen as the global exploiters of third world workers. This meant that cases of labour conflict in the foreign investment sector easily gained the coverage of the mass media. However, from another point of view, one could observe the negotiation between the state and the mass media and the state and business. Russell Heng (2001) says that beyond the ‘press freedom’ paradigm, a look should be taken at how press legislation could trigger certain dynamics of the state-media negotiation. Based on this hypothesis, one can argue that journalists might feel easier and more relaxed in covering labour conflicts and strikes in the foreign-investment sector, but dared not yet touch the state-
owned sector because this sector is still considered as a sensitive area. According to some
workers at DG, the journalists were often allowed to meet the company officials only, and
these might tell them a different story about the workshop or bribe them so that they
would not investigate further. In either case, this showed that the journalists were not
eager or brave enough to reveal the real situation in the state-owned factory. Although
equivalent evidence was not found in the joint-venture, I found it easier to reveal my
status in the joint-venture than in the state-owned company. In fact, the management staff
in the joint-venture understood more precisely about my status and my research than
those in the state-owned company. The personnel officer at MH told me that they always
welcomed the presence of any journalists who wanted to come to investigate the labour
conditions at MH. Of course, I could not completely believe such a statement. There was
a small detail which suggested to me that managers at MH could not be totally confident
about its labour conditions and labour relations. After I had worked at MH for a while
and obtained some trust from the workers, they told me that they had been instructed by
their forewoman to tell me lies about their salaries when I first arrived at in the company.

More importantly, the focus of the mass media on the foreign investment sector
regarding labour conflicts and strikes might possibly support and reinforce the stronger
reactions of workers in the foreign investment sector when labour conflicts happened. As
the workers had access to the mass media every day through television and newspapers,
they might feel more confident when confronting management because they knew that
they could have the support of the mass media in the last resort and such support was
effective, as demonstrated in the cases being reported in the mass media. In other words,
the mass media might play a positive role in explaining the stronger overt resistance of
workers towards management in the foreign invested sector in general and at MH in particular.

**Conclusion**

In general, the presence or absence of a formal trade union had little impact on the organization of a strike or on whether a labour dispute would result in a strike. An understanding of the style and the structure of the trade unions in Vietnam at all levels is important in explaining such situations. In accordance with the socialist trade union style, the VGCL emphasized the role of mobilizing labour production instead of protecting workers. In spite of some reforms in the pre-*doi moi* era, the VGCL has not become completely autonomous from the party-state structure. At the same time, the inefficient and incapable mechanism of trade union officers at the local level made the capacity of the VGCL to implement policies as weak as any other state local administration. In many cases, local trade union officers at the company level functioned as nothing more than helpers of management. Eva Hansson argued that workers organized strikes outside the trade union or party-state structure in order to defend themselves. This development challenged the monopoly of the VGCL in labour-related issues. In fact, a number of non-governmental organizations have emerged which have actively participated in the improvement of the working and living conditions of workers. For example, the ILO in Vietnam has carried out a four-year project that aimed to improve labour relations in many factories in Vietnam by training local trade union officers, local authorities, management and workers about the concept of ‘tripartitism’, that is, the dialogue between the state, the company and the workers. CARE International (a non-governmental organization) also opened training courses for workers at the factories in Binh Duong.
district to improve their awareness of HIV-AIDs and to develop other skills including that of organizing strikes. As mentioned in the previous part, the Labour Watch Organization set up by the Vietnamese overseas based in the US made extensive reports on the working conditions and labour relations in the factories of Nike in Vietnam to lobby for international support for a case of exploitation by global capitalism of third-world workers. However, it was not clear whether this organization was striving for the rights of workers or had its own agenda. In other words, not all the new developments are genuine. Moreover, these new projects only affected a small number of companies and a small number of workers.

Evidently, one could easily observe some overt resistance of workers in all the three workshops. At TT there was no trade union and workers had to defend themselves in the confrontation with management. Often mature and skilled workers or those who came from the neighbouring areas dared to speak directly to the owners about their own problems and in this way could somehow protect the junior workers. Even so, these were not organized actions and they could not fundamentally change the bargaining power of the workers. The existence of a trade union at DG did not help to transform labour conflicts into organized strikes either. The organization of the trade union remained old-fashioned in any state-owned company, while the business expanded rapidly to integrate itself further into the global production chain. The trade union officers were not seen as being in the position of consulting with management on issues relating to production, but rather as being subordinate to management. While the party cell of the company did not reach the workshop level because most of the workers were young and were not party members, these trade union officers were often the first to be promoted to become party members. Thus, far from making the trade union become more autonomous from the
party, there has been a move to make it become more interwoven in order to consolidate the weakening positions of both the party and trade union in relation to management. To the workers, all the activities of mass organizations such as the Party, the youth union, women’s union and trade union were artificial and did not play any role in their struggle. The illegal strikes at DG showed that the workers desperately needed some leadership to organize their strikes more effectively. At MH, the trade union was established more as a formality than as a move stemming from the need to protect the workers. As the foreign investment sector has a bad reputation in labour relations among the public, the establishment of a trade union met no obstacles from the side of management. However, certainly it was also the kind of trade union that management wanted. In the context of post-socialist Vietnam, the ideal trade union for management was still the traditional style of trade union which functions as welfare distributor and subordinates the workers’ interests to the common interests of the company. Therefore, spontaneous reactions from workers to bad treatment also had nothing to do with the trade unions. However, one could observe that resistance of workers at MH was stronger and more direct than that at the other workshops. This could possibly be explained by the more salient discourse of labour relations in the foreign investment sector than in other ownership sectors.

From the case study of overt resistance and strikes in the three workshops, it is easy to see that workers need a capable leadership to organize them into more patterned and enduring collective actions so that their bargaining power can be improved. One possibility is that workers select their own trade union cadres and establish their own trade union which is not dependent on the local authority or the company management. Such independent trade unions might get financial support and expertise from the higher level of trade unions. Like taxi drivers in Ho Chi Minh City, garment workers could also
establish their own labour associations, which could operate alongside trade unions but place more emphasis on the protection of workers’ rights.

Overt resistance of workers in the three workshops also shed light on the relationship between the state and the society. Instead of arguing for a strong or a weak state, one should pay more attention to the negotiation between the state and society. In particular, this was a negotiation between the state and business, and between the state and the mass media at the local level. As observed in the case of TT, in the name of encouraging the development of the private sector, which was beneficial to the survival and operation of the local state apparatus in many ways, the local authority in Co Nhue did not enforce the establishment of trade unions in many small workshops in the village. There was an implicit dialogue of give and take between the local authority and local businesses. In the case of the mass media, the fact that the mass media focused on reporting the cases of strikes and labour conflicts raised the question of whether or not workers in the foreign invested companies were really being treated worse than those in other sectors. The findings in Chapters 1, 2 and 3 showed that the labour relations in the foreign invested company were not worse than in the state-owned company and the local private company. Comparatively, each company had a number of advantages in different aspects to compensate for disadvantages. However, it might be possible that journalists felt it easier to cover the cases in the foreign-investment sector rather than in the state sector. The negotiation between the state and the mass media confined the meaning of ‘press freedom’ within the boundaries of the foreign investment sector. This might possibly explain why workers at MH displayed more direct resistance to management than those at DG and TT. The workers could be more confident in their struggle when they knew that they had the support of the mass media.
PART 2

Chapter 5: Rural and urban continuities. Migration and Class Formation

Introduction

As the majority of garment workers have a rural origin, migration with its various motivations and effects plays a role in workers’ experience of daily life. This chapter will examine what motivates workers to migrate to the city and what the effects are of migration on the relationship between workers and managers, between workers and urbanites, between workers and their families and friends as well as among workers themselves. This chapter will argue that migration is directly connected with the process of class formation in Vietnam. Through the process of migration, one can imagine how class relations inside and outside the workshops are formed and mapped in the urban space of Vietnam. This chapter will demonstrate how work identities are interwoven with spatial (rural/urban) and gender identities and how such an intersection of identities influences the forms of class experience.

As mentioned in the introduction, my position in the whole thesis is that class is not an objective social position but something that frames our possibilities and access to a variety of capitals, which can be economic, cultural, symbolic or cultural (Hughes, 2004; Skeggs, 1997). In fact, this argument is developed in the whole thesis. In Chapter 2, class analysis informed the obstacles that workers faced in their access to vocational training and in recruitment into different factories. In Chapter 3, class analysis also framed the indirect, covert and individual forms of resistance of workers in their daily interaction with management. In Chapter 4, the fact that workers were unequipped with knowledge about the procedures for strikes and their rights and did not know where or to whom to
send their letters of complaint also showed their constrained access to the emerging civil society, which was becoming increasingly more autonomous from the state. In Chapter 6, class analysis will frame workers’ consumption patterns, and Chapter 7 will be a demonstration of how class constrains women workers’ opportunities for marriage, a form of cultural, symbolic and cultural capital. In this chapter, besides the focus on the difficult and unpleasant working and living conditions of garment workers as the effects of migration (in relation to urban workers and urbanites), stress is also placed on the discourse of improvement and upward social mobility of women garment workers. Although not all efforts are successful, they express the working class desire for respectability and better working and living conditions.

In general, migration is often examined from the socio-economic point of view. More specifically, high population growth in the rural areas, the move away from agriculture, combined with the industrialization of agriculture, as well as unstable, intermittent and meagre incomes from farming activities are the push factors, while the pull factors are the higher living standards and the booming condition of several manufacturing industries and service sectors in the city. In other words, migration demonstrates social inequality between areas and regions and has the effect of reducing such social gaps at the same time. However, to many migrant female labourers, the decision to move to Hanoi was not simply an economic decision. Their relationships with families, friends and communities also contributed as factors leading to the decision to migrate.

While the local networks proved to be an important factor that mitigated the migration process, the employers often intentionally used these local networks to recruit new workers. Moreover, using skilled workers to train and sponsor their local unskilled
ones was another management strategy. From workers’ perspectives, localism could help to strengthen the ties among workers from the same locality but also divide those who came from different places. The local networks could be helpful to migrants in the beginning, but later on sisterhood and brotherhood were more important than localism in maintaining workers’ commitments to the workshops. Localism was more evident at TT than at MH and DG.

The difference between urban workers and those who had a rural background could also be observed in the workshops. The former could have promotion, holidays, or leave more easily than the latter, and when the former made some mistakes the punishment was also less severe. Such differences in the way managers treated urban and migrant workers were also reflected in the different ways the urban and migrant workers joked with managers and even resisted them. Last but not least, some urban workers even oppressed migrant workers because of the weaker positions of the latter.

Outside the workshops, not only did young migrants have to accept temporary living conditions which were much poorer than those of their urban neighbours, but also many old state workers who had migrated to the city a long time ago and were still living in the state apartments experienced relatively worsening conditions. While the old migrants highlighted their rural identities as a way to cope with the changes in their surroundings, the young ones tended to make some efforts for upward social mobility, although not all their efforts were successful. In the past, it was easier for the migrant women workers in the state companies to get married and settle down in the city on their own because they were provided with free accommodation by the state companies. Now young migrant women found it more difficult even to get married, let alone settle down in the city. Many girls saw further education as the only way to change their jobs and their
social and economic positions. The hopes and plans for tomorrow played important roles in sustaining them and helping them to overcome the difficulties of today.

The chapter is divided into five parts. The first part will examine the process of rural-urban migration in Vietnam: the motivations for migration and the influence of localism on the pattern of migration to Hanoi. The second part is about the urbanization process, as well as the widening gaps between the rich and poor in the urban spaces. In the third part, I will explain how localism works in labour recruitment, labour management and in the way workers deal with managers and with each other. The fourth part is about the social division of rural and urban workers in the workshops. Finally, different forms of class experience of migrant garment workers in the urban space outside the workshops will be analysed in the last part of this chapter.

**Rural - Urban Migration: motivations and patterns of migration to Hanoi**

As in China, the economic reforms in Vietnam since 1986 have resulted in ever-increasing social inequalities between the rural and urban areas and between regions (for example, see Hy V. Luong, 2003, pp. 81-106). Before the economic reforms, although income differences within the same village were relatively small, there were some income differences between the group of peasants and the groups of state employees and military officers which were subsidized by the state. Thus, migration to the city was already a desire among the rural youth during the pre-reform period in spite of restrictions on mobility. After the economic reforms, together with a general reduction in poverty in the country, the urban-rural gap and regional inequality all increased in the 1990s. While the per capital expenditure in the top quintile was only 4.6 times that in the bottom one in 1992-1993, it increased to 5.5 times in 1997-1998 (Vietnam General Statistical Office
Furthermore, rural expenditure rose only 30 percent from 1992-1993 to 1997-1998, while urban expenditure rose by 60.5 percent in the same period. The increase in urban-rural inequality accounted for 96 percent of the total increase in inequality in this period, while that within urban and rural areas accounted only for 4 percent. Therefore, economic motivations are often considered as the main reason for migration.

However, the figures of economic statistics often simplify the complicated stories of migration, which in no way escapes the webs of social relations in the family and communities or gender relations. East and Southeast Asian literature on migrant workers contains frequent references to dutiful daughters who move to the city to work for some years to earn money to help their parents before their marriage (for example, see Salaff, 1981). In many northern rural areas, daughters’ obligations to pay the debt of ‘giving birth and raising’ to their parents are still considered as social norms. Vietnamese scholars have also paid attention to gender dynamics to explain the movement of female migrant labourers: their responsibilities not only towards their birth families, but also their own families, their children and communities (Tran Thi Van Anh & Le Ngoc Hung, 2000; Ha Thi Phuong Tien & Ha Quang Ngoc, 2001).

Migration to escape from heavy farming work is often a family and individual strategy. Vietnamese Confucianism places less emphasis on daughters’ responsibilities towards the joint family economy than sons. Becoming a garment worker always requires an investment from the parents; if not a tuition fee for training, then the living costs for the first few months or deposit fees for garment producers. For many young girls who failed the entrance examination, the second-best solution to escape from the rice fields was to become a garment worker. Many girls told me that factory work was still not as
hard as farming. In particular, working inside enabled them to have fair skin, which is one of the important marks of urban girls or upper middle class women.

I had a chance to talk to a father who has six children, four of whom are away from home. He himself was a veteran who fought in the historic Khe Sanh battle during the war against the Americans and the former Saigon regime. His two daughters had been working in Hanoi for around five years. The father said:

*We have only one and half hectares of land all together. Our place is dry hill land, which is suitable to grow only maize and cassava. Rice is cultivated in a small area of terraced fields so it has low productivity. This year, we lost the crops in Vinh Phuc. I want my children to work here (Hanoi) so that their lives will be less hard. If they (the third and fourth daughters) were at home, they would have been wading in the rice field at this time (around 7 pm). Only when they go to sleep can their feet be dry. In the countryside, girls who have just grown up have to get married immediately. The practice of early marriage has returned. Young girls of only 15 or 16 carrying babies in their arms look miserable. I do not want my daughters to be like that. I want them to earn money on their own. I have often told my children that we are poor. When we got married, we had nothing. Now we also cannot give them anything, except the land at home. My four children are working far from home. The eldest sister of Tu (my informant) already has a daughter. I do not ask her for help. Every time, when I go to visit her, she gives me good meals. That is enough. I do not expect more than that. Every time when my daughters come back home, the villagers say that they look more mature and pretty in good dresses. I feel very happy about that.*
Thus, migration provides an escape from farming work, poverty and early marriage. In many North Vietnamese villages, men from outside the village who dare to date the village girls can be beaten secretly by the village boys after their visits to the girls’ houses. The attack is seen as a kind of warning to the girls. If they do not accept the village boys, no one from outside will dare to approach them. While such a practice still survives in northern rural areas nowadays, many parents who do not want their daughters to become wives and mothers too early, like Phu’s father, decide to send their daughters to Hanoi for one or two years to learn some job. The girls can reduce one burden on the parents, help the parents a little bit and save some money for themselves before their marriage.

In some cases, migration can provide the girls with a temporary escape from the parents’ control over their marriage and the social control of the rural communities.

_Hue ran away from the village because of an unsuccessful marriage with her boyfriend. The couple faced opposition from both the families. The village fortune-teller told the boy’s parents that their ages did not match each other. The boy’s mother’s refusal of the marriage was a humiliation to Hue’s family. Besides, Hue’s family opposed the marriage on the grounds that the boy’s two younger brothers were born deaf and dumb and the problems might be genetic. Both Hue and her boyfriend decided to go to Hanoi to work in spite of her parents’ insistence on her marriage to other boys in the village. She asked for help from her bother and her village friends who were living in Hanoi at the beginning._

Thus, migration provided Hue with an escape from the unsuccessful marriage and the parents’ control. The generation of their parents preferred to find their ‘better half’ within the village because they shared the same customs and knew each other’s families.
The connection of the two families in the village, in many cases, helped to enhance the prestige of both families. At the same time, social sanctions would be more severe if the commitment was withdrawn unilaterally from one partner or something went wrong, as happened in the case of Hue. This is also the reason why many young people nowadays prefer to have boyfriends or girlfriends from somewhere else. Therefore, migrating to the city and working and living in an environment full of young people from different parts of the country provides them with opportunities to get to know boys and girls from other areas. In such a way, in many cases, the economic motivations are combined with many other strategies which are often related to family relations, love affairs or marriage plans.

While farming could only provide a subsistence level of living, the extra cash needed for special occasions like funerals, weddings and so on often came from other sources of income than from farming. In the joint family economies, cash sent home by the migrant elder brothers or sisters can be used to finance the journeys of the younger. It is more convenient when brothers or sisters who are already established in the city can provide accommodation and food for the younger at the beginning. The extended family in the village also has the responsibility for helping young people’s first moves either in the form of a cash contribution or sponsoring them in the city. In the other words, as the parents are not always the ones who pay for their children’s expenses at the beginning, their power over their girls’ decision to migrate could be reduced. From many stories behind the motivations for migration, one can always see that economic reasons are interwoven with gender identities.

Partially due to the strategies that the girls would work for only a few years before marriage, the garment workforce is very unstable, especially in the small private workshops like TT. Many workers prefer working in small local private workshops,
because without contracts or insurance payments they can leave the workshops to go home at any time after their deposits have been refunded. In particular at TT, the employers had to recruit new workers most of the time because there was always someone who quit the job. Of course, this was not what the employers wanted because they had to train new workers, and this would reduce the productivity and quality of the production lines. However, they also understood that if they wanted to make use of the cheap abundant female labour force from the rural areas, they had to accept the fact that marriage was an unavoidable reason for rural girls to go back home. Many girls used marriage as an excuse to quit when they found a better place to work in Hanoi. At TT there were no migrant workers who continued working after marriage. At DG and MH, a few women who got married to urban men, and those whose husbands were also migrant and were working in the city went on working for the companies after getting married. So such fluid labour formation made it difficult for the state to formalize or organize the labour force in the private informal sector.

As in China, the *ho khau* (residence permit) system was used for the purposes of identification, eligibility for state employment, police work and restriction of migration to the cities. While household registration directly regulated access to the most essential goods and services like ration coupons, land, children’s education and so on of the citizens of a place, many jobs in the cities were only available to those who held an urban *ho khau*. However, the system in Vietnam was not as rigid as it was in China even before the economic reforms. While in China the system froze any labour mobility completely for many years, some mobility in Vietnam was still possible (Thrift and Forbes, 1986; David Koh, 2001a, p. 281; Andrew Hardy, 2001, pp.187-212). In the past, because migration to urban areas followed two main channels, employment by the state and
family reunion, (Le Bach Duong, 1998, p.1), rural-urban migration depended on prior access to employment or the presence of a close family member in the city (Andrew Hardy, 2001, pp. 196). However, the ho khau system has become rather loose since the economic reforms. With the abolition of the state subsidy system, being unregistered no longer affects a person’s livelihood in a critical way (Li Tana, 1996; Andrew Hardy, 2001, pp. 199). In most of the job advertisements, the requirement of permanent registration in the city has been abolished. Migrants can legally move to the cities and find jobs and live in the cities, provided that they register their temporary stay (tam tru) at the local police station where they are residing in the cities. In China, even when the economic reforms opened up some labour mobility, migrant workers had to apply for different kinds of documents that allowed them to stay temporarily in the city, but this cost them a large proportion of their monthly salaries (Anita Chan, 2003, p.46). In Vietnam migrants do not have to pay a large amount in fees as temporary residents and can live off the income from their labour rather than depend on state (Andrew Hardy, 2001, pp. 199).

Localism plays an important role in the process of rural-urban migration. According to Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh (2001), migrants from Huong Quat village, Hung Yen Province, are women and most of them are street vendors. Moreover, women in each hamlet of the village specialize in selling different kinds of goods. For instance, most of the women in Dong Gianh sell clothes, while women in Dan Chu often sell fruit and so on (Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh, 2001). Hy (2003) suggests that social capital was higher in the north and central Vietnam (than in the South) due to the high rate of village endogamy and a proliferation of non-governmental organizations (including patrilineages). This resulted in strong networks of migrants from particular northern and
central villages in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Hy V. Luong, 2003, pp. 81-106). For example, migrants from Xuan Thuy District of Nam Dinh province made up 70 percent of the non-Hanoi scavengers and junk buyers in Hanoi and were heavily concentrated in the O Cho Dua neighbourhood of the city (Digregorio 1994: chapter 3; see also Li 1996, pp. 34 – 36, cited in Hy V. Luong, 2003, pp. 81-106).

The support from the local networks plays an important role in the decision to migrate and in the life of migrant garment workers. Lan, an old worker from Thanh Hoa, migrated to the South with her husband and daughters ten years ago. As her husband had some heart disease, they needed a lot of money for his treatment. Lan told me that without the support from the informal association of Thanh Hoa people in Ho Chi Minh City, her salary from the garment work only could not feed the family, let alone saving enough to afford the operation. This informal association was very active in helping new migrants from Thanh Hoa in their early days to settle down in Ho Chi Minh City as well the migrant families who had serious financial problems. They had moved to Hanoi less than one year ago and Lan had worked at TT since then. In Hanoi, while her husband got some temporary jobs now and then, her family was also supported by her own brothers and sisters. One sister allowed her family to stay in their house. One sister paid for her daughters’ school fees. One lent her a small old motorbike to go to work. Although she still complained all the time about her situation, she admitted that she was very lucky to receive this support from her relatives and the local networks. As a result, she said that they were going to attend the wedding of a relative in Thanh Hoa, although such a trip for two persons would cost them a fortune. How the local networks influence workers’ commitments and labour management relations will be discussed further in the next parts.
The rural and urban class formation. The established and the outsiders

While the rural-urban income gap is the main factor leading to the flood of migrant labour from the rural areas to the city, the boom of public and private wealth creation in the urban areas is seen as a pull factor of migration. Having more economic, social and cultural capital in the urban context, urban residents often fill better positions in the occupational hierarchies, leaving the majority of migrants to take over the service as well as manual labour market. The occupations that urban residents leave open for the majority of migrants to take over are ‘cuu van’\(^1\), construction workers, street vendors, carpenters, domestic workers, garment workers and so on. In such a way, migrants are incorporated into the city as the lower working class.

In the process of class formation in post-socialist Vietnam, occupations have gradually emerged as an important way to classify social groups. However, entrepreneurship and private wealth creation in the market economy proved to be more robust factors in widening the gap between the rich and the poor. In the socialist past, there was not so much difference in income level and social status between an engineer who had graduated from university and a manual worker. The salary at the entry level for a university graduate might be lower than that of a worker, although the university graduate would have more chances for promotion in his or her career. Even before doi moi, ‘luong’ (official income) was much smaller than ‘lau’ (unofficial income), or ‘the outer leg [unofficial income] is longer than the inner leg [official salary]’ (\textit{Chan ngoai dai hon chan trong}). The metaphor implies that state workers had to do moonlighting jobs to supplement their monthly salaries from their official jobs in order to make ends meet. More critically, the sources of unofficial incomes are usually related to work in

\(^1\) Irregular labourers who do heavy manual jobs.
official capacities. In other words, positions in the state offices could generate power, and in turn power generates money (David Koh, 2001a, 2001b). However, such trajectories could not be applied to all university graduates and many could receive only meagre state-subsidized salaries. Hien, a 37-year-old manager at TT, who used to be a worker in a state-owned leather factory, told me:

_During my time in high school, very few students in my class wanted to go to universities. This was quite different from today. I just wanted to graduate from high school quickly to earn money to buy this thing and that for myself so that I did not have to ask for money from my parents. I did not think much about the future._

_On the other hand, I could see many examples around me. For example, my cousin, who studied geography for 4 years at the university, could not find a proper job that suited his study after graduation. Consequently, he had to work as a manual worker in a factory to earn his living. I saw him every day pushing a cart full of ore material up and down the hills and asked myself why he had to study for four years just to do that._

The economic reforms favoured a small number of the mobile, the young and the powerful in terms of economic and social capital in the emergent private and foreign investment sectors and in a number of state corporations (Nguyen An Phuong, 2001). As Nguyen An Phuong agreed, various choices and opportunities only opened up for a segment of educated youth within the context of the complex and diverse reality that _doi moi_ had brought about. In a number of state administration offices, which received state subsidies to maintain their activities, the situation has not changed much since the

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2 David Koh (2001a, p.284) cited the example of a state employee working in a tax office, whose unofficial income was ten times as much as his official salary. In 2001 he bought a brand new Korean car with income he received from advising foreign businesses about the tax regime and ways to evade taxes illegally.
economic reforms. For example, in 1997, the chairman of a people’s ward committee received 390,000 dong in salary per month, while other state posts were paid less. After four rounds of wage adjustment, the minimum wage for state bureaucrats which could be applied to fresh university graduates employed in the state sector increased from 144,000 dong in 1993 to 290,000 dong in 2003. Without any extra income, university graduates could earn only half what an inexperienced garment worker in the local private sector did. Concerning living standards, the official statistics showed that the mean of annual total household expenditure in the urban areas was about 9.77 million dong, which worked out at 814,166 dong per month (David Koh, 2001b). While such low salary levels could induce corruption, a proportion of young educated people still moved from foreign companies to state institutions because they saw the opportunities ‘to advance to higher positions’ in addition to the chance of a scholarship to study abroad. Thus, it can be argued that occupation as an important classifying factor of social classes proved to be rather ambiguous, while the perception of state employees as the privileged group has been much weakened, though not yet eliminated, especially in rural areas in post-socialist Vietnam.\(^3\) Gallup (2002) in his research for the World Bank also concluded that wage employment has not been the locus of growing disparity between the haves and have-nots in Vietnam.

Alternatively, the socio-economic gap between rural and urban areas has created different ways to categorize social groups. The following is a description of the phenomenon of the emerging rich and poor in contemporary Vietnamese society:

“A decade later (the 1990s), Hanoi began witnessing conspicuous private wealth, in the forms of large private residences and private mini-hotels, accommodating

\(^3\) See Chapter 2.
the flow of tourists, aid officials, and international investors. By the end of the
1990s, more than a few wealthy Hanoi residents owned three star-hotels in the city
and four-star tourist resorts in other parts of Vietnam. Conspicuous consumption
had also emerged in the form of private automobiles, among other things. Hanoi
had eventually caught up with the more freewheeling Ho Chi Minh City, where, by
the end of the 1980s, private wealth had been more freely displayed in the form of
newly constructed private villas behind high walls. By the late 1990s, a small
Vietnamese urban elite had accumulated sufficient wealth to be able to finance
their children’s overseas education in the West while the annual per capita income
in 1999 in Vietnam remained around U.S.$ 374. At the other end of the spectrum
were beggars and slum dwellers along the blackened and highly polluted city
canals, the growing landless peasantry in the Mekong delta, and the
disenfranchised ethnic minority cultivators in the highlands. Many of the slum
dwellers came from the poorer regions of Vietnam, reflecting heightened inequality
not only within a city but also along regional lines across the country” (Hy V
Luong, 2003, p.81).

From the appearance of the cities, the clearest evidence of the urban rich and rural
poor was the construction boom in newly built and well-equipped houses. Going together
with this boom were the rising prices for the rights to use and transfer urban land, which
meant that any ordinary urban citizens owning a house in and outside the city have
become much richer than any middle-class peasants in the countryside.

During my fieldwork in Co Nhue, besides the daily activities of garment business,
the life of the village was very much disturbed by real estate transactions. Prices of
transferring land use rights in Co Nhue, which did not deviate from the general trend,
increased dramatically within a few years. The owners of TT bought a piece of land of 200 m² in 1991 at the price of around 0.02 ounces of gold per square meter. Up to 2001, the price fluctuated between 2 and 3 ounces. However, at the end of 2002 it rose tenfold to around 30 ounces. In other words, the exchange value of the plot increased a thousand times in more than a decade. Besides, Co Nhue ‘landowners’ built several small rooms⁴ to rent out to migrant workers and students. From such a strategic investment, in addition to the price hikes of land, they could earn extra income averaging several hundred US$ per month.

T, the owner of TT, did not even hide the fact that they possessed the land use rights of a number of properties in the village. While the domestic garment business fluctuated a lot because the producers could not predict the weather for every year to adjust production quantities (for example, the winter of the year 2002 was very short and not so cold), the prices of houses and land use rights increased sharply. T said that very few household enterprises in Co Nhue sold their land to invest in the expansion of the garment business. Instead, most of them used the benefits gained from the garment business to invest in the real estate business. Evidently last year, according to T, most garment producers in Co Nhue gained much more profit from the land business than the garment business, whereas the latter cost them much time and energy. It can be said that the real estate business somehow represented an obstacle to the development of garment production in the village.

Thus in the process of urbanization, land and houses became the indicators of the haves and have-nots. Ironically, this was more evident in the cities rather than in the countryside. In such social contexts, garment workers possibly experienced wider and

⁴ The size of each room can be from 6 to 10 square meters.
sharper class relations than ever before. In the socialist era, most migrant workers in the state-owned enterprises were provided with free accommodation in the state-subsidized apartments. However, this did not happen any more, even for new state workers. Now all migrant workers had to pay their rent from their meagre income.

**Localism. Sisterhood and Brotherhood**

As mentioned in the previous part, the local networks often provide support for migrants so that they can find jobs and settle down in the city. In this part, I will try to argue that capitalists and managers used localism not only in recruitment but also in labour control and management. While localism both divided and united workers at the same time, sisterhood and brotherhood among the workers who worked and lived together proved to be a more important factor in influencing workers’ commitment to the workshops. In other words, good friendship rather than localism among migrant workers not necessarily coming from the same place induced them to remain in the workshops. However, this finding was based mainly on TT, the local private workshop.

In Co Nhue, it was common for the garment girls to introduce their friends and relatives from the same village to work in the same workshop. As mentioned in Chapter 1, in many small household enterprises in Co Nhue, due to the lack of both skilled and unskilled workers, the owners encouraged skilled workers in the workshop to sponsor younger ones in their networks from kinship groups, friends or the same village for entry to the workshop and then coached them during work. These household enterprises did not have assembly lines as a form of work organization. Instead, each worker received a number of unassembled complete pieces and was totally responsible for their quality. By recruiting the unskilled workers from the local networks of the skilled workers, the
owners could form a team, headed by the latter, who were committed to giving
instruction to the former in the execution of simple tasks. These local networks enabled
the owners to reduce their administrative work in managing a group of workers with
uneven levels of skill. The hierarchy in the local network remained the same in the team:

Son, Hien, Thuan and Bung came from a village in Phu Xuyen District, Ha Tay
province. They are working in the same workshop and living together in the rent
house. Son and Hien are more or less in the same age group while Thuan and Bung
are around 6 or 8 years younger than Son and Hien. Bung is a niece of Son and
was sponsored by Son to enter the workshop while Hien sponsors Thuan, who is a
distant relative of Hien. Before working in Co Nhue, Hien and Son worked together
in Ninh Hiep and then Hien went to work in the South for five years because she
had one sister who had migrated earlier to the South, was already married and
settled there. Therefore, Hien is the most skilled worker among the four while Son
is the eldest one while Bung and Thuan did not know anything about garment work
when entering the workshop. In the beginning the four workers formed a group of
their own; Hien and Son managed the difficult tasks and instructed Bung and
Thuan in how to do the simple ones. Later on, Hien and Son decided to work
separately because they had some conflicting opinions about work. Thus, Hien
worked together with Thuan and Son worked together with Bung. In the evening,
the younger girls often came home earlier to cook for their aunt and sister.

At TT, there was a strong local network of workers from Vinh Phuc Province. The
connection with Vinh Phuc Province started in the early days of TT when T took over a
number of sewing machines and workers from a small garment workshop in Vinh Phuc
owned by a friend of his to start his own business at home in Co Nhue. The group of six
girls, Doi Me, Thu, Qui, Ly, Hiep and Hoi, were among the first core workers of TT who moved from Vinh Phuc. Because they were of the same age, had the same skill levels and started at TT at the same time, these girls worked as a group (the gang system) when the production of small orders for the domestic market did not require the setting up of assembly lines. Several other workers from Vinh Phuc were also introduced to TT by the local networks. For example, Hue, who came from Vinh Phuc, was introduced to TT by her friend, who also came from Vinh Phuc and was also a worker at TT at that time. Later on, when T wanted to expand his workshop, he once again brought some more machines from the workshop in Vinh Phuc and advertised a new recruitment of apprentices from Vinh Phuc. It can be said that T intentionally used the local networks to employ workers.

In fact, it was easy to find cases of a relative or a friend introducing or introduced by the others at the TT workshop. For example, Tu, Phu and Quyen were relatives who came from the same village in Vinh Phuc and were living together in the same house. Phu was the first to come to the workshop. Before that she had worked as a domestic helper in the house of a relative who was a friend of T and was also living in Co Nhue. This person introduced Tu to the workshop. Both Tu and Quyen were her cousins and were introduced by Phu to TT. Tinh and Tam were two sisters from Thanh Hoa; Oanh and Ly were cousins from Ninh Binh and Duyen and Hoa were also cousins from Phu Tho. On the other hand, it was also common that girls who came from the same village, district or province, although did not know each other before, very soon became close and then decided to live together. Chi, Thao, Quyen from Hung Yen were an example of this. They first met at a vocational centre in Gia Lam. After they moved to TT they never lived separately.
At both MH and DG it was more difficult to find workers from the same home villages. MH attracted more workers from Bac Ninh province than any other province because the company was located beside Highway No.5, and so it was very convenient for them to go home. When recruiting new workers to only a few vacant positions on each team, the company did not advertise widely but encouraged its workers to introduce their friends, relatives and acquaintances. In comparison with TT and MH, migrant workers at DG did not come from any specific location, but from all over the North. At a certain time, the company wanted to employ only qualified workers with permanent permits to stay in Hanoi, as one of its neighbouring companies did. However, the company soon realized that it could scarcely get any workers because few young people in the neighbouring areas wanted to become garment workers. Moreover, not many friends and relatives of workers could meet the requirement of a certain level of skill or could afford the payment of fees ‘under the table’ to enter the company. Even so, some local groups were formed after they met each other in the company. For example, N from Vinh Phuc in team 12 lived with six other girls from the same province. As the girls worked on different teams and in different workshops, they had quite different time schedules. Nevertheless the girls tried to have dinner together in the evening. Those who came home first would cook for the others and waited until all the others had come back to eat together.

While localism was very helpful to migrant workers in the beginning to find jobs and settle down in the city, young migrant workers also liked to live together with people from different places whom they felt close to, were interesting or they had something new to learn from. The friendship among workers from different places was also a source of
great support in their daily life. Quite a few love affairs and marriages came out of the friendship between neighbours:

_Hue (from Vinh Phuc) lived together with Hien and Lien, who were cousins from Nam Ha. They rented a room in a traditional Vietnamese house in the countryside, which had four rooms around a rectangular yard. Three other rooms were occupied by some students, who were studying at the universities in the neighbourhood. Hue really felt happy with the new brothers and sisters she met in the new place. Feeling sorry for the girls who came home late from work and then had to cook dinner, the students always cooked rice for them in advance, so that when the girls came home they only had to prepare other food. The boys could play guitars and sing well so the house was full of music all the time. Other student friends also visited them sometimes. Hue said that the students did not show that they were superior and the girls never got bored among their new friends. In return, when one student liked a girl among the workers who paid visits to Hue, Lien and Hien, the girls volunteered to become match-makers._

Thus, instead of the egalitarian relationship among state-employees in the collective lodgings in the same apartment block, the ties among these young people living in the same house were characterized as brotherhood and sisterhood. For example, Hue, Lien and Hien often introduced the student boys to their co-workers friends, who visited them at home, as ‘anh nuoi’ (adopted brothers).³

However, tensions could also easily arise from sharing communal facilities in a small space. For example, when friends and relatives came and occupied their own rooms, the student boys often went to the girls’ rooms and took a nap in the daytime.

³ In daily language, one only called an elder male person ‘anh’ in general.
Because the roof was made from aluminium, plastic or metal, it was very hot inside during summer, and they had to switch on the fan to be able to sleep. So this cost them extra on the electricity bill for the month. Another example was the shampoo bottles that the girls (Hue, Lien and Hien) sometimes forgot to bring inside the room after washing their hair in the yard. The next day they saw that the shampoo in the bottle was almost half gone. Maybe the student boys and girls for their convenience also used the girls’ shampoo. The girls found it difficult to speak out about these sensitive issues to the student boys and girls, but their small incomes were so tight that they had to calculate every single cent even for small items.

The younger ones often obeyed and listened to their ‘elder sister’ more than the owners, managers or even parents. In other words, there was a strong peer-group culture among these young workers. Dung, a young male sewing worker from Dong Anh, wrote in his diary how much he missed his friends in the workshop and in particular his ‘two beloved sisters’ Huye and Phu late one night in his house in Dong Anh, when his mother had asked him to return home for good. After that, Huye and the whole group of workers who lived near each other visited his mother and persuaded her to allow Dung to go back to the workshop. In the end Dung returned to TT. Huye wrote in her diary as follows: “One can feel happier living among good friends than living in a sea of pearls or in a diamond mine”. Such a metaphor expressed the high appreciation of sisterhood and brotherhood. In this case the workers considered sisterhood and brotherhood among those who worked and lived together to be more important and valuable than the local network.

To many girls and boys, sisterhood or brotherhood was the main reason that kept them in the workshops. The group of Chi, Thao, and Quyen was another example. As

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6 Some workers allowed me to read their dairies, which were sometimes combined with song books.
mentioned before, although they came from the same village and district, they only got to know each other at the vocational school before moving to TT. After working at TT for a few months, Chi suddenly became ill seriously and then had some mental problems. After staying at home for a year, she was still very depressed. As Chi was not young any more and all her elder sisters and friends of the same age also had their own families, she might be lonely staying at home with her old parents. At last, her family also agreed with her friends that she should come back to work at TT in the hope that having friends around her would make her better. After one year, Chi recovered completely from her half-mad symptoms and became normal. As a result, Chi and her family felt grateful to the owner because he was willing to take her back while she was in a bad state. The sisterhood between the three girls was very strong. When one’s family had some event or celebration, the two others even cried when asking the owners for leave to go and help the family. They protected each other fiercely when H made jokes and spoke badly about one of them. When Quen and Thao left TT, Chi also decided to work for six months more as a way of expressing her gratitude to the owners before leaving the workshop.

At the same time, management also could control the workers more easily as a group, either living together or coming from the same community. In the previous chapter, I already mentioned that the group of workers headed by Huye did not go back to TT after attending the funeral. The owners asked the group to make an official apology before they were allowed to return to work again. However, when none of them came to apologize, the owners thought that Huye, the sister of the group, was the one who was taking the leading role in making the workers so stubborn. They called her and blamed her for giving a bad example for workers to follow and persuaded her to come back to the workshop. They believed that the way she reacted to management would influence the
behaviour of the younger ones in the group. In order to control the whole group, the owners only needed to maintain a good relationship with the ‘elder sisters’ who were charismatic in the ‘community’.

Conflicts could also occur more easily because of more intense and frequent interactions between the girls or boys within a small space. Among the workers living in the same room, the worst thing that could happen was when one stole things from the others. Usually each girl possessed a locked metal box which was used to put her private valuable things including money in. Sometimes a girl complained that she had lost money although the box was locked. This created a lot of suspicion among the girls about whether her claim was correct, or she had locked the box carefully, or some friends who visited them or somebody inside the room were the thief. These accidents and accusations of course damaged their friendships a great deal. However, when such conflicts happened, the elder sister or the leader of the group would play the role of arbitrator and the two sides had to compromise at the command of the ‘elder sister’. That was the reason why the owner at TT often suggested that a new worker should stay in a house with an ‘elder sister’ so that she could be taken care of. However, in many houses, there was not really an elder sister who could be appointed. Conflicts might happen in the workshop and continue at home and vice versa. One could even observe that localism worked as a division among the workers coming from different places:

As Hien could not manage the basic skills although she had already been trained in the production line for three months, Aunt Truong pushed her off the sewing line to the auxiliary section. However, Lien and Hien thought that it was Hue who spoke ill about Hien with Aunt Truong, and became very annoyed with Hue. After

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7 As mentioned in the previous part, Hien and Lien were cousins from Nam Ha, while Hue cam from Vinh Phuc. The three of them shared one small rented room and ate together.
hearing that, Hue asked Aunt Truong to explain to the two girls about her innocence. Then Aunt Truong became angry and said in front of everybody that she was not a child so that Hue had to tell her what to do and that Hien was so clumsy and stupid. Then, when they were all at home, the two girls started attacking Hue. They accused Hue of giving a helping hand to Aunt Truong to humiliate Hien in front of 50 people. Hue became a kind of wicked person and she dared to do such bad things while they were living together. After that the two girls did not want to listen to Hue’s explanation and also refused to say anything to Hue. At lunch, as Hue was taking a nap, they did not even wake her up to have lunch together.

Thus, localism functioned as a factor which worked both for and against workers’ solidarity. In spite of the conflicts that might be caused by localism, the sisterhood and brotherhood among the workers was considered as a great advantage of migration and factory work. An understanding of the ties between workers can help to further explain their commitment to the workshops. Workers continued to work not only because of the levels of compensation in terms of material rewards but also because of good friendships, which supported them a great deal and kept a balance between their work and life. To an extent, sisterhood and brotherhood were closely connected to compensation in terms of emotion because management strategically created and maintained a fertile environment for such good friendships to grow. This was observed at TT in particular.

The division between the urban and the rural inside the workshop

As mentioned in Chapter 1, migrant workers had more difficulty than urban workers in their access to vocational training and employment in the garment workshops. As a result, although few urban boys and girls decided to take up garment jobs, they were
often considered to be more skilled than migrant workers and were given jobs that required higher levels of skill, and hence earned higher salaries than their migrant colleagues. However, different forms of discrimination against the migrant workers could also be observed in the daily interactions between labour and management and between workers themselves. Migrant workers were often seen as more obedient and even stupid and were not so direct in their opposition to management.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Co Nhue workers were considered as more skilled than migrant workers. T, the owner of TT, often joked that Co Nhue children were even born on the sewing machine table. This implied that, having grown up in the environment of garment production, Co Nhue people could easily obtain the skill, even without having to learn it. At the same time, many Co Nhue people did not go to work in the workshops like migrant workers but stayed at home and received inputs from their neighbours. As Co Nhue workers had sewing machines at home, they could easily become home-workers and received higher piece-wage rates, even after deducting the cost of electricity and depreciation of the sewing machines. In spite of higher piece-wage rates for home-based workers, their wages were not higher than those of factory-based workers in Co Nhue because of the lack of discipline and concentration. However, home-based workers could combine their work with other activities at home, and this fitted into the strategy of married women so that they could take care of their small children at home.

In the three workshops, managers seemed to be less strict with urban workers regarding discipline. At TT, while the migrant girls could scarcely get leave to go home, some girls from Yen Noi, a village in Thanh Tri District, were absent quite often. When I asked Hien, the manager, about it she replied that as they were people from around here, they would have plenty of opportunities to find better jobs. As she knew that they were
only working here temporarily, Hien did not want to put too much pressure on them about their absence. In team 8 at MH workers often told me that Xuan preferred people who knew how to please her. Usually those who knew how to ‘please’ her often happened to come from Hanoi. In the team Xuan preferred talking to the two young unmarried girls, Hoa and Huong, from Gia Lam. The two girls could easily get permission for some leave, and when they came back from holidays they could keep on working in the same positions. Another example of someone Xuan gave more privileges to than others was Van. Van came from Yen Vien, Gia Lam, and was the mother of a four-year-old son. Van was tall, well dressed and was considered as someone who had a big mouth in the team. Sometimes, Xuan agreed that she could leave the workshop as soon as she finished the day’s quota. As a result, she worked very hard and even did not take lunch or dinner in order to finish the quota earlier than the others. Most of the workers saw this as a special privilege, because this was certainly not given to everybody. When some migrant workers asked for the same permission for early leave with very ‘reasonable reasons’ such as having a sick child or parent’s death anniversary, the forewoman bluntly refused their proposal as if they were trying to cheat her.

At MH, managers might possibly withdraw a punishment for some urban workers for initiating and organizing their co-workers to strike. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Van, Huy, Thuy cao and Nhanh, although they were accused of initiating the strike, were finally able to return to work normally. Besides the fact that management did not have enough evidence to prove that they were the leaders of the strikes, their co-workers told me the director dared not dismiss them or punish them severely because they all came from the neighbourhood of the company. If the company decided to fire them, migrant workers might quietly accept it and return home, but workers from Hanoi might bring the
case to the notice of the mass media or the public or even sue the company. The workers themselves speculated that migrant and urban workers would have different reactions to management’s decision and it was possible that management had the same idea. Such an assumption actually sharpened the imagined division between the rural and the urban.

The kinds of jokes that urban workers made in their interactions with management were different from those of migrant workers. While migrant workers tried to prove some intimate relationship with management through the jokes, urban workers did not care much whether such jokes irritated managers or owners. Phúc often had jokes with T and H in the workshops. For example, when she saw that H had put a pile of banknotes in one of the back pockets of her trousers, she said: “Be careful, if the money drops out of the pocket, your leg might get hurt.” Only if someone had a very close relationship with the other would he or she dare to speak in that way. During the time when T and H supervised workers in the workshop, they also made jokes with workers, including the migrant ones, but often they were the ones who initiated the jokes and not the other way round. The jokes were often about this girl with her boyfriend or the boyfriend of the other girl. Rarely did the migrant workers dare to attack the owners spontaneously in jokes in the way Phúc did. As mentioned in Chapter 1, some skilled workers from Vinh Phúc happily told me the story of how H had visited them at home the previous evening and borrowed some money from them to buy bread for them. The story was told by the girls, firstly as a joke about how an employer or a capitalist was in debt to her own employees, secondly as evidence of the close relationship between the owners and the girls. However, one can see two different kinds of relationship through the jokes: the

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8 The girl from Xuan Dinh, the neighbouring village of Co Nhue, who made direct comments on the owners’s huge profits and workers’ low salaries at TT in Chapter 3.
former expressed an equal relation while the latter showed a hierarchical relation, with the higher giving privileges (intimacy) to the lower.

At the same time, urban workers in general were more direct in showing oppositional opinions to managers. In fact there was something more defiant and daring in the way urban workers dealt with the owners and managers, which showed that the former accepted and gave themselves a higher position in the eyes of the latter. For example, at the farewell party for Uncle Khuong on the last day of the year (Western Calendar), I was surprised that I did not see Phuc, the girl who was often called the ‘daughter-in-law’ of the owners. Her friends told me that Phuc had announced bluntly in advance that she would not be attending the party because she did not want to go to work on a national holiday and then join the party. At the same time, Hien, the girl from Nam Ha, who had told me that she did not want to go to the party either, gave the official excuse of visiting some relatives in the city.

Urban workers were often closer to the owners or managers who were also urbanites. So they knew very well how much the employers earned as profits and how small their salaries were in comparison with what the owners earned. Phuc told me:

*Our salaries last Tet were very bad. On average, we got only 100,000 dong. The piece-rates were too low. Before, Uncle T said that he would give us half of the sub-contract prices that he received from customers. Actually, we received only less than 30%. Some days ago, I saw a customer pay Aunt H 20 million dong for the order of shirts (all the material and accessories were provided by the customers). If this amount is divided by the number of shirts we produced, the unit price would be at least 5000 dong per piece. But it was only 1500 dong when it reached our hands. The sub-contract price of uniforms for primary school students*
was 12,000 dong but we only received 3500 dong. This was partially because the orders were subcontracted several times before our owner got them. Anyway, they ‘ate too much’. Besides, we had to feed a flock of technicians so our wages were low.

In another example, Thuy, the aunt of the Phuc, was the only one who dared to question the owners directly about the cheap piece-rates that they had offered to workers. Thuy was an experienced worker who had been employed by different owners in Co Nhue for many years. Some years ago when she started to work for T and H, H lent her some money to repair the house which she had inherited from her mother when she had just separated from her husband. Even after Thuy paid all the debts, H, (the owner’s wife) often mentioned the ‘invaluable support’ that she had given to Thuy at that difficult time. In the end, before making up her mind to leave TT, she said that she had to question the owners about the piece-rates, as no one else dared to ask about it. Although H wanted to keep Thuy, her resistance to the owners through the direct question about the cheap piece-rates was very clear. H replied in general that it was the only price that she could offer, and if Thuy wanted a higher price she should find another workshop to work in.

Another example was Huong, who was a Co Nhue villager. To my surprise, as soon as she had entered the workshop, she immediately asked Hien, a shop-floor manager herself, why the workshop employed so many technicians, which was unusual in other household enterprises in Co Nhue. She argued that the larger the number of technicians the owners employed, the lower the piece-rates that the workers would receive. However, skilled migrant workers like Huye or Qui, who had been in the workshop for 3 or 4 years, had never raised such questions relating to the issues influencing the piece-rates. As

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9 Thuy was also the one who confronted the owner to protect Chi in Chapter 4.
mentioned in Chapter 3, Chieu\(^{10}\) at MH also originally came from the neighbourhood. She was the only girl in the workshop who in defiance registered to take the promotion exam out of 100 workers on the team without getting permission from Xuan. As Huy, an urban worker who moved from DG to MH, commented, “In general, foremen (at both MH and DG) bully workers but, to tell the truth, they cannot oppress everybody. They bully only those they can jump over. So they often bully the migrant workers”.

Sometimes, urban workers also bullied migrant workers in the way that ‘big fish eat small fish’. Huy said: “When the products with some mistakes came to them (urban workers), they often unreasonably asked young girls from the countryside to take the whole pieces apart. Not least, they grumbled as if these auxiliary workers were the ones who had made such mistakes.” Workers at MH still remembered how Chiem was suddenly attacked in front of the factory gate by a group of local youths when he was just going out the gate at the end of the working day. He was beaten brutally and only with the help of some other workers was Chiem able to escape behind the gate of the opposite factory. Workers in team 8 of MH told me what might have been the reason for the attack. Usually two teams had to share some specialized machines. The problem started when Chiem used the specialized machines longer than the end of his shift, and the operators of specialized machines from team 5 had to wait for him for a while. As a result, the two workers started hurling some dirty words at each other. However, everybody suspected that the conflict might not stop there. The worker from team 5, who came from the village where the company was located, might take revenge on Chiem by using his local people. The workshop director, Mrs Dieu, and Xuan, team 8’s forewoman,

\(^{10}\) In Chapter 3 Chieu was the one who was opposed by Xuan, her forewomen to become the vice forewoman of the team for the reason that she was just married. In return, she talked badly about Xuan’s behaviour as a result of her unmarried status.
also visited Chiem at home and gave him some money for medical treatment. They also decided to give him full payment for the two weeks he had to stay at home. Later on, when the police came to investigate the reasons for the fight, as somebody had informed the police, the company suggested to Chiem that he should not tell the police the whole story in detail, because the boys who beat Chiem were local people, and by revealing the case the company might be taking the risk of waging a war with the local people. In fact, in the process of urbanization and industrialization, large areas of agricultural land in suburban Hanoi were transformed into industrial land like the Sai Dong industrial zones. When the farmers in the areas lost their land as a source of long-term income and occupation, they only got compensation for the crop of one season. For this reason local people often received higher priority in employment in the factories that were built on their local areas. Of course, the company wanted to maintain a good relationship with local people. Thus, a conflict about work among workers might possibly contain some elements of localism, the rural-urban divide and urbanization.

**Rural-urban continuities in the social life of garment workers**

In the past, migrant workers in the state-owned factories were provided with free housing in the apartment blocks built by the factories. A collective lifestyle is the most prominent feature in these state apartments. There were about ten flats per floor and a priority for construction was the communal kitchens and dining room, which were intended to promote a communal spirit and egalitarian behaviour.

“Small communal kitchens, in fact just an open space with charcoal burners, were built at the end of each corridor of the permanent khu (apartment) blocks, to be shared by the occupants of each the 10 one-room flats, and even these were only
for the use of married women – single women were still expected to eat in the communal dining halls....In the first buildings, several floors, accommodating hundreds of people, were served by only one set of toilets on each floor. Later buildings were considerably improved by building toilets on each floor, to be shared among ten or twelve families” (Rosenthal, 2002, p. 222).

Although these communal kitchens and toilets were a source of tension, the intimacy of neighbours in collective living was encouraged by the Party as a way of moderating many forms of behaviour and adherence to political campaigns. ‘Building democratic, harmonious families’11 or ‘New Family Culture’12 movements could be seen as examples of such efforts. Older women workers often said that they had happy memories of the excitement of initially moving into the apartment and working in the factory. By moving to the city to take up their jobs in the city, they achieved a measure of independence from the traditional demands of rural family life, for example, the absence of mothers-in-law and the freedom to choose their own husbands. Their status as state employees and their possession of a Hanoi residence permit made them especially marriageable, because their access to a Hanoi residence permit was transferable to their husbands. In particularly, one woman said that her husband previously had refused to marry her because she was ‘too poor to marry’, but this all changed after she gained her March Eighth job, with her housing, other benefits and residence rights in the capital.

However, these workers felt that they were marginalized in the urban market economy. Rosenthal (2002, pp.216-225) describes the changes in the life of older state

11 The movement was aimed at eliminating bad habits and practices existing from the old regime, like a selfish living style, wasteful and unplanned spending, or untidy and unhygienic living habits (Rosenthal, 2002, p. 214).
12 The movement was expected to eradicate the non-equalitarian social relations of feudalism and, roughly, Confucianism, to liberate women and give them equality with men (while retaining some important ‘feminine virtues’), to eliminate superstition, build communal spirit, and create the conditions for good socialist workers to be raised within good socialist families (Rosenthal, 2002, p. 212).
workers as follows. As a result of the economic reforms, a large number of state workers were made redundant or kept on the pay-roll with a small salary. Thus, many more women, who used to be state workers, had to venture into the new open economy with varying degrees of skill and success. This was the first source of their anxiety. The second source of anxiety came from problems such as the water shortage and leaking sewage as a result of the deterioration of the state apartments. These apartments were no longer a part of the assets of state-owned companies, and the administration and management of these building were shifted to the local authority of Hanoi, which had very limited funds for repairing and renovating these deteriorating buildings. Alongside the general policy of gradually privatizing the right to use these apartments as replacement for the renting system, these apartments were more openly incorporated into the free market of real estate. As a result, the residents are no longer exclusively from the ranks of workers from the textile factory. Small pretty traders and shopkeepers of all kinds - representatives of the generation of the free market - moved in to replace those capable of moving to better accommodation. The uneven living standards among new and old residents might lead to some frictions in the efforts to maintain a harmonious relationship as in the past. At the same time, the anxieties of daily life caused not only by material shortages but also by the experience of ‘the deterioration of social morals’ like drug addiction, corruption, prostitution and so on, made them become nostalgic for the old days, both in their mythical rural past and their socialist era campaign days. Although these old men and women who were retired or almost retired would not move back to their home villages to stay for good, they often described the que (home village) as a place of good tinh cam.

13 To have or to show tinh cam is a kind of performative social virtue, for example, attendance at weddings, sickbeds and in particular funerals, meeting certain kinds of obligations in gift-giving, hospitality, and exhibiting friendly and non-hierarchical behaviour. For a comprehensive description and analysis of the role of tinh cam sentiments in many aspects of contemporary Vietnamese life, see Malanmey, 2001.
(sympathy or sentimental relations), moral virtue and simplicity. They negotiated to place themselves within this past by maintaining a dual status as both urban and rural. Many women identified themselves as being ‘from the que’, although they had lived in Hanoi for more than half their lives. They rarely answered ‘Hanoi’ when asked where they were from.

“The term nha que (from the ‘que’) is most often used as an insult, meaning rustic or redneck or rude. Hanoians often use it without irony to dismiss the clothes, dress, manners or accent of the countryside. March Eight (the name of the state company) workers would jokingly call themselves 'nha que’ when they compared themselves to wealthy Hanoians or to me. For example, people said to me at various times, “I’ve never been to visit the Huong pagoda, I’m so nha que” or “I’ve never tried foreign food, I’m so nha que”, or simply “I can’t understand, I’m so nha que”. Indeed, compared to more successful middle-class Hanoians, the factory workers are indeed nha que, their phuong an outpost of old socialist ideas and industrial decline on the outskirts of Hanoi” (Rosenthal, 2002, p. 222).

In brief, they highlighted their rural origins and local identities as a way to cope with the changes surrounding them. The strong identification with the rural background rather than a representation of the working class or their long-term urban residence reflected the boundaries between them and rich urban citizens. To a certain extent, the rural background implied some class identity. However, compared with the new migrant workers, the older ones working in the state factories were still considered as luckier because they had been able to settle down in the city with the initial support of the state and factories.
In the mass media, the life of new migrant workers is described as just consisting of five ‘nos’: no house, no family, no entertainment, no money and no future. The conference entitled, ‘Building Cultural Life at the Grass-roots Level in the Mekong River Delta’ held in December, 2002 in Binh Duong, concluded that there is a special culture among migrant workers, called the ‘culture of slums’, where a minimum level of facilities, hygiene and security is absent. This culture is characterized by ‘freedom’ in relationships out of wedlock between male and female migrant workers from different areas, social exclusion from the local community or population and hence the ‘deterioration’ of traditional culture and values.

Actually, urban residents living in the neighbourhood of the factories or industrial areas were the ones who benefited most from the temporary stay of migrant workers. Each room measured only 7 or 8 square meters, and they also had to share the communal space like kitchens and toilets. Thus, like older state workers, migrant workers still had a collective life, which consolidated their solidarity as well as creating tensions and conflicts among them at the same time, as demonstrated in the previous part.

Not only were the gaps between the living conditions of new migrant workers and their urban neighbours much larger, but the migrants also had to face greater problems of criminality in the surrounding areas of cheap and temporary rental houses. It was not unusual when some workers complained that their rooms were broken into at night or in the daytime while they were at work and some of their possessions were lost. The workers were not only the witnesses but also the victims of all kinds of ‘social evils’ in the urban space. Following one group of workers to find a new place to stay, I could


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understand how difficult it was to find a room for a reasonable price but with good security. For example, in one place the empty space in front of the rent house with high grass would be ideal for drug addicts to hide in. In an area featuring many villas with high walls and big gates, the drug addicts could not find any shelter better than the space in front of the temporary rooms. In the end the girls did not choose the place, because the rent was rather high and the drug addicts could easily break into the house when they were not in.

While the older migrant workers tried to reject the negative urban working class by maintaining a dual status as both rural and urban, the new ones did not have to emphasize their rural origin because it was evident. However, their working class identities were expressed through their strategies of upward social mobility, their unsuccessful efforts to carry out such strategies, and even the realization of the failures of such efforts. Marriage can be considered as a method of achieving social mobility. Many had happy families, but some did not. When I asked a migrant worker whether she wanted to get married to a boy in Co Nhue to remain in the city, she replied; “I can’t even make a match with a drug addict here because he has his family plot, while all the land of our family back home can’t be exchanged for one square meter here”. In the accepted sense, a normal marriage as the condition for a sustainable and strong relationship between the couple implies an equality of class positions of the two families and then two people. Although what she said was not something that really happened to her, she used it as a metaphor to reflect her social position in comparison with the urbanites. H, a forty-year-old unmarried woman at DG, said that she had better marry someone from a rural background but who was sincere and honest, rather than someone from among the urban men, who were often

16 This point will be expanded in Chapter 7.
H cited a series of examples of several girlfriends of hers who were also migrant workers and working at DG. In the beginning, they were considered as being lucky to be able to get married to urban boys. However, after a while it turned out that the boys were addicted to either drugs or gambling and then beat the women. Even the shattering of illusions about urban men revealed a popular idea about the superiority of the urban class among the rural population. Huye at TT said: “I thought that they must have had something more elegant or something more special than the boys in my village. But when I came here and had friends from Co Nhue like Quang (the nephew of T) or Duc, I did not think them any different from the boys in my village. Staying in the house and working with the sewing machines all day, they are as boring as the village boys”.

The desire for social mobility is also evidence of class experience. While marriage proved to be not the best way for achieving social mobility, many workers tried to change their occupations by making efforts to study further. Although many of the garment girls had failed in the entrance examinations to universities or dropped out of high school, they did not give up their pursuit of further education while working. Luyen had worked at DG for just a few months. She had already failed twice in the entrance examination to Hanoi Polytechnic University, which was one of the best universities in Hanoi. As the family could not afford to support her for one more year staying at home and preparing for the exam, she decided to work at DG. She was determined to escape from a worker’s life but also did not want to choose a college or another university with lower entry qualification. As she was unable to go to a private preschool, she saved money to buy books to study on her own. Every night she could only sit down at the ‘table’ at 11 pm and study until 4 or 5 am. The table was a wooden board put on the desk and the girl sat on her bed. Her
roommates, who were her sister and cousin and two other girls, dared not discourage her intentions, and hence did not complain about the light being on during the night. They said that she had to drink strong coffee to stay awake at night and then had to work the next day. On the day off, her friend who was already a student, came from Hanoi to DG to study with her. When I offered to take a picture of her as a souvenir, she asked me to wait for a moment to bring out the ‘table’ and books. She wanted me to take a photo of her while she was studying. At that time, the neighbour, a local middle-aged man passed by and said very impolitely: “Are you pretending to study? If you are so hard-working, why did you fail the exams so many years?” Luyen could not say a word in response to the rude man. The dream of becoming a university student had given her the energy to overcome hardships and such embarrassment. As mentioned in Chapter 2, four girls in the local private workshop TT also went to the evening class to get a high school diploma.

However, the degrees they got after studying did not guarantee that they could change to well paid or relaxing jobs easily. Every time when I went to DG, Hien informed me about her plan to move to another job. Hien had a rich father who was a manager in a big state company. She was living with her husband and daughter in an apartment, which was given to her mother when she retired from a state-owned company, while her father gave her money to buy a piece of land and some extra money to build a house on it. Before entering MH, she had already taken an accounting course but could not find an accounting job after that. She said that in her family she was the only one who did not have a university degree and had to become a garment worker. For that reason, she wanted to change her job by any means. She even decided not to build the house first but to use her savings to find a new job in a state company instead. Although she had
invested a large amount of money in all the ‘gates’, her plan did not seem to be going smoothly. First, she was told to wait for a while so that the boss could arrange the work, but then the person who had the authority to sign the contract was on a long business trip. She said that such a situation had been dragging on for almost a year.

Many young workers at DG told me that they only saw the company as a transitional place for them before moving to the jobs that they really wanted to do. After working at DG for a year, Mo went to a technical college for two years. The intake was not so difficult but more importantly, her parents determined to finance the tuition fees and living costs for two years. When she came back to the company to get her previous month’s salary, everybody just said how lucky she was. Thuy also worked at DG for three years. She felt quite tired of factory work and dreamed about opening a tailor shop in her hometown after saving enough money. So many garment girls saw garment work only as only a means but not an end.

‘Home, sweet home’ often appeared in the poems composed by the workers. Without any artistic style or genre, they were more or less a kind of diary in which they put their thoughts and feelings. Many of these poems expressed nostalgia for the home villages where they spent their childhood. Sweet memories of the village life were expressed in small details from ‘the dyke, the river banks, the bamboos behind the house’ to the afternoon village market with ‘thatched houses selling banh duc’ 17. Diary-like poems came out from the feeling of loneliness in the strange city:

‘My home village is too far to go back to.

So I have to stay in this narrow room with its terrible smell.

I can’t go out because it’s raining too heavily.

17 A typical countryside food in the North.
Because I do not know anyone in this place,
How sad it is to be far away from home.
No money, no rice means no love.’

Conclusion

The focus of this chapter is to understand the motivations and effects of migration of garment workers on labour relations, work commitment and satisfaction and women workers’ identities. While rural-urban migration helps to reduce poverty in the rural areas, it widens the gap between the rich and the poor in the urban space. In other words, migration is directly associated with the process of class formation in the cities.

Although economic motivation could not be denied as the most important reason for migration, the migration stories of garment workers proved that gender was an important factor that shaped the decision to migrate. As an individual strategy of the girls themselves and their families, factory work provided an escape from early marriage and heavy farming work. Even if the girls did go back home to get married in the villages after a few years, they might still continue the garment work at home or open small tailor shops in the villages. While some migrated because of conflicts with their parents, some escaped the social control or boring life in villages to have more freedom and more mobility. For young people, meeting new people, making new friends, including boyfriends and girlfriends, and learning from these social relations in the migrant environments were exciting experiences that they wanted to have. At the same time, migration can increase these daughters’ status in the family because of the gifts they bring home or their higher contribution to the household economies. All these strategies
affirmed their gender identity, or strong identification as daughters and women in their relationship with their parents, relatives, friends and communities.

While the local networks played an important role in supporting their local people in finding jobs and settling down in the city, management also used localism not only for recruitment but also in instructing new workers and supervising them. Although localism was found to be an important factor in the decision to migrate or not and where to work, sisterhood and brotherhood proved to be more vital in workers’ commitment to the workshops. When workers had good relationships with others in the workshops and those in their lodgings, it was more difficult for them to make efforts to look for better opportunities and to move out even if they found new jobs with slightly better working conditions. While localism caused some conflicts in the workshops and in the living places, sisterhood and brotherhood united the working class in their struggle in spite of the fact that they came from different places. Localism as a way of management and as a lifestyle of workers was more evident in small local workshops like TT, rather than in big workshops where the companies could attract skilled workers by advertisement.

The rural-urban gap was not only seen in society at large but could also be observed inside the workshops between management and workers as well as between workers and workers. Management tended to privilege urban workers not only by giving them more leave and holidays easily but also by punishing them less severely when they make mistakes. At the same time, as the consequences of the different positions of urban and migrant workers, workers of urban and rural backgrounds had different manners of joking with management and expressing their oppositional opinions to management. While urban workers liked to be more direct and straightforward in their relationship with management, migrant workers tended to value harmonious relations in the existing
hierarchical order. In more intensified production lines like MH and DG, where co-workers needed to have a high level of cooperation and individual productivities heavily influenced wages, some urban workers who were the skilled ones even laid the stress and anxieties from work on their migrant colleagues who were the unskilled ones.

The working class identities are expressed not only in the uncomfortable living conditions but also in the desire for respectability and an escape from the negative connotations of working class identity. Older workers in the state company expressed their anxieties about their deteriorating living standards in comparison with other groups or occupations in the city and maintained their ‘nha que’ countryside identities, as a way to cope with the situation. Although they had lived in the city for half of their life and did not intend to go back to live in the countryside, the identification with the countryside expressed their desire for respectability or the need to be recognized and distinguished from other urban groups of the working class. Seeing a big gap between their own living conditions and those of urbanites, the new migrant workers felt they were being marginalized in the urban society, while the garment workshop as the workplace could not help them to obtain much social mobility. The older generation of state workers could get married and settle down easily in the city because they were provided with housing and enjoyed permanent registration in the city. While marriage is still considered as a strategy for social mobility, many young migrant workers found it hard to make it come true because of their lower class positions as migrant workers. To some young workers, studying further and changing their occupation were strategies. Although they might not be successful with such strategies, living with such dreams and hopes helped them to handle the difficulties of today more easily. Thus, gender and class are so intertwined with each other that one cannot be separated from the other. As for the further
consequences of migration, in the next chapter I will examine how consumerism, youth culture and popular culture as the most prominent features of urban life influence migrant women workers’ identities.
Chapter 6: From Production to Consumption

Introduction

Production and consumption are always two interconnected processes. Paul du Gay (1996) argues that the relationship between production and consumption is one of dislocation, which means that one cannot understand production without an examination of the process of consumption. Recent literature on work organization suggests that:

“Work as employment might be becoming less significant as a source of what have been by convention in sociology described as collective or “class” identities and consciousness. The developments are closely associated with the growth of consumption, both as the source of employment and as a focus of new customer-oriented practices” (Rosemary Crompton, 1996, p.126).

In this chapter, I will try to examine consumer behaviours of garment workers in the three garment workshops investigated. A large part of this chapter will be used to expand on how consumption is used by management as compensation for the disadvantages of working in a particular company or a management strategy to keep workers’ commitment. Another purpose is to argue that some consumer behaviours like eating vegetarian food, which produces few calories, or listening to yellow music, cannot be seen as either resistance or compliance. Rather, management’s toleration of ‘misbehaviour’ implies a negotiation between management and workers. The major argument of this chapter is that workers’ consumer behaviours are not entirely the reflections of their social positions, nor are they totally determined by themselves in their own way. While the social structures inform the possibilities of their behaviours and their access to various kinds of capital, the women workers can manoeuvre between different
social structures and processes to create new meanings on their own. Different social identities are formed in the process of consumption but they are contradictory to each other and contingent at the same time.

In most of the research that explores the production of identity positions or identity formation, consumption becomes the site which connects ‘worker-producer’ and ‘citizen-consumer’ and where the joints of different social identities are articulated. Paul du Gay (1996) argues that any established economic identity is in essence a contingent identity. Following the assumption of Laclau (1990) on the dislocation of any social identity, a contingent identity can never manage to constitute itself fully, because it relies on something ‘outside’ itself for its very existence. Thus, work identities can only be understood fully when they are analyzed in consumer behaviours. Criticizing the approach of Bourdieu (1984), which views consumer behaviour as a simple expression of the will of capital, or of already existing and seemingly immutable social divisions, Certeau (1984) argues that “meaning is also produced by the consumers in the use they make of those goods and texts in the practice of their everyday lives” (Paul du Gay, 1996, p.86). However, criticizing this cultural analysis as seeing social subjects as active agents in the process of their own self constitution and considering how they cut across given social divisions to produce hybrid identities, Paul du Gay (1996, p. 90) saw:

“Procedures of consumption are “tactical” in character: habits of action and “way of operating” it that cannot count on a “proper” (spatial or institutional localization) place, nor thus on a borderline distinguishing production as a visible

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1 According to Laclau (1930, p.39), every identity is dislocated insofar as ‘it depends upon an outside which both denies that identity and provides its condition of possibility at one and the same time’.

2 Bourdieu (1984) argues that each group, class or class fraction has a different habitus and, hence, a different taste structure. In other words, different ‘objective conditions’ are interiorized through habitus as desire expressed in taste.
In other words, rather being either completely “autonomous” or totally “determined”, consumer behavior is “nomadic” (Paul du Gay, 1996, p. 90)

Ethnographic research on daily life consumption behaviours of women workers exploited different aspects in the relationship between production and consumption as well as different ways in which gender identities are articulated. Lisa Rofel (1999) argues that the changing relationship between production and consumption through time associates with the ‘imaginary of modernity’ or the ideological images of women. There are three important periods in China’s recent history (the socialist revolution, the Cultural Revolution and the Deng era), and each produced its own ‘modernity’ with many implications for women. The new gender identities are produced based on the desire to overcome the limitations of ideologies in the past. However, although women workers refused to be fixed in one imaginary of modernity, their identities are still fixed in their age cohorts. In Freeman’s study (2000), women workers’ modern identities are produced through their consumption of high heels and corporate uniforms. Identifying themselves as ‘pink collar’ women workers, these women refused to be fixed in a particular class position of Third World exploited women workers. At the same time, their consumer behaviour is structured by the position of the informatics outsourcing industry in the international political economy. Pun Ngai (2003) elaborates on the formation of dagongmei (women migrant labourers from the countryside) in the consumer revolution in China. In general, women’s experiences are seen as various and there are different ways to dissect working class women as a given social division to produce different social identities. However, the danger associated with the use of the subjectivity and identity concept to frame the analysis is that one can easily take up an identity or a position at will, depending on how one situates the positions of social actors in their
relationship with the antagonizing forces. At the same time, consumption tends to be viewed as a totality in the same way as production was conceptualized in the classical labour process theories.

Rather than viewing consumption as a totality, this chapter will examine concrete management strategies that are connected with consumption to show the intriguing relationship between production and consumption. In particular, the chapter will try to explore how modernity, class and gender identities are produced in garment workers’ consumption pattern of cosmetics, jewellery, clothes, household goods, food and popular culture. The chapter will argue that through these consumer behaviours, women garment workers in Vietnam refused to be fixed in one category of modern or traditional women. At the same time, the meanings of their consumer behaviours are indeterminate. Their consumer behaviours are neither totally subject to the discourse of consumerism as well as a single particular social process like class, gender or migration, nor are they strategically planned as acts of resistance to management or any social structure.

**Modernity and femininity in the market economy**

As in any growing market in Asia, the post-socialist Vietnam is undergoing a consumer revolution. It is difficult to see any residential houses in the main streets of Hanoi with no shops opened in them. Besides these small shops, which are a prominent feature of Hanoi urban life, there are also many shopping centres, located in newly built high-rise buildings, where consumers can buy anything without going from street to street to collect what they need like before. Now that people can enjoy easy, convenient and pleasant access to various kinds of commodity which they have never experienced before, the term ‘shopping addicts’ has begun to appear in newspapers to describe a small group
of successful young professionals or businessmen who spend most of their high incomes on the purchase of famous brand-named fashion items, hi-tech equipment, motorbikes and cars. With 60 percent of the population under the age of 30, the post-socialist Vietnam becomes a potential and attractive consumption market.

Although a consumerist society is a prominent feature of capitalism, it always touches the very basis of local culture. On the one hand, women are seen as the main consumers in society, and on the other hand women are considered as the bearers of traditional culture. In the rise of the market economy, women are often blamed as the symbol of the evils of the market economy when consumerism has corrupted society. For example, in the short story titled ‘Tuong ve huu’ (the Retired General) by Nguyen Huy Thiep, the daughter-in-law of the general, while running after money to have an extravagant material life, destroys the moral basis of the tradition of the general’s family. The short story ‘Tiem may Sai Gon’ (The Saigon Tailor) by Pham Thi Hoai was one of the few that wrote about the influence of urban life on migrant garment workers. The tailor’s shop obtained such a name because it was located near the railway which carried the express trains from Hanoi to Saigon (the old name of Ho Chi Minh City). To people of the North, Saigon was the embodiment of the modern and Westernized life or the culture that encouraged ‘exposing the beauty of bodies’. The trains to the South became the carriers of the migrant girls’ dreams towards the life of consumption that had not yet been widely accepted at that time in Hanoi. The character named Lan went to Hanoi without the consent of her father to learn to become a tailor. As a bright and pretty girl, she took on a new lifestyle easily with ‘pink suit, white mini skirt, high heels and lipstick’. Like other migrant girls who were eager to learn the new things, she ‘sent all the shyness about exposing her body that she used to have back to her parents at home’. The
story has a sad ending: the train runs over her while she is trying to cross the barriers.

Although she dies, in a way she was able to fulfil her dream of going to Saigon. In general, the character (the migrant girl) was analysed as the victim of chaotic urban life.

Like post-socialist China, there is also a shift in the relationship between production and consumption in society and such a shift is always gendered. As mentioned in the introduction, in the socialist period women were mobilized into production in order to build up socialism in the North and support the national struggle against the Americans and the old Southern Saigon regime (Tetreault, 1996; Truong 1997). In a typical poster, the young women were shown standing side by side with young men. Some held books as the symbol of students or researchers. Some wore the blue uniform of workers. Some held sickles, which gave the impression that they were farmers. They were all looking ahead to an image of the future, which was painted colourfully with yellow rice fields, red-roofed schools and white smoke coming from the high chimney of the factory in the blue sky. The general impression of this kind of picture was a positive atmosphere, which encouraged everyone to work harder for a better future, regardless of sex and occupation. In fact, there were also posters and slogans that had a purely educational purpose: gender equality between men and women in society in general and in the family, the new family culture, family planning programs, the application of modern technology to increase productivity and so on. However, the ultimate aim of these educational programs was to promote production and gender equality, and the ideological images of women as producers were also incorporated into the wider framework of production. In other words, modernity was associated with the future, high technology and production, while the traditional culture of the past was viewed as backward.
Later, in the market-oriented economy, the socialist dream about production as the source of modernity collapsed and consumption took over the prominent position of production. Women were no longer portrayed as producers but mainly as consumers in the public space. They became the target audiences of commercials and advertising activities at the same time. Besides a few posters that had an educational purpose, which were mainly used to combat social evils like HIV/AIDS, drug addiction or prostitution, advertisements with commercial purposes accounted for a large part of (electronic) posters and sign-boards in the public space. Married women with their happy families were the main characters in the commercials for household goods, and young women who wore cosmetics, jewellery and fashionable clothes as the commercial products always portrayed feminine beauty: long hair, a slim body, and a sweet and smiling face. At the same times, fitness centres and beauty salons, the models for which were quickly copied from Thailand or Hong Kong, have mushroomed to serve affluent women. This booming industry was always aided by the highly experienced advertising industry. The industry was advertised to make the dream of many girls of possessing a slim body come true.

As the dream about the future collapsed, tradition was revived as the result of the economic reforms. Talking about the traditional gender ideologies in Vietnam, one cannot forget to mention ‘tam tong, tu duc’ (the four virtues: the mastery of cooking, good appearance, proper speech, proper manners and the three submissions: to the father when she is small, to the husband when she is married, and to the son when the husband dies). Although the socialist discourse tried to eradicate gender inequality in terms of the division of labour between men and women, the traditional values of Confucianism regarding femininity did not completely disappear in society even during the socialist period (Sourcy, 2002). As mentioned in the introduction, after the country’s reunification,
while still encouraging men and women to share decision-making and housework, women were told to go back to their noble and natural role of motherhood and turn away from the main function as producers to observe family planning and child education. In particular, after the stipulation of the household contract as the first move in economic reform which emphasized the family as the unit of production, even a sexual division of labour in the family was no longer a policy concern and this created fertile ground for Confucian ideologies to revive. The family became the most important unit for both production and reproduction and women’s interests became subordinated to the family’s collective interest (Truong, 1997). The Confucian ideologies on women have been transformed into a model of femininity in which subservience to families is adopted and made habitual in women. At the same time, partly as a legacy of the socialist past, the pressures for conformity to a gender norm still persist. Describing how Confucianism works among young women nowadays, Sourcy (2002) writes as follows:

“Now, young women do not act submissively because they are following Confucian prescriptions of behaviours, such as the four virtues. Instead, these behaviour patterns get reproduced because it is seen as romantic and attractive to behave in these ways” (Sourcy, 2002, p.5).

In other words, femininity depicted as receptivity does not arise directly from Confucian-inspired governance as in the past but from a pattern of sexual desire, the emergence of which is further supported by the state discourse which advocates a return to tradition and the commercialization of women’s bodies. Such changes in gender ideologies can easily be observed in women workers’ consumer behaviours.
Consumption of clothes, jewellery, cosmetics and household goods

With regard to the changes in female garment workers’ appearance since they migrated to Hanoi or started working for the company, most of the owners and managers of the workshops told me that the girls had changed completely, ‘like an owl casting off its feathers to become a swan’. Although this may sound a bit of an exaggeration, the managers wanted to emphasize compensation as an important management strategy. This was particularly evident at TT, with young girls in their late teens or early twenties, who had recently arrived in the city from the countryside. T, the owner of TT, was very proud to show me how much the girls had changed in their appearance. In one particular case, a young girl, who had been working at TT for only a few months, was not allowed to work in the city by her parents any more. When she visited home after a few months with a completely different appearance - new hair-style, fashion clothes and make-up - there were even some rumours among the villagers that she had been working as a karaoke waitress, and this is what had enabled her to change her appearance so quickly. So her parents forbid her to return to TT. By means of this story the owner implied that although the garment workshop did not give them high salaries, it provided them with a decent job in the eyes of conservative villagers. At the same time, besides having a small income to maintain a basic life in the city, the girls could buy for themselves new clothes and some cheap ornaments. H, the owner’s wife, pointed to Quyen and said: “Look at her hair and hands, there’s no more empty space.” Indeed, her hair was full of hairpins of different styles and colours, while there were ten rings of different shapes and colours on her ten fingers.

1 In Chapter 1, T’s wife also described how miserable the girls looked when they first entered the workshop and how they had changed after working there for a few years. She saw the girls’ moving out of the workshop as an act of ingratitude.
In Chapter 2, I already mentioned that the high wages at DG were the main attraction to its workers. The salaries were mainly used for saving and buying items of fashion, which were often genuine and more expensive than the things that young workers at TT bought. Hien said that she could save around 5 million dong per year and gave her parents from 200,000 to 300,000 dong every month. However, she was not very economical and spent a lot of money for herself. Her friends could save even more than that. For example, Hien said that Thu, whose wages were among the highest in team 12, could save at least 10 million dong a year. Seeing her watch, gold ring, bracelet and necklace, I offered an appraisal: “Well, look at the rich girl”. Hien replied: “Whatever other girls have, I also have. I am a girl and can earn money so there is no reason why not to spend money”. In a way, she felt rather proud that she could buy jewellery and fashion items from her own money which she earned from her paid work. Like Hien, Hai also wore a watch, bracelets, necklaces, earrings and amazingly three big gold rings on her small fingers. As Hai had worked at DG for 8 years and was a skilled worker who had already won a prize in the skill competition of the company, I asked her if she could save a lot of money from such long working experience. She said: “Look at me, then you can understand whether I can save a lot”. It might have been a smart way of evading the question about one’s financial status. But indeed, she could easily impress people by the quantity of jewellery she put on. Talking about the garment girls and gold, one owner of a Co Nhue workshop, which was not TT, said:

*If the girls earned 10 dong, they only spent 3 dong. They are not like us (workshop owners or urbanites), who commonly spent 50,000 or 60,000 dong when we earned 100,000 dong. For example, they only spent 2000 dong for the supper when they had to work overtime in late evenings. Many girls saved money to buy some ounces*
of gold. In the countryside, gold is a precious thing. Boys who saw that they had some gold rings, often thought that the girls were rich, good at doing business and thrifty. They did not know that the girls had to work so hard over here to earn money. However, thanks to such gold rings, the girls found it easier to get married. Once they could earn money to save a bit, they became eager to work and did not want to go back.

Thus, according to this man, gold or vang ta (Vietnamese gold) expressed the symbolic value of a woman in the rural areas. In Vietnam, vang ta is the most valuable among different kinds of gold because it contains the highest percentage of genuine gold, while vang tay (Western gold) may look shinier and more beautiful but has less economic value because the gold is mixed with other substances to make it harder in order to produce ornaments in different delicate styles and shapes. It should be noted that as vang ta is often very soft, it often looks rough and it is difficult to make fashion jewellery from it. Traditionally, parents often give a dowry in vang ta to their daughter at her marriage. The amount of vang ta which, depending on the family’s situation, the woman brings to her husband’s family not only embodies symbolically the strong ties between the parents and the daughter but also the prestige and status of the bride’s family in the eyes of outsiders, which would improve the girl’s position in the husband’s family. Moreover, gold (particularly vang ta) also plays the role of economic security when necessary: the woman can sell gold to buy productive property, to help the husband to buy a house or to invest in his business or to invest in the children’s education and so on. Thus, in practice, the dowry gold not only has a symbolic form but more and more is

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4 vang ta is considered as 23 or 24 carat gold.
5 vang tay is seen as gold of 10–18 carats.
transformed into a form of consumption.⁶ Therefore, nowadays, although jewellery of *vang tay* may look more beautiful, *vang ta* is still preferred as gold for a dowry. On the other hand, when girls can earn their own money from doing business or from their paid jobs, they also buy gold, either *vang ta* or *vang tay*, as savings for the future, before entering on married life. Among the items that Hai wore, a few were made of *vang ta* and a few were made of *vang tay*.

As mentioned in the previous part, many young garment workers, especially at TT, could not afford to buy either *vang ta* or *vang tay*. So they bought fake jewellery which did not have much economic value but served more as decoration. However, as it shone with the colour of gold, many people might think that the girls were wearing real gold, while the girls might feel more confident about their social status. For example, Cuc, who was born in 1985, was somewhat taller than her friends and looked more active and attractive than them. She wore a pearl necklace and had all kinds of hairpins in her long hair and several rings on her hands. However, out of all these rings only one was made of *vang ta* or Vietnamese gold. She was proud to tell me that when she first came to the workshop, Ch, the mechanic, immediately told her that she did not look like a garment worker but more like a businesswoman. Cuc told me that she was so amazed by his ‘correct’ comment. She came from a business family in Vinh Yen Town, the centre of Vinh Phuc province. Because she had helped her parents doing business since she was small, she was able to save to buy a ring of *vang ta* for herself. The rings showed that she was a more active person than her girlfriends of the same age. In general, although not all garment girls, especially the young ones who had just started working, could afford to buy

⁶ The same can be observed in the Middle East (Moors, 2003).
vang ta, as it was their desire to have it, and many of them acquired the fake jewellery, that also shone like real gold to affirm their ‘status’.

However, not all the girls liked to have vang ta. Thuy at MH bought a gold bracelet that she liked very much for 700,000 dong (less than 50 US$), which was more or less the same amount as one month’s salary. The bracelet looked shiny and gold, but from its price I guessed that it was made from vang tay. For the same amount of money she could still buy vang ta, but only a very small ring. It should be mentioned that Thuy was born in Hanoi and she was living with her family in the neighbourhood of MH and DG. She had a boyfriend and planned to get married in the near future. However, in Hanoi in general young girls who are middle-class, fashion-loving and educated are often not very fond of gold, even vang tay. Their bracelets or rings could be made from any materials like platinum, silver or even bronze, but must be unique or rare in style and shape. In such a way, aesthetic taste is more important than economic security. In Thuy’s case, the necklace might indicate a combination of saving and aesthetic taste. Although she could buy what she liked, the item was obtained with a certain level of effort (she had to borrow Yen’s money to buy it and had to think hard before buying the bracelet). Her consumer behaviour was different from the general pattern of her unmarried migrant co-workers as well as young middle class girls in the city.

However, not all women thought it was worthwhile to invest money in buying jewellery in the way young workers did. At MH, Yen, who had been married for three years and had a two-year-old daughter, and Thuy who was unmarried, often sat at the same table for lunch in the canteen and there they gossiped and shared stories about everyday life with each other. Thuy borrowed some money from Yen to buy the bracelet.
When Yen found out about the price of the bracelet that Thuy bought, she complained to me that Thuy would have to be more careful in the future when she got married.

If I were her, I would not have bought such expensive stuff. Her boyfriend is a nice guy. He does not have a motorbike yet. But every day in the morning he brings her to the factory and then goes to work. In the afternoon, he also picks her up and then takes her home. She is already committed to him and wants to buy a motorbike together with him. Still she said that she wanted to buy a necklace and asked me if I could lend her some money. If they plan to have a family, they should start buying household goods gradually, for example, an electric rice cooker this month, and a bed the next month, so that when they are a family, they will have everything ready.

At lunch together in the canteen, we said something about the stewed fish, and she said I was too stingy. I told her that she would understand when she had a family. If your husband can earn only one million dong, and you can earn some hundred and you do not want to rely on anyone else, you have to be economical. I prefer the content rather than the appearance. On my husband’s birthday, when I asked her for advice on what to buy for him, she suggested to me to buy a leather belt, which was worth sixty thousand dong. Actually, I only bought a bunch of flowers, which was only one sixth of the cost of a leather belt. My husband is only around in his military camp. He does not have to receive guests or go out for business meetings so he does not need to be stylish. At the same time, we have so many things to pay for. I think that in the family, being thrifty is an important virtue of the woman.

It should be noted that Thuy came from the neighbourhood of MH, while Yen came from Hung Yen province. In general, the urban workers complain that migrant workers are too economical, while the latter say that the former spend money too lavishly. As a
married woman, Yen preferred to buy consumer goods which could be of practical use for the whole family and save time for household work. In other words, the consumer behaviours of married women were guided by what was the most important consideration or was convenient for the family but not for themselves. This can be regarded as an example of the mutual constitution of class, gender and rural/urban identities. In Yen’s case, the interaction of working class, gender and rural identities constrained her choice of what formed her priorities in consumption. In Yen’s eyes, there was some tension between working class and gender identities. In other words, they are mutually constituted but also contested each other at the same time.

In the consumption of clothing, as garment workers produced clothes themselves, it looked as if they would be very keen on fashion. As mentioned in Chapter 2, normally industrial garment workers could not make clothes themselves and also had them made by tailors. The products they produced were often exported to foreign markets, which were either very cold or had different tastes from those in Hanoi or Vietnam. Therefore, garment workers, particularly those at MH and DG, in general did not like the products they made. While some could catch up with the latest fashion in Hanoi, others kept old styles of clothes which looked simple and decent. For example, T and L were of the same age and were living in the same rented house. They went to Hanoi at the same time seven years ago and since then had worked for the same company. However, they had quite different styles in dressing. While L did not mind wearing short pants and two-string T-shirts, T always wore long jeans and long-sleeved shirts with a high collar. I was with the girls on a hot summer evening after their work. We decided that after a shower we would go out to have dinner at a nearby restaurant. T wondered what she should choose between her usual long-sleeved shirt and a T-shirt without sleeves which would
expose her bare arms, and asked us for an advice. After being persuaded by us, she reluctantly chose the T-shirt. However, this did not give her a good feeling at all. On the way to the restaurant and even during our time there, she was rather obsessed by this new style and kept on mumbling to herself: “cu do bo me the nao ay” (How shy I am feeling!). T was 28 years old and was the only daughter in a family of eight children. All her brothers were grown up. Her family was living in Dong Anh, which was only around 30 km away from DG. On the one hand, she did not want to work near home because of having to live together with her stepmother and the families of her married brothers. On the other hand, she was being pushed hard by her family to get married because she was considered as old for marriage according to the village norms. Sometimes T asked me to go to the tailors with her to pick up some new clothes, which always looked quite decent and traditional. As mentioned in the previous part, her friend told me that she could earn as much as 10 million dong (around 650 US$) in a year because her monthly wages were rather high in the team. Although she did not claim that her friends who followed the urban fashion were not decent, or that women who had sexy dresses to attract men were bad women, she could not change her style of clothes. The meaning of her consumer behaviour was very undetermined: she did not wear fashionable or sexy clothes because she identified herself as a working class woman who did not have a taste for fancy things, or as a traditional woman whose virtue was seen from a proper (not sexy or provocative) appearance, or simply because she had got used to wearing simple clothes.

At the same time, workers as garment producers were not completely alienated from their own consumption goods. The connection between production and consumption became direct when workers tried to make a copy of the designs of the clothes they produced in the factories. However, instead of seeing this consumer behaviour as an act
of resistance of worker-consumers against the alienation process of commodities in capitalist societies, I am arguing that such consumer behaviour was more or less a negotiation within themselves between new and old gender identities, between tradition and modernity. At TT, there was one small order of long dresses to be exported to Poland. In general, long dresses were considered as Westernized clothes, which only professional women in the city wear. Although the girls at TT liked the style of the dress very much, they told me that the dress looked too sexy because of its low bustline. The girls planned to buy the material in the market and ask the cutter to cut it. However, the only thing they wanted to change was to make the chest part more covered. This kind of modification was often applied to the garment girls’ fashion in general. There was a process of selecting and learning new things, as well as an adjustment of the self to adapt to these new things so that the changes were not abrupt or the changes make them much different from people in their surroundings. Thus, the modification of the design of export products elaborated the way women workers tried to manoeuvre through different social processes or different modernities, using the term of Lisa Rofel (1999). In other words, the garment girls did not want to be fixed in a particular category, modern or traditional, or even in a particular kind of modernity.

Focusing on the ‘subcultural world’ of mainly white, male, working-class youth, studies by Willis (1978) and Hebdige (1979) emphasized the ways in which subcultural groups use commodities as signifiers in an active process of constructing ‘oppositional identities’. Through their symbolic work of ‘consuming’ material culture, these groups translate commodified objects from an ‘alienable’ to an ‘inalienable’ condition: that is, from being an apparent symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artefact with particular inseparable connotations. However, Clarke (1991, pp.110-11) criticized subcultural analysis in terms of resistance on a variety of grounds. At one level, subcultural analyses are unspecific about what exactly is being resisted. Secondly, there is no substantial political analysis of the content or direction of this ostensible resistance. Finally, these studies have been criticized as representing subcultures as too much the product of consumers as active, rational agents; in other words, as subjects ‘to whom an excess of consciousness is attributed, thus neglecting the contradictory and overdetermined character of subjectivity’ (Clarke, 1991, p.111).
As mentioned in the previous part, Yen said that married women should buy things that had practical use for the family in the first place, and then buy things for themselves later. The way women workers gossiped with each other also reflected what was considered as the appropriate appearance of married women. Bac and Hang were both married and came from the same village, which was not very far from the company. By chance I heard their conversation about another woman, who had already quit her job some months ago. Hai Thu, the name of the woman, who had just been married, looked rather pretty. She was always proud that her husband was a driver who loved her very much. Later on, the co-workers discovered that he was only a ‘Honda om’ (motorbike driver), a job that, in general, no one could be proud of. She always said that her husband was very sweet to her. As his mother had some small business in the market, she asked the daughter-in-law to carry the buckets to the market. When her husband came back home and saw his wife doing this, he became angry at his mother. In the morning, he asked his wife, Hai Thu, to wake up early to make herself up so that the husband could see his wife’s beautiful face before she went to work. However, Hang thought that it was quite ridiculous to put on make-up and then go to the factory where dust was all around in the air and the face was covered to avoid dust. She argued that it was useless and a waste of time to make oneself beautiful in the factory environment. Bac added that for the few months Hai Thu was working in the factory, she always asked if she could leave at 4.30 pm to go back home to her husband. As the foreman did not, of course, agree with that, she quit the job for good. The story implied that in married women’s conventional thinking, the marriage put a full stop to a period in which the women make up and dress to attract men. After that, they should devote themselves to family life. As a result, those who took care of their own bodies to that extent should be considered as selfish.
Like Hai Thu, Thuoc in team 8 of MH was also considered as somebody who deviated from the ‘normal’ type of married women. Recently everybody in the team said that Thuoc was looking more and more beautiful. She constantly changed her hairstyle, wore more jewellery on her body and put on new clothes when going to work. She even asked me the price for making her hair straight (I myself had it done). Straight hair was a kind of fashion among the young urban; the hairdresser used a special kind of chemical and certain techniques to make the hair straight, smooth and shining, and this could be effective for a few months. When I told her that the price I had paid the hairdresser for this service cost around one seventh or one eighth of her monthly salary, she said that it was rather expensive but she would still prefer to have it done at such a price when she had some extra money. Some girls that she knew paid much lesser but the quality of the service was not good at all. In a way, she expressed herself as someone who knew how to take care of herself instead of only focusing on the family as other married women in the team did. In the beginning, I only knew that she was married and had one son. So I was very surprised to hear that she was happy to have dinner in the factory canteen due to the overtime work in the evening. Usually most of the married women wanted to go home early to have dinner with their family, even though the dinner in the canteen was provided free. Later on, after knowing each other for a while, she revealed that she was living alone and was in the process of divorce from her husband in the court. Although she tried to hide her private family situation, many co-workers knew about it. She often got comments that she was looking younger and prettier nowadays. Behind her back, people spread the rumour that she had a boyfriend who gave her the new jewellery, which she had put on only recently. Thuoc told me that since she left her husband, she felt much more relaxed. During the time they were still together, her husband beat her up, insulted
her viciously and blamed her for being a useless wife. Moreover, his mother who lived with them was also on the side of her son in the fight against her. Now that they were separated, her mother-in-law took care of her son, taught him that his mother was a bad woman, and did not allow her to visit her son. Thuoc decided that she had no other choice but to get a divorce and she also did not want to take the custody of the son. She argued that as she was still young and would certainly re-marry, living with the boy might pose an obstacle to her next marriage, although she loved her son very much. Hien, her close co-worker friend criticized her for leaving her own son. According to Hien, who often repeated the proverb ‘ca chuoi dam duoi vi con’ (even a mother fish spends a lot of energy taking care of her children), Thuoc could divorce her husband but should take the custody of her son. However, Thuoc showed that she was a healthy and hardworking woman. She never complained about working overtime and said that since she became a worker she had gained more weight because doing small business in the market was much more physically exhausting and mentally challenging. Besides working in the garment factory, she tried to earn some extra income by distributing joss sticks which she bought from the wholesalers in Dong Xuan market to some retailers in the markets in the neighbourhood of Gia Lam on the free weekends or in the early morning before going to work. In general, she was not particularly depressed about her current situation.

However, unlike Thuoc’s case, the co-workers encouraged Kha to try a new hairstyle and to be better-dressed in order to keep her husband. Kha had two sons and an unemployed husband. She was rather simply dressed when I first met her. She often complained to me that the fact that women workers had to work long hours every day was dangerous for the happiness of the families. She even took the example of her own sister, who was also a garment worker. The sister’s husband also worked in a garment workshop
and had an affair with a girl in his workplace. As they did not have enough time for each other, secret affairs arose. Although Kha’s husband did not have a stable job, he often went to illegal casinos for gambling where, she said, there were many charming and beautiful women who really knew how to flirt and use men. In a way, she was very nervous lest her husband have extra-marital affairs. One month later she completely changed her appearance, and this made her look a few years younger.

In general, married women preferred to buy household goods or motorbikes rather than buying vang ta even in the form of saving. However, this does not mean that unmarried girls only bought jewellery, gold, cosmetics, clothes or fashion items, the things that are used to put on their bodies. As dutiful daughters, many thought that if they just sent money home to their parents, their parents would never spend the money on buying household goods to improve their living conditions. As a result, the girls wanted to buy the goods for their parents themselves. Ha, a young girl at MH, asked me to accompany her to buy an electric cooker in Gai Lam shopping centre. She wanted to buy a good one for her parents but there were so many kinds and it was hard to choose. Tam, also at MH, had long been planning to buy a new flat screen colour TV for her parents. That was the reason why she joined a ‘ho’ (rotating savings association), and this month she was the one who got all the money (around 2 million VND or 130 US$). Still she had to borrow part from her sister to supplement this amount so that she could afford a nice TV. When I went with T at DG to visit her parents in their home village, T showed me the motorbike that her brother was riding on and said that she bought it for him. She herself could not ride a motorbike but her home village was about 30 km away from DG, so her brother often took her back and forth when she had holidays and wanted to visit

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8 This was mentioned in Chapter 4.
home. The purchase of consumer goods for the parents and siblings, of course, showed that the unmarried girls were dutiful daughters. However, their temporary quarters in the rented houses did not allow them to purchase large consumer goods or household goods. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the areas where migrant workers rented accommodation often had high criminal rates. Small and simple locks on the temporary houses could not prevent the thieves breaking in. It happened very often that the girls lost personal belongings like clothes and even money. It was very risky if they had valuable things inside the houses because they had to work from early morning till late at night. Therefore, because of their temporary working and living conditions, the unmarried girls often did not invest in buying large consumer goods for themselves. Instead, they invested in gold (both vang ta and vang tay), which could be used in the future.

In this part I have expanded on how consumption was used as a way of compensation to keep workers’ commitment in all three companies. At the same time, workers also viewed consumption as a part of their tactics in giving their commitments. In such a way, the intriguing relationship between production and consumption is revealed. Pun Ngai (2003) used the term ‘subsumption’ to refer to the displacement/misplacement of production for consumption as the motor of profit making.

“The subsumption of the political economy under the new label of cultural economy does not mean that the production-consumption dyad has been delinked, but that it is recoded in a new (in)visibility in which the desiring-machine of production in which the desire machine of production has to be condensed and subsumed” (Pun Ngai, 2003; p.472).

This also meant that workers’ behaviours are totally subject to production, which has been subsumed under consumption. However, the fact that some workers tried to
make clothes for themselves on their own, that some planned to work in the factory for a few years before changing to other jobs, and some only spent a small part in their salaries showed that consumption like production also should not be viewed as a totality that controlled all workers’ behaviours.

Like any consumers, the industrial garment workers are alienated from the commodities they consume. Garment workers, in general, cannot make their own clothes but have them made by tailors or buy ready-made clothes. However, a few workers with a certain level of skill were able to copy, with some modification, the design of the products they produced and made some clothes for their own use. This could be seen as an act of resistance from workers against the capitalist alienation trend of commodities. However, in fact, management did not oppose or try to prevent such copying of products for export because of the differences in taste between foreign customers and worker-customers. In one particular case, some girls at TT tried to make their own long dresses from the design being used for export to Poland, but dared not keep the low bustline of the original design. This modification should be seen as the girls’ adjustment between different social processes: tradition and modernity. In other words, the girls refused to be fixed as modern or traditional working class women.

In general, the consumption patterns of unmarried girls and married woman are different. While unmarried girls can spend as much as they like on jewellery and clothing, a married woman can only be considered as a good mother and wife if she does not spend money on herself but spends it on the family and on the children. Although the unmarried garment girls could look very fashionable, many of them did not see this as an expression of freedom of the self but wished to have an ideal beauty like in the commercials to become attractive to men. Even when the girls copied the designs from fashion to have
their clothes made by the tailors or themselves, they intentionally made them less sexy than the originally ones. Many dared not to wear clothes that reveal chests or arms because they thought that such clothes would mark them as not being good girls. In particular, migrant girls’ buying and wearing vang ta as a form of savings showed that gold was important as economic security in their married life and as evidence to back up the position and status of the women before and after marriage. Even if they could not afford to buy vang ta, they had to buy some fake items or vang tay (Western gold) which had some golden colour, and this also expressed the wish to buy the real stuff in the future or the wish to affirm one’s status. Thus, the consumption of clothing and jewellery also partly has a place in the plan of marriage. As Alexander Sourcy (2002) argues, gender inequality arises from a high level of conformity to the structure of sexual desires or femininity. Thus, although the unmarried girls refused to be seen as completely modern or traditional in appearance, to a certain extent they still conformed to the Confucian norms of women’s values.

At the same time, as Paul du Gay (1996) argues, one should not view the consumer behaviours as being completely ‘autonomous’ from social structures or totally ‘determined’ by the agency. Thuy’s (MH) purchase of the bracelet partly reflected her class position and urban origins, but also came from her liking for the unique shape and style of the bracelet. Often it could also be considered as a form of saving which she could exchange for money if she was in need of it in the future. Many migrant girls could also combine different kinds of jewellery, both real and fake, different kinds of gold (vang ta and vang tay), as well as different kinds of material for jewellery from gold to bronze, silver or even metal. In general, it is not common among garment workers for a married woman to buy fashionable clothes and jewellery for herself. However, some
made themselves beautiful not only to please their husbands or to distract them from having affairs outside the marriage, but they also saw it partly as a demand of the self. At the same time, some unmarried girls like T (at DG) kept to the old-fashioned style not entirely because she thought sexy fashion was bad, but because she was not used to wearing something new. Unmarried girls bought household commodities for their parents but not for themselves in the first instance because they were dutiful daughters. However, they did it also because of their temporary living and working conditions, which made it inconvenient for them to purchase such goods.

Consumption of food
Huye had the nickname of ‘Huye map’ (Big Huye) because she had the stout but healthy looking figure of a countryside girl who did heavy farming work. Coming from a small village in Vinh Phu Province, she was the eldest daughter of a peasant family with four children. She was always the one who received the highest salary at TT. However, she did not spend a large proportion of her salary for herself. Sometimes she sent money to her parents to pay for the construction of the road running in front of the house, sometimes she bought professional tools for her brother to open a hairdressing shop in the town, and sometimes she covered the living costs of the unmarried younger sister who suddenly became unemployed in Hanoi and went to live with her for a short time to find another job. In general, Huye map was a good worker and a dutiful daughter and sister.

However, the only problem was that Huye map was rather fat in comparison with other workers. Being obsessed with her over-sized body, she was afraid of going to crowded places like weddings or birthdays, where some shortcomings of one’s appearance might become a theme of open discussion or some secret comments of the
two girls sitting next to each other. She even thought that she could not have a boyfriend at the age of 26 because she was too fat. She tried every means to become thinner. Sometimes she worked overnight alone in the workshop. As a result, her wages were always highest in the workshop. Besides going on diet, she ate green lemons and drank vinegar every day to reduce her weight. But even after all these efforts she did not manage to reduce. Instead, her skin got paler and sometimes she had a terrible headache.

The discipline of her body by dieting, drinking vinegar, and working expresses the coercive character of the structure of gender relations. At the same time, her working class identity informed the way she disciplined her body: by working hard and drinking vinegar, but not by doing gymnastics or having plastic surgery. This can be considered as a clear example of the mutual constitution of gender and working class identities. However, the meaning of working overnight is quite indeterminate. She worked overnight in order to lose weight. She worked harder than others in order to earn more money for herself or to help her parents. Or possibly, she worked harder than others because she had a good relationship with the owners and wanted to express her gratitude towards the employers through her actions, especially when a delivery was coming near and her task was critical in increasing the speed of the production line.

Besides the consumption of clothes, cosmetics and jewellery which are used to put on bodies, bodies may be transformed and incorporated into organizational life through food and drink. Organizational practices may be materialized into the bodies of workers, and the properties of food and drink may change during interactions (Valentine, 2002, p.17). Indeed, the ways in which the three workshops provided meals for workers and the level of management’s tolerance of illegal eating habits inside the workshops reflected
distinct modes of management practice. At the same time, the consumption of food was also a site where social identities were formed and contested.

H, the wife of the owner of the TT workshop, told me about the new girls who had just entered her workshop as apprentices:

*I cannot understand them at all. When I came to visit them, I saw that their meals were very simple, only some vegetables with rice. But they bought several new necklaces, earrings and hairpins. Every day, I see a new item on their bodies. They often complain that they are tired or have a headache. If they use their whole salaries to buy that kind of stuff, how can they be healthy enough to work?*

Thus, to a certain extent, the employers tried to have some control over the bodies, health and productive labour of their workers. When the girls did not invest their salaries in the reproduction of labour power, this misbehaviour could be seen as an act of resistance. In fact, when I visited the girls from TT at their rented houses during lunch or dinner, I noticed that the meals often had a poor nutrition level. The meals contained rice as the main food, plus some vegetables and tofu. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the workshop could not manage to provide meals for workers because it took them a lot of extra work. In general, self-provision of welfare was the general character of TT. The tolerance for eating in the workshop was also a reflection of loose discipline in the workshop. On the other hand, as the girls were still in their teens or their early twenties, some still gained more weight although they ate nothing and had to work long hours a day. Some girls had the body shape of a countryside woman: a stout figure, like Hue or Huye map. No matter how hard they tried to limit their meal portions or even went on a diet, they still kept the same body shape. Thus, it might be possible that instead of strategically or rationally resisting management strategies, the girls were (un)consciously
subjected to the discourse of gendered consumerism as described at the beginning of the chapter. They just wanted to have the ideal looks of a movie or fashion star so that they could fit into fashionable clothes to be more attractive to men. At the same time, it could also be argued that their economical consumer behaviours in food went against the complete subsumption of production by consumption (Pun Ngai, 2003). This was proved by the fact that by cooking for themselves, instead of eating out, women workers at TT could live on their small incomes, though with difficulty.

At MH, according to the former director of workshop No.6, one of the reasons why MH had to provide lunch for workers in the company’s canteen was that workers did not buy good meals with enough nutritional value in an attempt to save money and to keep the body slim. When the girls complained about long working hours which exhausted their bodies, the company replied that it was not because of long hours or hard work but because the girls did not take in enough food to produce energy for labour. The company subsidized half the price of lunch, because the director said that if the company gave them this cash the girls would have used that amount to buy junk food like cake or fruit for lunch instead of buying themselves proper meals. By claiming that such food could not provide enough energy for the production of labour in a job like garment work, management indirectly admitted that garment work was a ‘heavy job’. On the other hand, eating cakes and fruit could be considered as girl’s culture. At the same time, such eating habits also expressed a kind of nostalgia for their home villages where they were used to picking some ripe fruit in the garden or eating some countryside cakes made by their mothers. However, the main reason why MH had to provide meals for workers was because MH was located in an industrial area. Except for factories, there were no residential houses in the surrounding areas and street vendors were also prohibited from
coming in. If the managers saw someone eating inside the workshop, a ticket for a fine would be given to the worker. During the period when workers had to work overtime in the evening continuously, they had to eat both lunch and dinner in the canteen. One young girl even told me that she felt as if she lacked vegetables because of eating too much meat. I myself sometimes had lunch with the workers and did not see that there was too much meat at all. Although dinners were provided free, married women preferred to go home early and have dinner at home with their families. Management staff often shared the same tables and they were often given something extra by the canteen staff. For example, sometimes they got a few mandarins for dessert. Of course, desserts were not included in the meals provided by the canteen, but workers could buy them for themselves.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, DG also provided the workers with lunch and payment for lunch was automatically deducted from their monthly salaries. However, the quality of lunch was so low that some workers who had high salaries and were single went out to have lunch and accepted losing a large amount of money every month. It could not be said that the meals did not provide workers with enough nutrition from meat or fish, but they were processed and cooked for thousands of people in such a terribly messy way that I had the feeling that the food was not cooked for human beings but for animals. The worst thing was the alarming hygienic condition of the meals. Recently the mass media have often covered cases of massive food poisoning in several factories throughout the country. In general, the provision of food of poor quality at DG reflected the superficial nature of its welfare provisions. It can be said that most of the skilled workers and management staff (who were supposed to have higher salaries than others) could not stand the meal quality in the canteen and had lunch at a restaurant outside the company.
At the same time, although eating and drinking in the workshop were prohibited according to the rule, during a time of hot weather when the air-conditioners were not switched on yet, management did not say a word when I brought a few cold bottles of Fanta from outside into the workshop and the workers drank them during work. When I asked a worker whether eating and drinking were tolerated, the girl said that even the forewoman ate inside so she could not punish them for the same transgression that she herself made.

While in the case of TT the garment girls decided what they wanted to eat and could have some more savings from preparing their daily meals, in the case of MH and DG factory work could free them from the kitchen. In particular at DG the majority of workers had to have dinner at the restaurants in the neighbourhood, because when they went home it was already very late in the evening. To a certain extent, earning one’s own wages and being free from the kitchen sounded as if factory work promoted women’s liberty. However, such working conditions could not promote any kind of family life. Seeing that they were unable to cook or had no time for cooking every day, the garment girls could be removed from the category of ideologically traditional women and became modern women. On the other hand, the preference for eating food with a low level of nutrition showed their subservience to gender norms of femininity and attractiveness. Moreover, eating inside the workshop, or having lunch outside while the company provided lunch in the canteen, could be seen as misbehaviour. At the same time, management also tolerated the misbehaviour to a certain extent. Thus, the consumption of food could be considered as the site of implicit negotiation between workers and management rather than employee struggle. The meaning of the garment girls’ habit of eating fruit and junk food become very indeterminate. In Huye’s case, it was clear that
she wanted to reduce her weight as a technique of disciplining her own body. However, it can be also be understood as a way to save money or/and a girl’s habit of eating junk food.

**The consumption of popular culture**

Music played an important role in the workshop culture. Many garment workshops were equipped with modern audio systems for quick and precise instructions with regard to production. Besides the work-related issues, this audio-equipment was also used for playing music, which from management’s point of view was intended to reduce the tension of the working speed and made the work less boring. In such a way, it prevented workers from falling asleep or talking to each other. At DG in particular, music or radio programs were switched from 2 pm until 4 pm because workers often felt sleepy in the afternoon after lunch. At MH, music was rarely heard in the workshop, possibly because management wanted to keep a strict industrial environment. At TT, the owner’s wife only allowed workers to listen to music on Saturday, on the grounds that they could not concentrate on work while listening to music. This command was effective for a while, but later on I saw that workers switched on the radio cassette as usual. It seemed that the owners and managers had to tolerate it. While workers at DG and MH had to listen to the kind of music management chose, workers at TT brought the music they wanted to hear to the workshop. When the owners and managers were not in the workshop, workers at TT even sang together during work. Such relaxation was one of the reasons why many girls preferred to work in the private workshops.

In all three workshops, most (often unmarried and young garment) workers had small notebooks in which they noted down the texts of their favourite love songs and
poems. At home, when they had free time, singing was also one of the activities they engaged in together. It was not strange that the girls wrote and sang about the emotional feelings and romantic loves of girls at their age. However, the theme of failures in love, separation or loneliness, are repeated most frequently in their writings (see the demonstration and translation at the end of the chapter).

My general impression was that they liked to sing and listen to music with a slow tempo and sad lyrics. Some of the songs were composed in recent times and some were from the past. This kind of music reminded me of ‘nhac vang’ (‘yellow music’ or sad music), which originally came from the South before the country’s unification in 1975 and became the rage in the North in the late 70s and early 80s. Some even defined yellow music as songs with sad lyrics, no matter when they were composed. Before the reunification, some sad songs about separation in love were considered as antiwar or against forced enlistment in the army of the Saigon Republican army. However, it was only after the country’s reunification that the term ‘nhac vang’ was used officially in some articles that aimed at educating the public about the musical legacy of the Republican era. The author of one of these articles defined the yellow music as follows:

“The overall effect of yellow music pieces is to evoke in hapless listeners a gloomy, embittered, impotent and cynical mood towards life, an attitude negating youth’s desire to be cheerful, a sensation of being drowned in loneliness and in a withered and desolate world” (To Vu, 1976, p.46).

The most salient aspect of official criticism of this Southern Vietnamese music was the politicization of such diverse dimensions of musical expression as rhythm, melody, tempo, volume and vocal style. It was even called ‘reactionary bourgeoisie musical vestiges’, or the musical legacy of the US era in the operation of a neo-colonial conspiracy
(Philip Taylor, 2001, p. 42). The yellowness of the love songs of the Republican era was found in their “khong lanh manh” (unwholesome) lyrical themes about separation, loneliness, sadness and nostalgia. This could fit well with the psychological status of a republican soldier who was forced to join the army, who hated the war and did not pay any attention to the country’s political situation, but was only preoccupied with his private affairs, like missing his girlfriend who left him to go with another man in the homeland and so on. Such yellow weakness was not permissible in a revolutionary and glorious time when people were living in happiness. Moreover, yellow music was dominant among communities of the Vietnamese diaspora in the US and Europe during this period. The feeling of displacement and nostalgia was quite evident in these songs. In some way or other, copies of these kinds of cassette tape with recordings of these songs were sent back to Vietnam and became quite influential among young people. In fact, the production and proliferation of yellow music originating from diasporic communities abroad expressed the dynamic transitional linkages between Vietnamese communities abroad and in the homeland, which was vested in cultural, political and economical interests on each side (Valverde, 2003). It should be mentioned that during the 1980s, as soon as the unified country had got out of the devastating wars, it fell into an economic crisis. For a time those who liked yellow music dared not to play it loudly out of fear of being seen as having reactionary bourgeois sentiments. However, as time passed, the control over the yellow music from the government side was gradually lessened as part of the general trend of loosening the grip of the party state on cultural life. The changing role of the media in Vietnam has permitted the public to be exposed to new forms of leisure and entertainment. While the government reveals its uneasiness over these activities in its frequent crackdowns and directives on closing karaoke bars or eliminating the sex movies
which are available illegally in the market, ultimately leisure and entertainment activities which are not deliberately corrupt (*doi truy*) do not appear to pose a serious threat to the overall political and social structure (Thomas & Thuan, 2003). This relaxation in controlling the mass media reflects the dynamic of give and take in government reactions to these consumer trends. These emergent modalities of government revealed a reorganization of the state’s activities to suit a market regime. At the same time, the depoliticization of yellow music was also followed by the fact that yellow music lost its popularity among young people. This meant that once it was less controlled, it became less attractive. Since the economic reforms, yellow music has gone out of fashion at least in the urban areas and pop music has replaced the position of yellow music. At the same time revolutionary music also recovered, not because of its propaganda content or political education but because of its cheerful melodies.

A new generation of audience, who were born and grew up in a more peaceful and economically better-off time, arose. With access to various kinds of music with much faster rhythms, more and more young people lost their fondness for the slow tempo and the mourning words of the songs. In the last ten years, youth music has become commercialized and absorbed into a booming entertainment industry. Young pop star singers have their own managers and staff who take care of advertising themselves, managing fan clubs and dealing with the public in general. Live shows and tours of such stars across the country are organized regularly in order to meet the expectations of young fans. At the same time, in any commercial magazines one can always find the pictures of the stars, stories about their lives, their fashions, their hobbies and so on. I often saw such magazines in some of the workers’ rooms, which they borrowed from each other to read during free time. In such a context, I was rather surprised to know that many of the young
workers liked listening to yellow music, which did not seem to match their young age. There might be some link between their sad and lonely moods and the yellow music which touched a sympathetic chord. In a seeming contradiction, they could hang the posters of new pop-stars like My Tam, Thanh Thao or even Western movie-stars on the walls, but what they actually liked to listen to was the music of Che Linh, or Tuan Vu, whose music was not popular among young people in the urban areas. Such a contradiction in their consumer behaviours revealed negotiable and incoherent selves.

As mentioned before, what garment workers liked to listen to was not always yellow music of the past but could be any music with of sad lyrics, composed either now or in the past. Nhac tre (‘young music’ or music for the youth) nowadays is a combination of many kinds of rhythms and melodies from high to low, and from slow to quick. Being associated with the showbiz techniques, nhac tre is also called fashion or commercial music with the ultimate goal of gaining as many young fans as possible. Not every song in this kind of music fills the listeners with thoughts of happiness. The content of many new songs is often criticized as lacking an educational function in comparison with the songs sung during the time of the war. Like yellow music, most of the compositions now in fashion are about love in all kinds of emotional settings and about private feelings. So it is not clear-cut that only garment workers or working class people like yellow music or sad music. Many young urbanites from rich families may like it as well. At the same time, while many garment girls prefer yellow music to other types of music, this does not mean that they do not listen to pop music or music with cheerful melodies.

Many sociologists often demonstrated how locally produced music interacts with the “local structure of feeling” (for example see Bennett, 1997, 2000; Banerji & Baumann
Such an understanding crucially informs the notion of collective identity and communities in given regions and localities. In other words, there is some connection between the growth of popular music and identity formation of a group of people. For example, with regard to diasporic discourse, music can bond displaced people, effectively bridging the geographic distance between them and providing a sense of collective identity articulated by a symbolic sense of community. In general, displacement and resistance are two important themes that are often explored by academics in popular music. According to Frith (1996), identity is mobile and our experience of music – music making and music listening - is best understood as an experience of this self-in-process. The issue is not how a particular piece of music reflects the people but how it produces them, how it creates and constructs an experience – a musical experience, an aesthetic experience – of which we can only make sense by taking on both a subjective and collective identity. Such an approach does not reject the connection between the consumption of music and identity formation, but collective identities are born out of the sharing of some musical experience instead of using music to expose the same ideas or thoughts.

Thus, it is not appropriate to argue that workers’ consumption of yellow music is an expression of their resistance. On the one hand, the connection between their working and living conditions and the sad lyrics of the songs, the displacement and feelings of disappointment derived from such songs, cannot be denied. On the other hand, the experience of listening to music, singing songs together or copying songs from each other’s notebooks could form a sense of collectivity among the workers.
Conclusion

This chapter has explored the consumer behaviours of garment workers in the three workshops. In general, an understanding of production is not complete without an understanding of consumption and vice-versa. In other words, consumption can both reflect management strategies as well as workers’ tactical behaviours on the shop-floor as well as in their daily life. The main argument of the chapter is that workers’ consumer behaviours are not automatically inscribed in the production and reproduction of social differentiation and social structures (Bourdieu, 1984), nor are they freely determined by the self in its process of constitution (Willis, 1978; Hebdige, 1979). While the social structure provides a framework for analysing the possibilities of different meanings of a behaviour or the access to the various kinds of capital, the self is in the constant process of negotiating different social identities, which are contested and sometimes even contradictory. Workers’ consumer behaviours are not totally subject to consumption which subsumes production, but are not strategically and rationally planned to aim at producing long-term effects or outcomes. Rather, they are more nomadic and their meanings are sometimes indeterminate.

The intriguing relationship between production and consumption is reflected in the way management used consumption as compensation to keep workers’ commitment. The chapter showed that at TT the employers emphasized the young girls’ satisfaction in being able to buy small items of ornamentation to make them more pretty and to live independently from their parents for the first time. By giving them enough time to cook lunch and dinner for themselves, the employers expected the workers to be able to live on their meagre incomes, because cooking could save them more than eating out. At DG,

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Gender symbolism is also a social structure.
without any direct statement from management, consumption was clearly used as management’s strategy to keep workers’ commitment, because workers’ level of consumption (saving as well) was much higher than that at TT, and several workers had a clear plan about how to use their salaries. At the same time, as they had no time to cook, they also accepted paying more from their higher salaries for food. As at DG, the attraction of consumption was also observed among women workers at MH. How one spent money and how one consumed a particular product sometimes were the main focuses of the daily exchange between women workers, while work seemed to become tedious and automatic as something one had to do simply to earn a living. Playing music in the workshops was also seen as a way to keep workers awake and to make the work become less tedious in many workshops. At the same time, management’s tolerance of workers’ eating junk food or food with less nutritional value, eating inside the workshop or even listening to music too much during work showed the implicit negotiation between management and workers. These workers’ consumer behaviours could be seen neither exclusively as resistance nor compliance, because management disliked but also could not oppose the misbehaviour totally.

From the discussion in this chapter, we can see that many consumer behaviours had definite meanings, which reproduce and are produced by the social structures. Many migrant garment girls preferred to buy vang ta (if they could afford it) as a form of saving for future use after their marriage, either to increase their status in the (future) in-law families or to exchange the gold for money when necessary. On the other hand, urban middle class or professional women did not pay much attention to the economic value of the material of the jewellery but more to their (rare and/or unique) shapes or styles. While the urban girls tried to lose weight by going to gyms and going on diets, some migrant
garment girls tried to minimize their meagre meal portions while working hard and drinking vinegar. Some wore fashionable clothes and a lot of jewellery to have attractive looks like modern girls. Some disliked having a showy look with make-up, fashionable clothes and ornaments. However, what they had in common was that they all wanted to look feminine in different ways, either in a traditional or modern style. One may argue that both wanted to conform to a structure of desire, which is considered as a form of gender equality. While it was common for unmarried women to give priority to the purchase of personal belongings, married women, especially in the working class families, were often obliged to make their personal interest in clothes, cosmetics or jewellery subservient to the essential needs of the whole family. As a result, they did not even want to buy gold, which only possessed an economic value, but preferred to buy household goods that served the immediate needs of their families.

At the same time, there were also many consumer behaviours of garment workers that did not strictly follow any social structures. While being constrained by their economic and social positions, the women garment workers expressed their agency in giving different meanings to their consumer behaviours which did not fall squarely into any category. For example, while young garment girls bought jewellery made of different material, with different shapes and styles, they chose one of the rings made of vang ta. This was either because they could not afford to buy all of it in vang ta or/and because the others had the attractive and rare styles that they liked. Although T (at DG) was financially capable of buying fashionable clothes, she still wore a long sleeved shirt with high collar even when going out. It was either her habit to wear such clothes or she was a typical working class girl from a rural background, or she wanted to be seen as a decent girl in the traditional style. However, she herself was not clear about the particular reason
or combination of all of them that led her to come up with such a style. When the young girls at TT copied the design of long dresses which were being produced for the Polish market, they dared not keep the low bustline as in the original design. In such a way, the girls refused to be seen as completely modern and urban girls or as totally traditional or ‘nha que’ (countryside women), while the older migrant workers intentionally adopted the latter identity, although they had spent half of their lives in the city. Migrant girls’ habit of eating cakes and fruit or food giving them fewer calories in general was either because they wanted to save more money, they wanted to have slim figures like models, or because they missed the food that they often had during their childhood. In general, the meanings given to their consumer behaviours were very indeterminate and diffused.

In the consumption of popular culture, in general garment workers liked listening to yellow music or music with sad lyrics and a slow tempo, which somehow had some connection with the displacement and uncomfortable living and working conditions of migrant workers as the ‘structure of feelings’. At the same time, listening to yellow music was not a unique feature of the working class, as the diasporic community and many young people from the urban middle class also shared the same preference. Therefore it is impossible to argue that working class identity as a social structure is reflected in the consumption of yellow music. It is even more absurd to say that garment workers’ consumption of yellow music is a form of resistance, and the changing relationship between the state and mass media as well as the changing tastes of the common people also proved the depoliticization of this form of popular culture. However, one can only say that the experience of a musical piece among garment workers together somehow produces a sense of collective identity. In general, the chapter emphasized that while
social structures only informed the possibilities for the formation of different social identities, the self-in-process gives rise to the formation of different hybrid identities.
Translation of the content of the song:

The dream of illusion

Our love has turned into a dream, leaving me with a burden of sadness. There are no more sweet moments when we are together.

My heart is still bleeding every day because of you.

I have suffered a great deal of pain but our love still goes away.

The reason is that life is not as beautiful as we often dream.

As a result, my heart is full of suspicion.

Still, love is shining like drops of sun, lightening our souls on the dark nights.

Your breathing is still warm surrounding me, so why did my beloved want to leave me so soon?

Love is the eternal song of the wind, with the most beautiful melody in our world.

Happy moments are still in my heart, so I ask myself why my dream has vanished into the air.
Dế Lười

(Theo em anh thì vẻ)

Chấm lại miếng quê, noi có một chiều dè, có
khang trên như chiều vẻ,
Oi quê ta bảnh da bảnh dược, nơi thơ thơ
donɡ xanh tơi ngọt, nơi tuổi thơ ta, trai
qua đẹp như giấc mơ.
Oi quê ta dấu đường dài nâng phiên chờ
vừng hối lêu bảnh mà viên. Khi dường ai như
dạng chi dường me... tôi
(Dưa xanh ta thì ơi vẻ)

Nơi mẹ đưa nơi, nơi rào điện chói nơi, nơi
đồng sông bên lờ bên bối.
Bao nhiêu mảnh theo dòng để đâu ehen, phiên
bạt nơi phồn hoa cắt bụi. Dời khi cảnh có xưa
lao vào giấc mơ... tôi.

Nước quẹt quẹt thời gian bỗ mầu, nơi bến
nâu là nơi nương bái, thiếu quẹt hương ta vẻ, ta vẻ
dâu.
Translation: Returning home

(I am following you to visit) ²

The village where there is a dyke and bamboo trees

The village, which has *banh da, banh duc* and sweet fruits

The village where I have spent my happy childhood as in a dream

The village with small cottages in the poor market. Among them, I can see the
figures of some women like those my mother or my sister

(We are taking each other back to) ²

The place where my mother swung me in the cradle

The place where kites are flying freely in the sky

The place where a river is running through

For many years, I have floated in a different river, the river of competition and
jealousy between human beings, the river that created the prosperous land but also
became as meaningless as sand

Sometimes, the old birds mistakenly fly into my dream.

Time is flying as fast water running through the bridge. The unchanged place is the
place the sun comes most. Where can we go to if we don’t have our home village?
Chapter 7: The politics of marriage in the labour process. Returning home or remaining in the workshop?

Introduction

Every time I went to a new workshop, the first complaint I often heard from women workers was about their situation of being ‘e chong’ (unable to get married), but not about low wages or long working hours. The following is a story about older unmarried women, told by a shop-floor director:

The girls often told me jokingly that as they had to work until 9 pm everyday, they would stay single forever. I had to comfort them that they should find the partners inside the workshops, as it has often been said that love arises from production. But they replied that the number of boys here could be counted on the fingers of two hands. In spite of comforting them like that, I also understood it was an undeniable and painful fact. At DG, there are many girls who are over 30 years old but are unmarried. In the countryside, girls of that age are considered as being left out of the marriage market. Many workers around the thirties also quit the job to go home. Seeing that they quit the job suddenly, I went to ask the foreman what had happened to the girls, and I was told that they had gone home to get married. Although the factory work is hard, life here is still better than in the countryside. So it is not easy to decide to go home, but they also can’t stay unmarried like this forever. Those who are pretty and lucky can find a husband here, but those who are not have to go home. Anyway, even if they do go back home, they already have a savings account. At DG, I know an unmarried girl who is over thirty. She migrated to Hanoi ten years ago, and worked at DG for around 7 or 8 years. Seeing that life
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had no future, she decided to become the girlfriend of a married man. During the
time she worked at DG, she saved an amount of 40 million dong. When the man left
her, he took all her savings with him. Although she was pregnant by him, he had
beaten her so brutally that she was hospitalized. I knew her sad story from
someone in the personnel department, who advised me as the director of the
workshop to visit her in the hospital.

From the story of the manager, ‘e chong’ is considered a serious problem for the
garment girls. The story poses the dilemma of the girls who have passed the marriage age,
that is, to stay in the city or go back to their home village. In both contexts, it is difficult
for them to get married. It seems that the girl in the story led a Western life-style, which is
often characterized as a couple having sex before marriage, living together without
marriage, and pregnancy out of wedlock. However, behind the appearance of this Western
phenomenon, there is a strong conformity to the patriarchal gender norms which are
internalized among women. As a great deal of social stigma is attributed to ‘e chong’ the
worry of being unable to get married at an early age has exerted strong social pressure on
young girls nowadays.

To a certain extent, there might be some disproportional correlation between the
growing numbers of unmarried women in the garment industry and their declining social
status, especially in comparison with that of state-owned workers in the past. This chapter
can be understood as an explanation of how such a correlation works or how the problem
is rooted in social structures. It cannot be simply believed that the garment workers could
not get married just because there were not enough male workers in the workshops or
they did not have enough time to go out and date. Behind these simple reasons, there are
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they did not have enough time to go out and date. Behind these simple reasons, there are
some contingent discourses at different levels exerting pressures and fears on women
workers about being unable to get married, and about being unable to fulfil the ‘natural’ role of motherhood. Because the garment workers’ daily experience was far from the idealized image of women of the time, a loving wife and caring mother rather than a hero in production, this also meant that they had to make stressful efforts to reduce such a gap.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the economic reform returned both the tasks of production and reproduction to the family as the basic unit of society. After that, the collapse of the welfare system in the socialist era disrupted the state’s support for women in fulfilling their two tasks at the same time (Truong, 1997). As a result, reproductive health and the role of women in the family have deteriorated in the years of the economic reforms. Thus, although the current state’s discourse has paid equal attention to work and family, there was a certain move toward an emphasis on a happy family. The idealistic vision of romantic love and a happy family life is promoted not only by commercial advertisements but is also highlighted in the official channels of the mass media. The latter acknowledge the state’s recognition of its neglect of reproductive health in the early years of the economic reforms. Moreover, the emerging idealization of personal emotions can also be considered as a counter to the nationalization of private life in the past. In this context, garment workers’ experience of daily life is very different from the ideal women of the time.

Many women workers who have passed the marriage age find it difficult to decide whether to remain working in the city or to return home. If they return home, they will meet stronger pressure for marriage from their communities. However, it is common in the garment industry that many garment workers have to quit the job at the age of 40 or 50, because the work requires not only good health but also good eyes and quick hands, while the security benefits are very low. It can be said the dilemma of women garment
workers between remaining in the workshops or returning home is rooted in the shift of
the dominant gender ideologies as well as the absence of an appropriate security policy
for retired garment workers. Garment workers’ fear of being unable to get married is one
of the reasons why the labour force in this industry is flexible and unstable. This possibly
influences workers intention to get organized in collective action.

**Marriage market**

As an obligation towards the self, the family and the community, marriage is seen
as social control on men and women. At the same time, marriage is also seen as a way of
opening up social mobility. The issue of women’s class positions has occasioned much
debate. Radical feminists argue that all women as a gender constitute a class (for example
see Millett, 1971; Firestone, 1970; Delphy, 1977). Thus, marriage becomes a mechanism
or vehicle to perpetuate gender-class inequality or the conflicting interests of the two
classes. Socialist feminists have devoted much attention to analysing the position of
women engaged in unpaid work within the home in terms of class. In the same manner,
through marriage, the class relations of women’s domestic labour are revealed.
Sociologists have conventionally taken the family as the unit for analysis and ascribe the
class of the male head of the household to all other members of the family, regardless of
whether or not they also engage in waged employment. Thus, women are assigned a class
position indirectly, based on the place of their father or husband in the occupational
hierarchy. Recent feminist theorists have tried to combine both their home and paid
occupation as the sites for class generation, analysing the relation between women and
capital, women and the productive process and women and the various groups of male
workers (For example, see Glucksmann, 1990). While conventional sociologists ignore
waged employment as a part of the sources to construct women’s social locations, the historical materialist feminists tend to ignore the politics of marriage in social mobility, thus overlooking the dynamics of the possibly shifting boundaries between different groups of women.

Traditionally, great importance is attached to marriage and family in Vietnamese culture.

“A man marries a woman, who gives birth to their children. That is considered as the greatest happiness for the couple. It is also considered as something natural. Therefore, anyone who goes against nature or does not get married is seen as abnormal” (Le Thi, 2002, p.37).

Women are seen as flowers, which bloom only for a short period of time and then wither away. If men do not pick the flowers at the right time, it is the bad luck of the girl’s family. The parents themselves feel guilty towards their ancestors for not being able to fulfil the duty of parenthood. The happiness of old people is to see all their children in marriage and having children. ‘E chong’ (not in demand on the marriage market) is a well-known term in Vietnamese which refers to unmarried women above their late twenties. In short, they have to deal with the problem of stigma.

Social stigma and poverty are the two problems that unmarried women and single mothers have to face in Vietnam. As a result of the wars, many women soldiers and volunteers became single women or single mothers when they returned home from the conflict. The mass media sometimes cover stories about the villages, which are often called ‘the village of women without husbands’ or ‘the hamlet of women without
husbands’.¹ For example in Tien Ha, a poor mountainous village in Quang Nam province, one third out of 800 households are families without men.

“Tieu doan Ba Thao (Ba Thao Battalion) was the name of the military unit led by Ms Thao. This unit was in charge of transporting weapons and food for soldiers on Duong 9 Nam Lao (Highway no. 9 in the South of Laos) in the most desperate times during the war with the US. The famous names like Hai Khoi, Bon Thoi, Tam Hong, Hoa Tan of the unit of that day are more or less 60 today. They are living in poverty and loneliness.”²

The second generation of women without husbands in villages like Tien Lang are those women who are aged from 32 to 45. According to the vice-chairman of the village, the number reached 120 people, and when the years passed they decided to have children somehow in order to have someone who would take care of them in their old age. As there were only a few men in the village, the fact many of them migrated far away to work made the situation worse. The third generation was women who were more or less 30. If in the previous generation men migrated, in the third one it was the girls in their twenties who moved to the South in order to change their lives for themselves. Sometimes one brought a man back to the village to have a wedding. However, just a few years later, the villagers saw many of them back, holding a child in their arms and with another in the womb. In such a way, generations of women without children relied on each other to live their poor and unfortunate lives.

¹ Such names come from the titles of newspaper articles like “Lang khong chong Tien Ha” (Tien Ha, the village of women without husbands - http://www.vnexpress.net/Vietnam/Xa-hoi/2004/03/3B9D0A8B/) or “Xom khong chong” (the hamlet of women without husbands – http://www.ngoisao.net/News/Thoi-cuoc/2004/09/3B9AE183/).
² Lang khong chong Tien Ha” (Tien Ha, the village of women without husbands) http://www.vnexpress.net/Vietnam/Xa-hoi/2004/03/3B9D0A8B/
There are two diverging trends of marriage happening at the same time in Vietnam. One is early marriage, which is happening mostly in the rural, mountainous and remote areas. Due to changes in the Land Law in the 80s and early 90s, when a young couple married they would set up a new household separately from their parents and would be given more land. Therefore, early marriage is a way to obtain more land from the state. However, even in the areas near Hanoi, where agriculture is often not the only source of farmers’ incomes, the phenomenon still occurs in many villages. Early marriage is also said to be the consequence of the revival of Confucianism, which was never eliminated but is found in different forms of gender inequality in contemporary Vietnamese society.

The other trend is late marriage, which is the opposite of the former. The trend can be observed mainly in urban areas, where there are stronger pressures for economic survival as well as promotion in careers. There are two groups of women who follow this trend. The first group is intellectuals and successful entrepreneurs. These women want to put all their effort into their careers first, and then to get married later. However, when they have successful careers, they may find that it is already too late for marriage. The other group is women workers in big cities. According to a survey by the Trade Union of Ho Chi Minh City, around 60% of working women who are in their thirties are not married (Phu Nu (Women) 29/10/2002). From another source, the vice-chairman of the trade union of the industrial areas of Ho Chi Minh City, out of 142,000 workers working in a total of 13 special zones or industrial areas, more than 70 percent of workers are women and most of them are not married (Thanh Nien (Youth) on 16/6/2004).

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3 “Nhieu phu nu Vietnam ket hon muon” (Many Vietnamese women get married late), in http://www.vnexpress.com/xahoi on 29/10/2002
4 Cong nhan nhap cu thich tang ca hon gai tri. (Migrant workers prefer working overtime to having entertainment). http://www.vnexpress.net/vietnam/xa-hoi/?d=2004/6/16%2023%3A59%3A59
The article ‘Nhieu phu nu Viet Nam ket hon muon’ (Many Vietnamese women get married late) states that many women workers find family life out of their reach because of their low incomes and unstable jobs. Tension at work absorbs women’s energy and then discourages them from going out dating after work. Also, in the environments in which the majority of workers are women, the chances of finding suitable partners are even lower. H, a worker of 38 in the Viet Thang Textile Company in Ho Chi Minh City, explains the reason for her loneliness:

*It is difficult to find partners inside the factory as there are very few men working here. We are working by shift, so after work, the only thing we want to do is to go home quickly and lie down to sleep. There is no time for getting made up or socializing with friends*.

*Lao dong* (Labour), the official newspaper of workers, has recorded an interview with women workers in the industrial areas in the South as follows:

> “While frying the vegetables, Lien told me (the reporter) in a very sour voice: “To tell the truth, when she had just arrived in the South, Thoa looked so pretty with a fair complexion so many boys wanted to run after her. But after working in the industrial area for only one year, she has become thin and small like a dried fish...”. Indeed, Thoa tried to hide the tears coming out of self-pity on her face, which is still good looking but rather pale. “How can we have time to make up when we have to work all the time? We don’t have any time for entertainment. After coming home from work, we only want to sleep in order to have energy to go to work tomorrow. We don’t even have time to cook. We only buy some packs of instant noodles, add some boiled water and quickly finish the meal. That is the life*.

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of migrant workers living in rented houses. How can we find happiness? What we desire most is to be able to go home every year at Tet."

However, another article in the mass media reported that in a foreign-invested company in an industrial area in Ho Chi Minh City, workers officially sent a letter of complaint to the company bulletin because they were not allowed to work overtime. Many workers even refused to attend entertainment activities or seminars organized by the company so that they could work overtime. Out of 26,000 workers who were currently employed by the company, more than 90 percent were women and most of them were not married. The reason why workers liked to work overtime was very simple: to earn more money to cover living expenses and to support families at home. According to the article, the workers themselves refused to take the opportunity to widen their vision, gain more knowledge and to have entertainment. This went against workers’ claim that management forced them to work overtime although they did not want to. However, there were two undeniable facts that seemed to be contradictory to each other: overtime working was a daily practice in several workshops and workers wanted to earn more money.

Many female garment workers live in a milieu that is betwixt and between these two trends, towards early and late marriage. On the one hand, their demanding work in the garment workshop does not permit them the time or opportunity to enter marriage. As such they confront the same difficulties that other urban women face in combining the two spheres of family and career. On the other hand many of them have grown up in the

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6 Vietnamese New Year according to the Lunar Calendar.
7 Lao dong (Labour), No. 5, 05/01/2003.
8 Cong nhan Nhap cu thich tang ca hon gai tri. (Migrant workers prefer working overtime to having entertainment). Quoted from Thanh Nien (Youth) on 16/6/2004 or http://www.vnexpress.net/vietnam/xa-hoi/?d=2004/6/16%2023%3A59%3A59.
rural areas, and have been socialized in norms that consider early marriages desirable and natural. Maintaining contacts with their home village and living among fellow workers who also come from rural areas, they remain exposed to this expectation.

**Tinh nha tro (Love in the rent houses)**

The mass media have sometimes described how migrant workers enjoy too much freedom in living in rented houses, far away from home. They refer to not only ‘unwholesome cultural activities’ such as listening to yellow music, going to karaoke bars but also freedom in sexual relationships. Love affairs between men and women migrant workers were given a very fancy name by the mass media, ‘tinh nha tro’ or ‘love in the rent houses’:

> “Such love affairs often appear in the industrial areas. As most of the people are migrants who are living far from their home villages and families and who lack both affection and money, it is very easy for them to come closer to each other. Mr. Hung, the landowner of around 30 rooms for rent near the Vinh Loc industrial areas, Binh Chanh, said: “Two-thirds out of nearly 100 workers who are renting my rooms now are girls. Often, 4 or 5 girls join together to rent one room, which is rented for 300,000 dong per month”. But only one month later, the group breaks up and each girl shares the room with a boy who is considered as ‘chong ho’ (partner or unofficial husband). In some cases, the two couples can share one room if they work on different shifts. In most of these affairs, the girls are the losers. In the factories in the surrounding areas, there are very few men so they only pay attention to those girls who are rather pretty. So once the girls ‘successfully catch’ the boys, they always have to please the boys in every way to keep them staying
with them. The rents can be divided in half, but the girls have to cover the daily
expenses for food. As soon as the working hours finish, the ‘wife’ has to rush to the
market to buy food and then quickly return home to prepare hot meals for the
‘husband’, while the ‘husband’ who ‘loves’ his wife very much would stay at home
reading the newspaper and waiting for the dinner, but those who don’t would go to
the next room to drink and play cards. In spite of this, some boys are still not
satisfied. After a few months, they move to live with other girls who are newer,
younger and who know how to please them more. Mr. Hung said that some boys
change their ‘wives’ three or four times a year. Still, the girls dare not get upset or
complain. Many of the men who already have real wives in home villages, do not
hesitate to extort money and sex from these naive girls.

Many of the girls have to go to hospitals to solve the ‘problems’. Some even
have to give away the babies after giving birth. For example, Thu Hoa, a worker in
Song Than Industrial Area of Thu Duc, was pregnant with her ‘unofficial husband’
but did not have money to ‘solve the problem’, and had to leave the newly born
baby under a tree. Most of these girls did not have money to send home because
they have to sponsor their ‘husbands’. Anyhow, some have also ‘woken up’ and
‘smartly target other objectives’, those who are already married but still enjoy
extra-marital relations. The men only need to pay the rent and then have ‘safe
places’ to come back and forth. Besides, when such men only need to give the girls
an extra amount from 500,000 dong to 1,000,000 dong, they are considered as the
Kings of the girls. However, such ‘subscribed’ love affairs rarely lead to good
results because there are few men who exchange their families to marry low-
educated girls from the countryside. Such men come for a while and then disappear
for good. Some even had a relationship with the old peasant landlords, who
suddenly got rich by selling land to the industrial areas. The old men compensate
their ‘age factor’ by buying motorbikes for the girls, giving them money to send
home, and even buying a small house to ‘build up’ a new family’.

‘Quan he tinh duc trước khi cưới’ (sex before marriage) and ‘Song thu’ (the couple
living together before the marriage to see if they are compatible) become hot topics of
debate in most commercial newspapers which have attracted a great deal of attention
from young readers. Like the above article, most of the authors who wrote about this
phenomenon among young people emphasized the fact the girls were always the losers in
these affairs out of the marriage deals because they are naïve. In general, the official
public view criticizes sex before marriage and living together outside marriage. In spite of
the high abortion rate among unmarried female adolescents (Belanger & Khuat, 1998)
and rampant prostitution, girls’ virginity is still highly valued. Men could even refuse to
marry girls who are not virgins any more. As evidence, according to newspapers, there is
even an illegal service that stitches the hymen of girls for a very high price (up to 120
US$ per case) so that their fiancés would not break up with the girls.

It seems to be contradictory that on the one hand the migrant girls desperately want
to get married to conform to the gender and sexual norms, but on the other hand many of
them also destroy their own reputation by living together with their boyfriends outside
marriage. Vietnamese newspapers did not see the problem in terms of morality or social
stigma but emphasized more the loss that the girls have to suffer as a result of having sex
or living together before marriage.

*Tinh nha tro (Love affairs in the rent houses). [http://www.ngoisao.net/News/Thoi-
cuoc/2004/09/3B9AE151]. Quoted from the newspaper: “Cong An Thanh pho Ho chi Minh” (Police of Ho
Chi Minh City) on September 8, 2004.
In contrast to what the newspaper described in the industrial areas in the South, I did not know about or hear of any cases of ‘living together’ among my informants. First, financially very few migrant workers could afford the rent share of only two persons in the room. As often at least three and up to five or six girls shared one room, the share of only two might be a financial burden to them. Second, as most of them come from the northern rural areas, where the social control is rather stricter due to the high rate of village endogamy and the proliferation of patrilineages (Hy Van Luong, 2003, p.104), while Hanoi is not very far from their home villages, the garment girls also dared not take the risk of losing their reputation.

Although it is quite difficult to ask a girl about her sexual experience, the girls liked paying attention to others’ situation and liked to talk about the others. During the time I was at DG, without being asked, the girl who was sitting next to me whispered that she saw a boy coming into the girl’s room next to hers and staying there overnight. The couple took the opportunity when the roommates were visiting their home village. Another girl revealed to me that her best girl friend, who got married recently to another migrant boy from Hai Hung, had to go to hospital for an abortion right after their wedding. As the husband did not have a regular job and the wife was working in a state garment factory but had not been given an official contract, they decided not to keep the baby. The group of workers from Vinh Phuc in TT told me that there was a girl also from Vinh Phuc who asked to stay with them when she entered the workshop. She paid the rent for the whole month, but stayed only for a few days and then disappeared. When moving out, the girl told them that her boyfriend was renting a big private room for her. Soon after that, the girl also quit the workshop. So here and there the girls often enjoyed telling stories about ‘an com tuoc keng’ (having a meal before the bell rings), which refers to
sex before marriage. It was quite possible that sex before marriage was not so rare among
the garment girls.

When asked about their opinions on sex before marriage, the majority of the
respondents said they themselves did not really oppose sex before marriage. They did not
see it as a problem of morality or women’s virtue if the two persons really loved each
other. However, they feared its consequences if the two could not get married to each
other. As evidence, the girls told me about the case of a friend of theirs, whose mother-in-
law knew by accident that she and her husband had had sexual relations before their
marriage. After that the mother considered her as a bad woman and every time when she
did something wrong, the mother-in-law used it as a weapon to insult her.

Having a child born out of wedlock heightens even further the dilemmas the women
might face. Bringing home a child with no father would cause even greater awkwardness
than returning home without a husband. Reluctance to face this shame leads some to
attempt to remain in the city even when they lack the ability to do so. L’s boyfriend made
her pregnant and ran away. The girl dared not go back to her home village and even
worked until the delivery. The workers had to contribute money to support her financially
and took care of the young mother and the baby after work. Although it happened one
year ago and L finally returned to her home village, stories such as hers are still told by
the older workers to the younger ones who have more recently entered the workshop as a
warning about what can happen to girls in the chaotic urban scene. In general, the
garment girls’ view on ‘sex or living together before marriage’ overlapped with the
dominant view in commercial newspapers or special journals for women. Instead of
seeing it as a moral issue or structural gender inequality, the girls feared the consequences
of unsuccessful love affairs because of prevalent social stigmas and prejudices. It should
be noted that such fear comes from not only the internalization of the subservience to masculinity but also from the lack of knowledge about reproductive health, which is important for the girls to be able to protect themselves.

The stories of 'e chong' garment girls: The dilemma of returning home or remaining in the city

Remaining in the city

When I came back to MH a few weeks after the Tet holidays, what surprised me was the burning yellow colour of Yen’s dyed hair. I understood that there was a kind of fashion of dying hair called ‘highlight’ in which only a few hairs were dyed in an artistic way so that the dyed hair would look more prominent. However, it seemed that the dying was not so successful because the whole front part of her hair was yellow. Yen said that she planned to dye her hair to give herself a new look to celebrate the Tet holidays. But when her aunt saw it, she told her that she should dye her hair back again immediately because she looked like a cave. Yen did not resent her aunt, but also jokingly said: “I am not a normal cave but an old cave”.

Yen’s story showed that she did not enjoy catching up with fashion to become a ‘modern girl’ although she had to follow other ‘modern girls’ to dye her hair. Her reply to her aunt showed that she was very conscious of her ‘old age’ and dying the hair could be one way of reducing the ‘age’ problem and making her look younger. Rather than being driven by the consumerist fever, her move was motivated by the wish to conform to a norm which, in this case, could be understand as the norm of ‘attractiveness’. Of course, as demonstrated in Chapter 6, such a norm was much promoted by the market with its

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10 Cave means prostitute.
advertising tactics, and hence it became a part of the consumerist culture. When Yen got the critical comment from her aunt, she also confessed that such a fashion was not her style, and no matter what she did she could not solve her ‘age problem’. However, she was only 26 when I met her.

Yen was among many garment girls who had passed the marriage age, but were still staying in the city. Su, who was 4 years older than Yen, was living together with Yen in the same rent room. After working together at DG for 8 years, the two girls decided to change their working environment in the hope that something ‘more exciting’ might come to them. The girls found jobs in a small household producer in the inner city of Hanoi. Although their former salaries were around one million Vietnamese dong per month, the girls now had to accept a new salary of only 600,000 dong, which was only a little more than half their former salary. Moreover, as they were still living in Gia Lam, they had to cycle a long way to get to work every day. The only advantage was that they did not have to work late until 9 or 10 pm every day like before. However, after three months of cycling back and forth for two hours every day, they decided to quit the job for a range of reasons: low payment, unstable and seasonal work and the long distance from their rent house. When they both applied to MH, Yen was accepted and Su was refused because she did not meet the company’s requirements on the height and weight of workers. As a skilled worker, Su could easily find a job in a small company in the neighbourhood, but she also felt ‘lonely’ without close friends like Yen around. After only a few months she moved to several places and by the time I met Su, she was working for a private company in the neighbourhood where her salary was only 500,000 – 600,000 dong, but she was always the first one in the room to come home from work. Although she changed workplace several times, ‘no fundamental change’ happened to her
- she still could not find a boyfriend. She really regretted moving from DG. If before she complained that she did not even have time to visit her family at home, now she also complained of having a lot of free time while all her close friends were still at work. Going back home early, she always cooked dinner for all the members of the room. Sometimes, when some boys who were working at DG as quality control staff also went home early, she asked them to turn on loud music so that it would warm up the ‘lonely’ evening. Sometimes she also wanted to find a job near her home village, which was not very far from Hanoi. But she was told she would have to pay an amount of 2.5 million VND (175 US$) to be recruited in a factory which was near her mother’s house and was also not far from Hanoi. As it was not a small amount of money, she decided to stay at this current workshop. She said: “My mother did not ask me to move to a factory near home any more. She only asked me to get married but I did not listen to her. She said it was my choice. Now I can be free to decide wherever I want to stay.” This implied a rather conventional story that only when a migrant girl who is working far from home brings a husband home, is her status in the family improved, as her marriage brings a good reputation to the family. On the other hand, if she returns home alone, she only brings shame on the family. This is why her mother did not push her to come home any more.

The story of Su and Yen showed a failed attempt to get out of the situation of working days and nights at DG. As they had no training in any other area than garment work, it was not easy to for them to find a different job which would also mean fewer working hours and higher payment. However, they realized that they could not solve the problem of ‘e chong’ due to the factory environment by moving from one company to another.
Quy, who was nearly 40 years old, decided to keep on working at DG. Her parents had already died and she only visited her home village twice a year on the anniversary of her parents’ deaths. She did not talk about a plan to go back to her home village for good because she did not have a place to stay there. She was now living with four other girls in the same rent room. The youngest girl was only 20 years old and Quy took care of the girls like a mother and an eldest sister. The first time I visited the girl at their house, I noticed that Quy was outside playing with a small girl, the daughter of a fellow worker who was living nearby, and was combing her hair like a caring mother. Then while everybody was busy in the room chatting with me and another guest who seemed to be the boyfriend of the youngest girl, she lit coke to boil water so that everyone in the room had hot water for a shower. To a certain extent, she tried to isolate herself from the so-called group of young people. At the same time, although Quy took care of them, the girls even sometimes looked on Quy as a difficult woman, an attribute that was often imposed on an unmarried woman.\textsuperscript{11} However, after coming to their room several times, Qui got familiar with me and she became quite open to me. She said that every time the boyfriends of the girls came, she quietly withdrew to the neighbour or to the kitchen in the backyard behind the house so that the couple could have more freedom.

Phuong was more or less of the same age as Quy. She was both the oldest woman of team 12 and unmarried. Her mother was still alive and when she went home she was able to stay with her mother. She planned only to go home in ten years when she retired. As she was a skilled worker at DG and did not have any dependants, it seemed that she could live comfortably on her salary. However, Phuong told me that as she had some chronic illness in her stomach, most of her savings were spent on treatment. Although the

\textsuperscript{11} The same comment was made to the unmarried forewoman Xuan of team 8 at MH.
health insurance scheme of the factory only paid a small part of the fees for treatment, it was still useful for her. So it would have been much more difficult for her if she returned home now.

Peer pressures on marriage

Yet on returning to their home village the weight of such an expectation is sometimes unbearable. Hiep is a 26-year-old girl who moved to Hanoi when she was 23 and returns home from time to time. On such occasions she feels embarrassed by the way her relatives and neighbours interrogate her about her personal life, which seems no longer a personal matter.

Here (in Hanoi), every day, I do not have to hear someone touch on or talk about such issues. But every time I reach the gate of my house, my uncles ask me “Did you bring your boyfriend home this time to show us?” or “When can I have your sweeties?” The neighbours also give me no rest. They take every opportunity to make fun of me.

Like Hiep, many migrant girls hesitate about going back home for good when they pass the limits of marriageable age according to rural conventions. Besides the fact that the pressure to marry plays the role of social sanctions for those who are out of the normal track, most men in their age group already have families. Often such ‘e chong’ girls in the rural areas have to accept someone who has been divorced, had a wife who passed away or who suffers from health problems. Of course, this does not sound very attractive to the girls, and they only accept this solution as a last resort. Therefore, remaining in the city is a temporary strategy to avoid pressure and to delay unsatisfactory arranged marriages.

12 ‘To have sweeties’ is a polite way for people to refer to attending a wedding, as the bride and groom have to offer guests sweets at least. So “When can I have your sweeties?” means “When will you invite me to your wedding?”
Failures in love affairs in the city also lead many girls to contemplate returning home. Yet this approach too has dilemmas. Quyen fell in love with a boy inside the workshop but the boy soon dropped her to pursue another girl in the workshop. After three years of working in Hanoi, she wanted to go home. But she did not want to face her mother every day on the same issue:

*While I was at home, my mother sighed all the time. She told me: “It’s not important to me whether you get married or not but I can’t stand it when the neighbours say that we are unlucky (vo phuc). I feel so sad to hear that and can say nothing.*

Out of the group of five ‘e chong’ girls from Vinh Phuc at TT, at the time I did the fieldwork at TT only Hoi decided to leave TT to work in a new foreign-invested factory which had just been set up in Vinh Phuc. As she had a few years’ experience working at TT, Hoi was immediately promoted to the position of foreman, and supervised around 50 workers. Although the company was new, Hoi’s salary was almost double her former one at TT. When I visited Hoi after work at her house, she enthusiastically told me and Qui, who accompanied me from Hanoi to Hoi’s house, which was not far from Qui’s house, about her new work and the new factory. I asked Qui if she wanted to follow Hoi, and Qui replied that she would not do it because she would be very much annoyed by the cynical remarks referring to her marital status from the neighbours or her relatives. Besides this, she was not used to living with her parents any more. In fact, Vinh Phuc province, having the advantage of being close to Hanoi, had attracted a great deal of foreign investment. The company that Hoi worked for was the only one among many other newly established garment factories right in the centre of the provincial town. Hoi told me that as there was a shortage of even unskilled labour, the new companies had to
make a deal that they would not be allowed to recruit workers from each other. In such a situation, it would not be difficult for someone like Qui to be recruited in the garment company near her home. However, the main issue was that she did not want to work and live at home. Qui told me that if she got tired of working at TT, she would look for a job in another company in Hanoi.

Even co-workers in the workshop could also put some false pressure on the girls. At TT, the group of five unmarried girls who were from 25 to 30 years old seemed to be the focal point of the whole workshop’s attention. From nowhere, the rumour that “Doi Me, Thu and Ly are going to get married at the end of the year” was spread throughout the workshop. Hence, every time when one girl in the group asked for permission to go home, especially during the wedding season, the younger girls often said to each other: “She’s going home to get ready for the wedding”, even through the girl said nothing or tried to explain that she was going home to attend her friend’s wedding. The next time Ly asked for permission to go home, the same time thing happened. Before she left, one girl even insisted on asking her if she was going to get married soon. Feeling rather tired of being questioned all the time, she replied “Yes”. The young girls had just been waiting for such an answer and in a few days, when I first entered TT, the girls immediately informed me about their discovery that “Ly is engaged”. The way they talked really convinced me about the truth of the story. When Ly returned to the workshop from home, I immediately went to offer congratulations. But Ly only laughed because she herself did not think that she could go that far. In general, those who are on the brink of becoming ‘e chong’, met pressure not only from their own family, and village community at home but also from their co-workers. Such exaggerated interest from co-workers in their private affairs could well represent an added source of tension for these girls. Combined with the
other reasons like low payment and the absence of an insurance scheme, most of the girls at TT who were at the age for marriage age often decided to leave TT and go home. A few, who had already passed the age for marriage and did not want to go home, like Huye map or Qui, said that they would soon be leaving the workshop to find a better place to work. Only in big companies like DG or MH, where a better security system was in use, could single women possibly remain working in the city. Thus, in general, the garment girls were put under pressure to marry from their families, original communities and friends.

However, it is also possible that the parents themselves did not want their daughters to get married, because after marriage the girls could not continue to support their birth families as before. No evidence in this research was found to support this argument. On the one hand, it was difficult for the girls to speak out about such problems in their families, and on the other hand the girls might internalize their obligations towards their parents and see them as voluntary duties. In the case of Huye map, the parents kept on expecting support from her because she had not yet found a marriage partner. The financial obligation to the family could be seen as an intangible reason that delayed the girls’ marriage, even though they did not acknowledge it.

**Family life of garment workers**

Most of the garment girls would agree that the working environment in the garment factories which was dominated by women and the long working hours which did not give them spare time for dating are the two main reasons why garment workers could easily be ‘e chong’. However, some saw the issue from a different angle. Men disliked marrying garment women because the women did not have enough time to take care of the family.
In the garment workshops where I did my fieldwork, several couples were migrant workers from the same team, same workshop and the same factory, or they were both working and living in the same area in Hanoi. Many of them got married and continued to work in Hanoi. Tinh had been working at DG before, where she met her husband who was also working in the same workshop. She came from Ha Tinh and he came from Bac Ninh. After they got married and she got pregnant, the couple decided that she would move to another factory where the working hours were lighter and so she could come home earlier to make dinner. This is how she came to be working at MH at the time I did my fieldwork there. Tinh told me the story of a co-worker dating to show me that it was convenient to have partners in the same workshops but also they had no other options in the ‘constraining environment’:

_In the first few months, when I had just moved to MH, I often went home quite early. After cooking, I often went to the gate of DG to wait for my husband. Every day I saw a boy waiting for his girlfriend, who was working at DG and whom I also knew. The normal time for going home was 9 pm but sometimes we had to wait for one or two hours outside. I saw him every day for almost two months and really admired his patience. Unfortunately, he disappeared after that. So I really think that any boy who dared to marry to a girl working at DG is a great guy._

In another case, a young girl at MH had a boyfriend who was a policeman. As soon as they started the relationship, the boy suggested that he wanted to arrange for the girl to change jobs because he did not like his wife working in the garment factories. He was capable of doing it by using his personal contacts. Her friends told her that she should be happy because this was the signal that the policeman was serious and wanted a long-term
relation with her. In general, both men and women have some implicit ideal type of wife and husband they want to marry. Such an ideal type is very much based on occupation.

_Aunt Truong joked with Lien that she should marry a soldier. Lien said “How can I marry to a soldier? Soldiers prefer teachers to be their wives. Garment workers can only match with construction workers.”_ Aunt Truong said that she herself also married to a soldier, but then added: “My husband said that nowadays soldiers do not like to marry garment workers any more. Maybe you are right.” Chi also joined the conversation: “Soldiers are a useless kind of man and there are not so many teachers for them to marry”. Thom, whose boyfriend was a solider, said: “If you are right, I will dump my boyfriend”.

The girls realized that the union of garment workers and soldiers was considered as an ideal match in the past, but now such a pattern no longer existed. This was a clear signal that their position had been downgraded in the marriage market. In fact, one girl told me that her ex-boyfriend’s family did not like her because she was a garment worker. Later on, this boy married a village teacher.

According to Qui, conflicts in the family might arise from the fact that the husband and wife had different occupations as well as different backgrounds and the man was not sympathetic enough to his wife’s job. Qui said that the reason it was easier for girls in the countryside to get married within their villages was because most of the villagers were farmers, while in the city there were a variety of occupations, so it was much more difficult to find some one to match with. Although many boys before their marriage to garment girls agreed to support their wives to fulfil their duties both at home and at work, in fact after the marriage few men could easily accept the fact that the wife was out most of the time and did not do any housework at all. Qui cited the examples of many friends
of hers whose husbands had to accept the conditions even though they were not happy with them. Qui did not want such reluctant acceptance from men.

What Qui said could easily be observed in Cuc’s family. Cuc’s husband was a military officer. They came from the same village and had been married for around 15 years and had two children. As Cuc was working in the garment factory, her husband was the one who did all the housework at home, even though he did not complain, because his salary alone would not have been enough for the whole family, because Cuc was sick all the time and sometimes had to have operations. As a result sometimes she could not cycle by herself so her husband had to go to the company to pick her up. But one day, due to some misunderstanding, he had to wait outside the company for one hour whereas she was already home. She had come out earlier than the fixed time and had asked a friend to take her home. On such occasions, war often broke out in the family. After that, the man told his friend he wished he could let his wife stay at home, though he knew this was impossible because they needed money for his wife’s operations and the two children’s education. The next day, the woman came to the company with a tired and sad face that bore the marks of a night without sleep. She herself understood that she could not quit the job because her elder daughter was going to take the exam to enter high school. The higher the school she went to, the more money they needed to support her education. Even after the operation, when she was still very weak, she still tried to go to work but only worked up to 4 pm each day.

In most garment workers’ families, the salary of the wife is indispensable for the household economy. There is no concept of the male as the main bread-winner of the family. Often both the wife and husband are co-providers of the family. In many cases, the woman becomes the bread-winner of the family. As mentioned in Chapter 5, because
Lan’s husband had some heart disease and could not have regular job, her salary alone had to finance the whole family for a quite a period of time. In the case of Hien at DG, the husband was a drug addict and was sent to an education camp, so she had to work to feed herself and her daughter while saving money to visit her husband sometimes. The husband did not contribute anything to the family but sold anything of any value in the family to buy drugs.

Childcare and children’s education proved to be difficult to arrange and were costly to the families of garment workers. As mentioned in Chapter 5, Hien at MH had a five-year-old daughter. During the day, Hien sent her daughter to a neighbour, an old retired lady, who took care of the little girl alone. In the evening, when the mother was still at work and the father had to work nightshift a few times in the week, a young female primary teacher was hired to come to coach the young girl with her study every evening. As the daughter would go to primary school next year, the mother wanted her to be well prepared for school. Hien said: “I was just afraid that my daughter would not be able to catch up with the children in the city”. In fact, Hien had to invest her whole salary on her daughter’s care and education. Luckily, Hien said that she had well-established parents at home, who allowed them to stay in their apartment for free and sometimes supported her small family financially.

Everybody in team 8 at DG felt sorry for Thoa, a quiet 28-year-old lady who always had a sad face. Thoa came from Thanh Hoa but her husband was from Ninh Thuan, Bac Ninh province, which was only 30 km away from DG. Both the wife and the husband worked at DG. After being married for a few years, they had a small daughter and could even buy a little house near the company. After the husband died suddenly in an accident, Thoa had to send her daughter to her parents. However, unluckily the girl fell into a big
bowl of hot meal for pigs and all her chest got burnt. As she did not receive emergency
treatment in the right way, the skin peeled off. Thoa brought her daughter back to Hanoi
for treatment but it seemed to be too late. The skin could not return to its normal state any
more. As she had to work every day, the daughter was sent to the company kindergarten,
which often closed at 5 pm. As an exception, the foreman allowed her daughter to sit next
to her mother inside the workshop from 5 pm until 9 or 10 pm every day. This was the
only special treatment she got from the company.

In the case of Xuyen at DG, both the wife and husband were migrants. They met
each other in Hanoi, got married and also had a daughter. In the beginning, they sent the
daughter to their parents at home but then because they missed the newly born baby, they
took her back to Hanoi. An old lady in the neighbourhood where they rented a house
agreed to take care of the baby while she was at work. She was satisfied with this
arrangement because the woman did the job rather well. Of course, the private childcare
was rather expensive and her husband had to go to the South in the hope to getting a
better paid job. In the case of Yen at DG, the couple had to invite the grandmother of her
husband from the home village to Hanoi to take care of the baby. But as she was more
than 80 years old, it was not easy for the young couple to please her. When she was tired
and suddenly decided to go home for a rest, the couple felt panic and did not know what
to do.

If either the wife or the husband came from the neighbourhood and the couple were
living with or near the parents, the children would often stay at home with the
grandparents. Because this arrangement was less costly and more convenient for the
couples, it can be said that the employers paid the workers a cheap price but made use of
the labour force of the household economy. The married garment workers often
exchanged complaints with each other about their mothers-in-law in the workshops. The relationships between daughters and mothers-in-law living together became very complicated when the mothers helped the couple with babysitting during the daytime. Although it was not paid work, the mothers also still expected the couples to give them some special treatment in return, and this was not always in financial terms. For example, Kha said that she always bought some gifts for her mother-in-law who took care of her second child at home and had to pay attention to any demands made by the grandmother. When she came home late in the evening, she had to wash all the dishes and clothes for the whole family. Every day, before she was able to hold her small baby in her arms, it was already very late and she was too tired to play with the baby at all. What was considered as the most convenient for the women workers did not go easily or smoothly all the time. The woman always had to make some extra effort to compensate for what the in-laws did for her, even though she felt that she was much luckier than the migrant women.

In general, married women in garment workshops had great difficulty in fulfilling their duties as wives and mothers in the family at the same time as being employed in the garment workshops. As the co-providers or even the breadwinner of the families, the wives’ salary proved to be vital for the household economy. In such a way, they could not withdraw easily from factory work even if they did not like it. At the same time, childcare and children’s education were very costly, especially for those who had the income levels of workers. Although public kindergartens and crèches were available, they were not no longer subsided by the government. So the expenses for sending children to these public facilities were not cheap, especially in comparison with workers’ incomes. Moreover, these public services did not provide child-care after 5 pm. The mothers as
garment workers could not pick up their children from the kindergarten and the family had to arrange for somebody to pick up and take care of the children from 5 pm. In the three companies, only DG ran a kindergarten for its own employees. However, this school also operated as a part of the administration section, working from 7.30 am to 5 pm, without taking into account the fact that most of the production workers had to work until 9 or 10 pm. For this reason, many workers still chose the option of private school or private care. On the other hand, there were no such childcare facilities in private companies. At MH, a number of married women who came from the neighbourhood had their parents to take care of the children. At TT, among 50 workers only one woman had a small daughter who had to stay with her parents-in-law, while the couple were working in Hanoi and sent money home to the parents for childcare. She missed her daughter very much and wanted to live with her, but could not afford the high cost of childcare in Hanoi.

Many of them told me that they often felt guilty for having not devoted enough time to the family and felt sorry for the husbands or the relatives who had to replace them doing the housework. In many cases, the human resources of the whole family have to be mobilized to support the employment of the women. Lee (1998) described the labour regime in Hong Kong as familial hegemony, in which part-time employment was needed and women’s responsibilities towards their families were given priority so that they could maintain working in the factories after marriage. This could be seen as a contrast to the labour regime in Vietnam, where all kinds of resources of the family are used to sustain the women’s employment, although women’s paid work only aimed to sustain family life. In such a context, the status of garment workers has become downgraded in the marriage
market. Men are afraid of marrying garment workers who do not have enough time for the family and instead they themselves have to take more responsibility for housework.

**A more structural explanation for the problem of ‘e chong’**

One might assert that the girls’ unsuccessful love affairs and failure to marry were due to their personal choice or the personal problems of being unattractive to men. However, their unmarriageable status has some more structural and sociological reasons rather than personal issues. It is even rooted in a shift in the dominant gender ideologies, which contributed a great deal to declining status of women workers in relation to other occupational groups such as women white-collar workers.

The socialist gender discourse paid equal attention to women’s role in production and reproduction. However, historically, there was a shift in the focus of such a discourse. In the pre-1986 period the social structure facilitated women’s role in reproduction with the free provision of housing, childcare, nursing, hospitals and primary education for children. This helped women to manage their two important tasks at the same time. However, after 1986, as all these facilities collapsed, women did not get any support from the state to fulfil their role in reproduction while remaining at work. This caused a dramatic decrease in the quality of women’s reproduction (Truong, 1997). This was also implied in the recognition by the government of the poor quality of Vietnam’s adolescent reproductive health as well as children’s high rate of malnutrition in the National Strategy on Population and Family Planning for the 10 years from 2000-2010. Thus, besides maintaining the successful result of the birth rate control campaign, this official strategy placed a new emphasis on population quality, and reproductive health in particular. Thus, the official gender discourse shifted the focus from equal attention to both production and
reproduction to reproduction as a political correction of the transitional period. However, such a shift was no more than mere verbal advocacy. There were no concrete plans of action that were worked out to target specific vulnerable and less privileged groups such as migrant garment workers.

Such a shift in the general policies is demonstrated in particular in newly launched programs on radio and television. ‘Cua so tinh yeu’ (The window of love) is a radio program which provides all the answers to young people’s questions on love, sexuality and reproductive health. ‘Chung suc o nha ngay chu nha’ (Combining forces at home on Sunday) is a new program in the series of the ‘happy family’. The program is conducted in the form of a competition between three families with full members to check practical knowledge of both husbands and wives in solving daily problems in housework and childcare. ‘Người xây to am’ (The builder of the happy family), which is based on the idea that ‘men build houses, women build families’, gives tips on how to maintain good relations in families. However, the purpose of these programs is mainly to teach women how to become a good wife and mother, instead of what can be done for women to reduce their workload, work stress or family tensions.

At the same time, the market economy also spurred a wave of romanticism that one could not experience in the past. In women’s magazines the connection between happiness, the family and love is explicit: on the cover of one edition of the magazine, ‘Gia dinh van hoa’ (Family Culture), which is only one among several magazines of this type, the words ‘hạnh phúc’ (happiness) and ‘tình yêu’ (love) feature prominently. The content of these magazines also persistently refers to love. Articles with titles like ‘Happiness is only one – but multicoloured love is marvellous’, ‘A journey without rest for couples’, ‘The magic of love’, ‘Girl’s love’ or ‘Mutual attraction in a couple’s love’
can easily be found in the table of contents of such magazines (Soucy, 2002). In romantic love songs, love songs today are full of ‘touches’, kisses’, ‘do not leave me tonight’, ‘come to me just once more’, ‘I want to live with you until the end of my life’, ‘the last words of love’, or ‘the love story of three people’. South Korean movies, for a time, were considered as top movies and drama series in Hanoi because they presented romantic love affairs in difficult contexts and situations that often made emotional women shed tears. In other words, such waves of romanticism triggered by popular culture and its market provide insights into the changing priorities of the present.

The quality of family life is also a focus of commercial advertisements. Women in the role of the housewife appear in most of the advertisements for cooking utensils, seasoning, washing powder, milk for babies and electric appliances because they are the main consumers and users of these products. The images in these advertisements which were often seen were the scenes of a happy family with big smiles on the faces of the women, that express their satisfaction in using these products to take care of their healthy and prosperous looking husbands and children. Of course, the targets of these advertisements are middle-classed women, who either have office work that can generate good incomes or are housewives whose husbands are able to provide for the family.

Even lingering consequences of the war have been looked at in a different way. Private emotional sacrifice has been discovered as another aspect of the loss of war. Recently the movies have exploited a new aspect in the private life of the former women soldiers and volunteers. The movie named ‘Nga Ba Dong Loc’ (Dong Loc Crossroads) is about ten female volunteers who were killed by bombs while fulfilling their missions before having had the first kisses of their lives. ‘Nguoi dan ba mong du’ (The woman in the dream) describes the obsessions of a nurse who served in a medical centre at the front.
She could not get back to a normal life after the war because of the tragic death of the young soldiers who had never held a girl’s hand. Great humanity derives from the heroic scenes of the war: women soldiers’ desire for love as normal young Vietnamese girls. This signals a shift in the dominant gender symbolism through different periods of history. Such a new emphasis on private emotions as compensation for the collective ideologies in the past has given rise to a commercialized romanticism.

In such contexts, women workers are not the ideal image of women in the public space any more. In another words, as their class positions have been relatively diminished in comparison with other occupational groups, their chances of getting married have also diminished structurally. Their obedient behaviours in response to men’s needs in the industrial areas of the South should not be seen as an imitation of a Western lifestyle, but instead as a compensation for the decreasing status in the marriage market that they have been conscious of. Those who were not obedient in conforming with a sexually desirable stereotype or did not negotiate strategically between work and family would be left out of the marriage market. Even in the cases where married women workers wearily try to combine work and family, the shift in the dominant gender ideologies has constantly threatened their family happiness by exerting impacts on the husbands or making them felt guilty for not fulfilling the roles of mothers and wives. Such examples have also scared the unmarried girls or have made them more careful in their marriage decisions. While some of the garment girls may take the chance to date with different boys as a way to exercise their freedom in relationships, some might try in vain to look for the idealized romantic affairs described in novels or the mass media and, of course, could not find such things in daily life. In fact, many of the girls are not aware that such ideal love and romanticism are quite alien from their conditions of work and life.
Conclusion

To sum up, in their negotiation of norms of marriage, female migrant garment workers confront several dilemmas. They are torn between the twin imperatives of work and marriage. The fact that many garment workers are still single seems to affirm a valuation of women as productive workers rather loving wives and caring mothers. However, like other urban women who face this dilemma, their absorption with work and the difficulties of getting married can lead to a reverse emphasis: that the images of loving wives and caring mothers are more highlighted than ever. Female migrant garment workers also find themselves torn between the cultural norms of rural and urban modes of life. Their low class status relative to professional urban women as well as the greater pressures on marriage they face from their families and neighbours at home situate them between worlds, neither able to find the fulfilment they seek for themselves, nor satisfying the expectations of their respective homes. Finally they are caught up with particular intensity in shifts in popular and official gender ideologies, which place increasing emphasis on romantic fulfilment as a feminine ideal, creating pressure on women to conform to such ideals. While early marriage in the countryside represents a return to the traditional ideologies of the family, late marriage exposes a paradoxical reality: women should not be devoted to work or career, but at the same time still have to earn enough money to meet the financial demands of their families, while having enough time and knowledge to fulfil the roles of mother and wife in the family.

The question is whether unmarried migrant girls who decide to remain in the city eventually dare to ignore fulfilling their duties or try to conform to the social norms. On the one hand, their indifference to social pressures for marriage is a refusal to conform to
the social norms. At this point, we can see their struggle to claim their agency. At the same time, the commercialized stereotypes of sexually desirable women and romantic love as an impact of globalization have influenced men’s criteria for selecting their partners, pushing women to conform to those commercialized images. Moreover, such commercialized romance also creates a stereotype of men that women have in their dreams that obscures their practical views of their own realities. Women may resist certain forms of gender inequality, but in so doing they can simultaneously reproduce these structures. The state discourse, by shifting from a stress on women as productive workers to caring mothers in its new strategies for improving family quality, has unintentionally promoted women who have practical daily knowledge as well as time to take care of the family. In other words, professional and urban women become structurally more desirable than women workers who work all the time and have no time for families. On the other hand, the decision to remain in the city can be interpreted not as a refusal to conform to the norms but as a failure in their efforts towards conformity.

Although living in different periods of history, migrant garment workers share some similarities with the woman veteran and soldier during the wars. They are all surrounded by a female-dominated environment and are isolated from urban society. To a certain extent, the reluctance of garment workers to go home has the same reasons as the former volunteers in their move to new economic lands, namely escaping from the rumours and social pressures. While women volunteers and soldiers helped men to win in the country’s victory, garment workers are working hard to contribute to the image of ‘a new tiger in South-East Asia’. However, the difference is that the sacrifice of garment workers today is not painted in the same heroic shining colours. Migrant garment workers’
unsuccessful love affairs or their ‘out of date’ situations have symbolized their social exclusion from the dominant gender mainstreams.

Gender identities among migrant garment workers are more diverse and divergent from the traditional gender values and currently dominant discourses. Work and life strategies are always combined in any motivations of women, even though sometimes such combinations create contradictions in their identities. They try to live with such contradictory identities or make them coherent by selecting a particular value or identity among the multiple ones temporarily to make sense of their life. In any case, it shows that women workers are not passive victims of patriarchal capitalism but their agencies are revealed through their tactical plans for the future. Although they dare to become the ‘others’ who have different values from the traditional ones like virginity or a happy family consisting of a couple and two children, they are subject to these discourses at the same time.
CONCLUSION

Doi moi in Vietnam is often cited as a good example among a series of economic reforms in many former socialist countries. The average income levels of people have increased dramatically, and hence the material life of people in general has improved. Women workers’ income levels have also followed such a general trend. However, it is claimed that labour relations have worsened as a result of the economic reforms, and the social status of blue-collar workers has declined in comparison with the pre-reform period. The economic reforms have resulted in the commercialization of the state sector as well as the development and expansion of a private sector, including local and foreign investors. However, it is common that small local private companies do not have trade unions and labour conflicts frequently occur in foreign invested companies because of misunderstandings between management and workers, management’s mistreatment of workers and violations of the labour law. The main argument of this thesis is that instead of judging labour relations of a company based on its type of ownership, one should examine its management strategies, and this involves looking at three important elements: coercion, compensation and commitment. In other words, each company has a different method of compensation for its various kinds of ‘disadvantage’ in order to keep workers’ commitment. Depending on one’s personal situation, including such factors as skill levels, gender, age, original background, marriage status and family economic situation, workers will end up working for one company instead of for another. While the social status of the working class is declining in general, individual workers’ bargaining power vis-à-vis management is uneven, both in the labour market and in the workshop, depending on their personal situation. Although some (but not all workers) can have a
certain number of choices (of employment), these choices are often constrained by their limited access to different forms of capital, be they social, economic, cultural or symbolic, which enable them to have long-term strategies or to see beyond indirect or spontaneous acts of resistance. In a general context where the existence or absence of a trade union does not make much difference to the employee struggle and laws are not yet translated into practice, garment workers have developed (mis)behaviour and forms of resistance which are more tactical, pragmatic and negotiable, rather than straightforward, direct or affirmative in nature, to cope with the situation. While consumption is connected to the labour process as a mode of compensation, workers are neither completely subject to consumerism nor do they create meanings which are totally independent from any social structures for their consumer behaviours. Gender is not only incorporated into management strategies to become a power process in the workshop but is also used as a medium of the employee struggle. The declining social status and bargaining power of women workers vis-à-vis management are reflected not only through their indirect and covert forms of resistance but also through their marginalized positions in the urban spaces as well as in the marriage market. There is a shift in the gender discourse, which places more emphasis on woman’s role as wife and mother than as a producer. Such a shift creates a large gap between the daily experiences of women workers and the new gender ideologies, making them become ‘e chong’ (not in demand) in the marriage market. From a theoretical angle, the thesis tried to engage in the debates about labour process theory and the complex and even contradictory relationship between collectivism and individualism at different levels. Work organization, trade unions and other forms of solidarity practices, the reconceptualization of resistance, the intriguing relationship
between production and consumption, and the mutual constitution of different identities or the formation of social identities under class form the framework of analysis.

Classical labour theorists often place emphasis on the production of labour relations (labour control) and tend to suppose that the management project worked. Any labour regime belongs to the two main categories: despotic (coercion prevails), hegemonic (consent prevails), or a number of types as the combinations of these two, with (international) market volatility and state and company regulations such as market despotism, state despotism, state hegemonic regime and even hegemonic despotism. In any case, there is a certain level of workers’ consent (Burawoy, 1979). However, before asking the question why workers work as hard as they do, one should put forward the question of why workers perform work in a particular workplace. Chapter 1 argued that while commitment can be understood as either affective attachment to a workshop or just the continuation of working in that workshop, compliance is the ultimate goal of any management project (Legge, 1985), and commitment is used as a mode of labour control to manufacture workers’ commitment (Charles Tilly & Chris Tilly 1998). In the labour process theories, compensation should be highlighted as an important mode of labour control. Chapter 1 demonstrated how compensation worked in different ways in different companies to produce workers’ commitment. Managers often paid attention to what the characteristics and needs of the majority of women workers of their companies are. In particular, compensation policies depended on the experience and skill levels of workers whom the companies wanted to employ. For example, as TT attracted young workers who have often moved into the city for the first time and have no or little skill and working experience, a quasi-familial labour relation is used to compensate for low salaries and a working environment which is substandard. The absence of a trade union
was compensated for by a paternalistic mode of labour control. DG, which often employed skilled workers, provided competitive salaries and stable employment in the prestige state sector. However, while corruption occurred in the procedures of recruitment to this prestigious and renowned company, few married women could remain working there for the long term because of long working hours and strict discipline. MH attracted more married women because of the initial offer of shorter working hours. However, later on the workers realized that the working hours were not much shorter and salaries also decreased in proportion to the working hours. Still married women considered this as a good point. Although the company offered workers rather good salaries in relation to working hours, work intensification was quite high at MH. High technology equipment and scientific management facilitated high productivity, which resulted in not only high incomes but also in a high level of intensification at the same time. Based on the different emphases in management policies, we can label the management strategies of each company as follows: TT: the quasi-familial labour management relations, DG: ritual affirmative management strategies, and MH: management by the quota system. Chapter 6 explored further how compensation was manifested in particular in consumer behaviour. Management strategically and intentionally saw consumption as a mode of labour control and as a way to keep workers’ commitment. At TT, as most of the workers were young and were going to work for the first time, the level of compensation was only enough for them to cover very basic daily expenses and to buy a few cheap items of clothing and ornaments like hairpins, rings, bracelets (fake) and so on. Although most of the workers at DG were unmarried, they were more mature and experienced than those at TT and wanted a higher level of saving. They also spent more on clothes, cosmetics and jewellery, partly as a form of saving, and they often had saving accounts. At MH, the
group of married workers often used most of their income for the whole family rather than spending it on themselves. As a result, if they had some savings, they would spend it on household goods or means of transport like motorbikes, rather than gold (vàng ta). In general, consumption is the source of employment (Rosemary Crompton, 1996, p.126; Paul du Gay, 1996). It gives a powerful answer to the question of why workers work as hard as they do.

Collectivism is a complex concept which can be understood in many different ways at different levels. In the literature of management and labour process, there is a focus on the individualizing tendency of employment relations in the new management practices (for example, see Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995), leading to the disappearance of collectivism (Martinez & Stewart, 1997). Therefore, there is a need to distinguish the various meanings of collectivism at different levels and to ask how they interact with each other. Chapter 2 analysed the relationship of individualism/collectivism in the micro collective structure of gang work, teamwork (the production line) and in the forms of workers’ solidarity practices (in terms of supporting each other in production) and in the new philosophy of the economic reforms (new industrial relations) and its receptivity in the society at large. While gang work implies cooperative relations between individual workers (the collective worker), teamwork redefines collectivism through competitive relations between individuals within the team and/or between the teams. ‘Nhảy chuyên’ (jumping in the production line) could be seen as such a new management practice which aimed at increasing the productivity (and hence salaries) of individuals on the line in order to obtain higher line productivity. This management practice promoted higher competition among workers on the lines to earn more income, which was supposed to belong to the co-workers (if jumping did not
occur). So collectivism in the new management practice was at the expense of workers’ collective interests (in the traditional meaning of a trade union). The fieldwork result showed that such competition was highest at MH where there was a high level of deskilling and ‘nhay chuyen’ was applied strictly. At DG, the competition was less severe because the production line was less deskill, and this gave more space for gang work or crew work.¹ At TT, workers were less eager for jumping because of the uneven levels of skill among workers. Gang work was also organized more often among skilled workers. Another management practice which promoted competition between teams was the quota system. The daily quota system at MH did not really increase such competition between teams because workers would try to work faster to go home earlier with or without paying attention to other teams, though to a certain extent it could increase workers’ collective identification with the team. However, the quota system with bonus, which was used at DG for a while, and the practice of selecting the team with the best performance in the year, were obviously aimed at increasing competition among the teams in the same workshop. At TT, as described in Chapter 1, the construction by the employers of quasi-familial or/and community identities in the workshop could be seen a management practice that promoted workers’ ‘collective identification’ with the workshop. Thus, in general, the cooperative relations between workers were the most obvious at TT. MH had the strongest competitive relationships between individuals in the team while the competitive relations between teams and workshops were more evident at DG. As a result, workers at MH had the most individualistic behaviours while workers at TT could easily help each other at work. However, all the management practices mentioned above

¹ As explained in Chapter 2, a group of workers (more than two persons) share an amount of work and finally enjoy the equal share of income. At DG, gang work was organized between only two persons, who often had the same level of skill, while at TT this number could be five or six.
in the three workshops were seen within the framework of the economic reforms: their advocacy for the piece-rate system and the principle of financial incentive and merit by performance. Such principles can be seen as the denial of the equalization tendency of uneven efforts in the past, and in turn promote individualism/collectivism in management terms. At the level of workers’ practice, Chapter 3 elaborated on how collectivism was constructed in the workshop based on gender and autonomous collective working class identities (the sympathy of women workers towards their rude forewoman). In Chapter 4, the autonomous collective working identities were also produced through the direct confrontation of some skilled, mature and urban workers with management to protect younger and migrant workers, through labour conflicts, illegal strikes and some forms of saving associations. In Chapter 5, collectivism was based on the local networks, rural and urban identities as well as brotherhood and sisterhood (as a combination of autonomous working class identities, gender and youth culture). It should be noticed that these forms of collectivism are sometimes contradictory to each other. For example, collectivism based on localism went against autonomous working class identities (the conflict between Hien and Lien from Nam Ha and Hue from Vinh Phuc). On the one hand, urban and rural difference acts as a division in the working class. On the other hand, the protection given by some urban workers to migrant and young workers is the evidence of the working class solidarity. While the character of the collective worker, localism and brotherhood and sisterhood were strongest at TT and weakest at MH, collective action was strongest at MH and weakest at TT. In Chapter 6, collective working class identities were formed contingently by the collective experience of the consumption of gold, clothes, food and popular culture. All this further supported the argument of Callinicos (1987) that collective identities and collective action are not strongly correlated.
Although social scientists have long paid attention to resistance, it is still controversial as to how to understand and study it. Chapter 3 provided an analysis of indirect and covert forms of resistance in the three garment workshops. The first question is what qualifies as resistance. Lüdtke identified resistance as an act that is strategically planned to bring about some effect or outcome (Marcel van der Linden, 1995). Thus, there are some forms of behaviour which could not fit exactly into resistance and obedience as a binary opposition. Eigen-sinn and keeping distance are examples of such forms of behaviour, and refer to the situation where the worker just wants to retain some individual freedom, a sense of being oneself, self-willed behaviour, obstinacy, intractability and pigheadedness. The example of the girl who refused to listen to the manager but kept on working on her private things could be seen as an act of eigen-sinn. However, it is still ambiguous whether she only wanted to display her stubbornness or intentionally wanted to make the manager angry, or the reason was a combination of both. Thompson and Ackroyd (1995) suggested a different approach, which assumed that there was always a certain level of resistance in each type of workers’ misbehaviour, individual or collective. They also pointed out that it was not a coincidence that workers chose to engage in individual but not collective misbehaviour, because they had their own agendas and priorities that led them to select policies and programs for action. Martinez and Stewart (1997) also argued that as new management practices aimed at individualizing employment relations through identifying collectivism with the main institutions (team or workshop), they easily led workers to engage in individual acts of resistance, and labour theorists also shifted their focus to individual forms of resistance. Therefore, the analysis of workers’ misbehaviour should take into account the conditions and characteristics of the collective worker and the complex meanings of collectivism in a wider context. More
specifically, in analysing workers’ misbehaviour, one should point out what are the origins and medium of the employee struggles, what are the forms of workers’ experience of collectivism in engaging in the misbehaviour, whether workers realize the tendency of individualizing employment relations of new management practices, and what their agendas, priorities or calculations of risks and benefits involved in taking such misbehaviour are. In this way, Chapter 3 tried to analyse a number of forms of misbehaviour such as work avoidance, keeping distance, jokes and gossip, lies, and managerial behaviours. In general, the study of workers’ misbehaviour showed that one should not see resistance in binary opposition to obedience. Although there is much ambiguity in the concept, the study of workers’ misbehaviour can partially reflect the reality of (formal and informal) organizational life (for example, working late, job intensification, no holidays or difficulty in obtaining holidays, or the tendency of individualizing employment relations in new management practices), workers’ desire for direct resistance, workers’ solidarity practices (also conflicts, for example between Chieu and her forewoman) based on both gender and working class collective identities, as well as the ambivalent and shifting positions of managers and some privileged workers. Although those who misbehave were constrained by their weak bargaining power vis-à-vis management, their acts of misbehaviour could have some impact on management behaviour. In many cases, management tolerated acts of misbehaviour like eating, talking or listening to music inside the workshops.

Direct forms of resistance do not only imply collective action with or without the leadership of trade unions, but also labour conflicts, in both individual and collective forms, between workers and management. Chapter 4 argued that although direct forms of resistance frequently happened on the shop-floor, they were mainly organized outside the
channel of trade unions. The main explanation was the monopoly of and slow progress in the reform of the organizational structure of Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), which was not completely autonomous from the structure of the Party-State. As a result, local trade unions remained ineffective in their traditional styles in many state-owned companies, while foreign invested companies copied the socialist model of trade unions and transplanted it to their companies in order to keep a rein on trade unions. At the same time, local private companies were still beyond the reach of the VGCL. So workers’ strikes became illegal because they did not follow stipulated procedures. With different management strategies and different types of workers that the companies described in this thesis attracted, resistance strategies of workers in these companies were also different. At TT, there was no trade union and there were no strikes at all. If a worker had a serious conflict with the employers, the worker often decided to move out of the workshop, instead of undertaking some action to improve the working relations. Indirect forms of resistance were often observed rather than direct forms of resistance, and this also demonstrated the weak bargaining power of the workers vis-à-vis the employers. At DG, there were almost no organized strikes because the trade unions in the traditional socialist style did not support strikes. While even illegal and spontaneous strikes happened only rarely, no one dared to take the leadership to turn a labour conflict into a strike. Also like at TT, labour conflicts only involved one or a few workers. In general, strikes in the state sector were not supported by the mass media because it was often supposed to have harmonious labour relations. At MH, although the functions of the available trade union did not diverge much from the socialist type, labour conflicts and illegal strikes happened more frequently. Workers’ dissatisfaction could more easily lead to (illegal) strikes, partly because they were less afraid of the loss if the strikes were not
successful and might be sanctioned, and partly because the public and mass media supported workers in the foreign investment sector by constantly reporting a large number of strikes and labour conflicts in this sector. Through the coverage of the strikes in the private and foreign-invested companies, the workers were more aware of their rights and obligations as well as their bargaining power vis-à-vis the foreign private employers.

The intriguing relationship between consumption and production is another theoretical aspect that the thesis has attempted to deal with (Chapter 6). While the labour process theories tended to see production is a totality or production as the only site that constructs work identities, the consumption-led approach takes the view that work identities are formed outside the sphere of production (Paul du Gay, 1996; Lisa Rofel, 1999; Freeman, 2000; Pun Ngai, 2003). Although analytically trying to connect production with consumption, labour tends to disappear from the social processes that form subjectivities and different social identities, leaving cultural analysis to assume the dominant position (Lisa Rofel, 1999; Freeman, 2000; Pun Ngai, 2003). Thus, in contrast to labour process theories, consumption seemed to be viewed as a totality. The thesis argued that while neither production nor consumption is viewed as a totality or as a complete process, its intriguing relationship can be seen concretely in the daily experience of workers both at work and in their home life. Management strategies were formed through consumption. The establishment of the canteen at MH can be seen as an example of the control of nutrition that enabled workers to reproduce their labour power, and giving workers enough time during lunch-break so that they could prepare lunch for themselves was a way the employers of TT used to curb the low wage levels of workers. At the same time, workers’ consumer behaviours were more nomadic than structural: workers were not completely subject to the totality of consumption as well as production,
nor did they freely create meanings for their consumer behaviours. For example, some
women workers at TT tried to copy the design of a product being exported to Poland but
modified it in a way that suited their ‘taste’. Thus, there is a blurred division between
producer and consumer. The example also expressed the incomplete character of
alienability of commodities or the possibilities of inalienability of commodities (the
export goods).

A major theoretical part of this thesis is the formation of social identities. Rather
than seeing class as a fixed social position, that working class identities derive from, the
thesis treated class as a structure which frames the social actors’ possibilities and access
to a variety of capitals (economic, cultural symbolic or social) (Blaxter and Hughes,
2000; Skeggs, 1997). Within such a framework, there is a mutual constitution of different
social identities: class, gender, rural/urban origins, tradition and modernity. This
theoretical approach gives rise to hybrid social identities as well as the indeterminate
meanings of workers’ behaviours. This follows the line of post-structuralism in that social
actors refused to be fixed in a particular identity or category. It highlights the
contradictory and incoherent character of the subject or multiple identities. There were
many examples in the thesis that could be used to demonstrate this argument. In Chapter
2, few men took garment jobs either because they internalized the social construction of
masculinity at work, or because they had more opportunities to find jobs than women, or
a combination of both. At DG and MH, ironing was considered as dangerous and heavy,
and so it was often reserved for men and was well-paid, while at TT it was considered as
an auxiliary job reserved for apprentices who did not pay for tuition fees for learning
garment skills. The privileged positions of a few assembling male workers at TT could be
explained by an aggregate of a number of factors like the minority of male workers
(leading them to adopt some strategies to re-establish masculinity), the preference of male workers by management based on gender discrimination, their urban origins or their middle class family background. In Chapter 3, women workers at MH hated their forewoman because of her rude and authoritative behaviour, but sympathized with her as a co-worker/woman at the same time. In the same way, workers at DG also had a contradictory relationship with their foreman. In Chapter 5, economic reasons and gender were so intertwined in the motivations for migration that one could not be separated from each other. Workers’ solidarity at TT was not only derived from the strong local networks (local identities), but was also based on brotherhood and sisterhood (the close relationship among those who worked and lived together, or a shared working class identity) (the example of the three girls Thao, Chi and Quyen from Hung Yen). Also the division between rural and urban became blurred when skilled, mature urban women workers directly confronted management to protect younger migrant workers. In Chapter 6, young migrant garment workers not only bought jewellery of vang ta (Vietnamese gold, with symbolic and economic value), but also vang tay (Western gold, with symbolic, economic and aesthetic value), and other materials like bronze, silver, other metals (aesthetic value) and even fake gold (symbolic value). A young worker (Huye) at TT worked alone overnight to earn more money, to lose weight (because she already drank vinegar for the same purpose), and to please the owners. In general, different identities are formed in social practices, but none can give a definite meaning to the social actors’ behaviours. From the above examples, the ‘absence’ of class structure means that working class identity might or might not be evident from workers’ experiences, but class defines the space and scope in which workers can manoeuvre to create certain other meanings. At the same time, ‘absence’ also means that working class identity has been transformed into the
desire to escape from the negative connotations of working class, whether the dreams of upward social mobility through such efforts (to make dreams come true) can be successful or not. The older migrant workers in the state factories highlighted their rural origins and local identities both to defend and disguise their working class identity. Several migrant workers tried to work and study at the same time to earn a high school degree or to enter college or university. Their dream was to find a better job to escape from a worker’s life. Such a dream was seen not only in their own motivations but also in their efforts to provide a good education for their children. As demonstrated in Chapters 5 and 6, marriage provided another pathway for social mobility. While it seemed that the older generation of women state workers were more successful due to their state employee status, the new migrant workers found it more difficult to settle down in the city. Many remained single because they had passed the age for marriage. Some were not happy in married life, and some became single mothers or accepted a relationship outside wedlock. These facts reflect the declining social status of young migrant workers in comparison with state workers in the past.

Last but not least, another focus of this thesis is the state-society relation. The state has influenced garment workers’ daily experience and their resistance strategies in a number of ways. First of all, the philosophy of the economic reforms actually promoted higher competitiveness among workers in production, and this was at the expense of workers’ autonomous working class identities. Secondly, the privileges that many state-owned companies could still enjoy created an unfair playing field among different ownership sectors. This was partly facilitated by rampant corruption in the recruitment of many state companies, helping to reduce the bargaining power of workers vis-à-vis management in these companies. Thirdly, the loosening of state policies on rural-urban
migration facilitated the provision of a cheap labour force, in particular female labour to
the garment industry in urban areas. While the garment industry created a great number of
manual jobs for the abundant labour force from the rural areas, high competition in job
entry also reduced women workers’ bargaining power. Fourthly, the state’s policies
towards women have changed dramatically with the economic reforms. Before the
economic reforms, the state provided households with free childcare, healthcare,
children’s education and even free housing, facilitating the reproductive activities of the
households. However, after the economic reforms, the households had to undertake the
tasks of both production and reproduction, and this placed more burdens on women in the
families. In such a way, women workers had to fulfil the roles of wives and mothers in
the families and as workers in the factories. At the same time, these two types of
responsibility became much heavier because of higher demands and expectations from
society and families. Fifthly, as in most (ex)socialist countries, the trade unions were not
independent social movements but were closely connected to the party-state. Although
the trade unions carried out some reforms after doi moi, they were still not able to balance
the two mutually exclusive tasks at the same time: the mobilization of labour and
protection of workers’ rights. While the state acknowledged the urgent need to further
protect workers’ rights, the state also advocated the avoidance of strikes and labour
conflicts in general in order to create a stable and attractive environment for investors. At
the same time, local trade unions proved to be ineffective because of the lack of economic
and human resources to guide and organize workers in the procedures for legal strikes. As
a result most of the strikes that happened became illegal because of incorrect procedures.
Finally, at a more abstract level, in the relationship between the state and the society, one
can observe a dialogic negotiation of dilemma on issues, instead of a more dominant
position of the state vis-à-vis the society or an accommodating state. In the emergence of the civil society, the social actors are inevitably growing more and more independent from the state. While the state has to acknowledge this development, it does not retreat completely but compromises on a number of issues in exchange for some benefits to consolidate the state mechanism, which is weakening because of the lack of economic and human resources. For example, although the Labour Code stipulates that all companies which employ more than ten employees must establish a trade union, many workshops like TT in Co Nhue did not have one. The point was that the local authority of the area ignored this violation possibly because these businesses contributed a great deal to the operation of the local state mechanism as well as local social-economic projects at a time when the subsidies from the central state to local authority proved to be limited. In another example, while the mass media often reports strikes and labour conflicts in the private and foreign-invested sector, they rarely mention what is happening in the state sector, although the statistics show that a small percentage of strikes are still happening in state-owned companies. The mass media’s ignorance of or indifference to strikes in the state sector, or the consideration of this sector as a sensitive area, possibly represents an implicit negotiation between the state and mass media. Press freedom is allowed but only within an accepted limit. In the sphere of consumption, several cultural products from the past which were considered as anti-revolutionary, bourgeoisie sentimental or unwholesomely Westernized, become more and more accepted in society. This happens not only because the government has more relaxing and permissive attitudes towards cultural products in general but also because of random corruption happening at the local level. The businesses of commercialized cultural products are not prohibited and illegal transactions were ignored to a certain extent, reflecting the negotiation between the local
authority and the market forces. Only when such illegal activities go on too far, would the authority take some actions.

In general, from workers’ daily experience, we can see that garment workers have weak bargaining power vis-à-vis management. At the same time, we can also see that their experiences are various and the levels of bargaining power among workers are also different. There are a number of factors to which such differences can be attributed. The difference between men and women has decisively shaped the bargaining power of men and female workers’ bargaining power vis-à-vis management. The social construction of the role of sex is prominent in the garment industry. Using the social construction of women’s work and men’s work, management justified the recruitment of cheap female migrant workers as the majority of the garment labour force as well as the placement of male workers in better income generating positions. In such a way, there was an implicit assumption that men had higher skill levels than women. While male workers had conflicting views about their own jobs, the managers also contradicted themselves. In fact, there were many men who could do trivial work as well as women, and many women who managed heavy and complicated jobs as well as men. As female labour was more readily available for garment work than that of men, this denoted their weaker bargaining power, because the managers said that they preferred to employ men rather than women on the grounds that men could concentrate more on work as they did not have many family responsibilities. So women either had to accept lower-paid jobs in society or had fewer opportunities to obtain even these low paid jobs when there were high rates of unemployment. Being fewer and more valuable, male workers could have more privileges and could be more easily promoted to good positions than women.
Rural-urban migration was another factor that influenced workers’ daily experience as much as their bargaining power (Chapter 5). While local networks were often found supporting migrants in settling down and establishing a new life in the cities, in many small workshops in Co Nhue the employers not only used local people in recruiting new workers but also in sponsoring and instructing the new ones. Local people tended to live together and helped each other not only at work but also in many other aspects of life. In other words, it can be said that small employers used localism in labour control and management. At the same time, workers from the same locality also often protected each other against management. When a conflict broke out among workers, the locals also often protected each other against workers from other places. In this way localism could both unionize and divide workers. However, during the time they worked and lived together, besides localism, the workers also established ‘brotherhood’ and ‘sisterhood’, which were very important in consolidating the relationship and solidarity among the workers. Moreover, they also played a ‘spiritual role’ in the formation of workers’ affective attachment to the workshops. Hence, they directly influenced the decisions of young workers on whether they would remain working in the workshops. In supporting and promoting ‘brotherhood’ and ‘sisterhood’, the employers and managers incorporated such relationship in the power relations between them and the workers. It should be mentioned that the intensity of localism, brotherhood and sisterhood were less evident in big companies like DG and MH than in small workshops like TT. Big companies could easily have more public job advertisements or announcements. In the case of DG, workers had to pay out large amounts in fees ‘under the table’ in order to get employment. As a result, recruitment through the local networks became more difficult. Moreover, while new workers needed to have certain levels of skills to be employed and
big companies also had more adequate training systems, there was little opportunity for new workers to be trained on the job.

The rural-urban gap is not only a motivation for migration but also affects workers’ daily experience. Inside the workshops, urban workers were often considered as having higher skills than migrant workers (Chapter 1). Although this assumption, which is based on the rural urban division, was not always true, it was a fact that urban workers had better access to vocational training in the cities or might live in the environment of the occupation. As a result, it is easy to understand why urban workers could master the jobs more easily. Urban workers also had a more intimate relationship with employers and managers. In some cases, urban workers were given more privileges than migrant workers in the workshops (Chapter 5). However, while urban workers’ resistance to management was more direct and overt than that of migrant workers, urban workers were also often the ones who directly confronted or challenged managers and employers, or were the ones who protected migrant workers from unfair treatment by management. In a context where trade unions did not function properly, this assistance proved to be very valuable to migrant workers, whose bargaining power was weaker than the urban ones who could find new jobs more easily, had the support of the families living nearby and were better equipped with knowledge of workers’ rights. Outside the workshop, rural-urban gaps were not only manifested in the employment of a majority of migrants in low-paid but labour-intensive jobs, in the living conditions and consumption patterns of migrant manual labourers vis-à-vis those of urban citizens, but also in the decrease in the chances of getting married in an urban context.

Women’s age is also an important factor influencing workers’ experiences. In small workshops like TT, localism, brotherhood and sisterhood were used as part of
management strategies. At the same time, they also created a youth culture in the workshop, where the majority were unmarried young women workers. Regarding their consumption patterns, young unmarried garment workers generally liked to spend money on clothes, jewellery, and cosmetics which would give them the appearance of modern urban women. However, it could be argued that such behaviour conformed to the gender norms and ideologies: feminine beauty, which is subservient to masculine hegemony. Married women, who accounted for a larger proportion of workers in big workshops like DG and MH, tended to subsume the need for caring for their own bodies under the collective interest of the whole family. In other words, family was the most important factor for the self-formation of married woman and became the main source that constructed the identities of married working women. At the same time, because of their garment job, they did not have time to fulfil their responsibilities as mothers and wives. Moreover, all the human resources of the families had to be pooled to support the women’s employment. This meant that their husbands and parents had to make extra efforts to replace the women in housework. This seemed to support the argument for an emancipation of women from unpaid work in the household, and this gave them higher status in the family because of their financial contribution to the family. However, at the same time, such emancipation also created tension in the families because their daily experiences were contradictory to current gender ideologies. There was a shift in the ideal images of women, from an emphasis on work and career to family. In such a context, the social status of women garment workers has declined in the families and in society at large. The social problem of ‘e chong’ (unmarried but over the age for marriage) was also rooted in the declining status of women garment workers. While married women were preoccupied with family responsibilities, unmarried girls were concerned with love affairs
and marriage issues. This greatly reduced women workers’ bargaining power vis-à-vis management because employment was either considered as a temporary solution or it became vital to the survival strategies of the whole families. Even so, married women who were often more mature, skilled and experienced workers, were also the ones who dared to challenge management directly, and raised their voices to protect others. In spite of the absence or ineffectiveness of trade unions, we still can see workers’ different forms of solidarity: local networks, brotherhood and sisterhood, ho or the ‘rotating savings association’, women’s unions (though also not very effective), labour associations, and training courses on life skills, HIV/AIDS and other activities organized by some NGOs and international organizations.

From workers’ experience concerning their bargaining power, we can see that although social structures and social processes are important in shaping women worker’s subjectivities, the notion of agency is also quite relevant to their experience. Women’s agency is expressed in their different forms of resistance to management, their need to retain individual freedom, their conflicts, dilemmas and negotiations between old and new values of gender ideologies and between their contested multiple identities as workers, consumers, daughters, wives, mothers and (girl or boy)friends. In none of these cases are women workers completely submissive to a particular social identity but practically combine these identities or use the interaction of these identities variously in different social situations to make sense of their own experience.

The World Bank considered Vietnam as one of the most successful cases in minimizing the negative effects of liberalization among the post-socialist countries which were carrying out economic reforms. However, as demonstrated in this thesis, social inequality has increased dramatically in comparison with the pre-doi moi period and
exists in various forms. As new developments occurring at the time this thesis was nearing its completion, the government is making some moves in the direction of improving the living conditions of migrant garment workers. For example, there is a project in which the local authority in cooperation with the employers will build standardized apartments for rent by migrant workers. There is also a plan to increase the minimum wage levels in all sectors (including state sectors and non-state sectors) up to 50 US$. Such a move is aimed at levelling up the unequal footing between different ownership sectors in the labour market. Another new development is the increasingly severe lack of workers, even unskilled ones, in many garment factories in the whole country, no longer just the South. This can be explained by the fact the working conditions in the garment workshops remain the same while young girls have more alternatives or better offers in other jobs or manufacturing sectors. Due to the lack of workers, many garment companies have had to terminate the contracts they signed with customers and have accepted paying fines to these customers. At the same time, the employers had to offer workers better wage levels to prevent them from moving to other workshops, although they could only do this within a certain limit (if workers’ salaries are too high, they might incur a loss or lose their competitiveness in the market). This new development implies a greater bargaining power on the part of workers in the labour market. This may play a considerable role in reducing or eliminating corruption in the entry procedures to big state companies like DG. Even so, much still needs to be done to improve the living and working conditions of garment workers and female migrant workers in general.
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