Work without name: changing patterns of children's work in a Northern Vietnamese village

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Citation for published version (APA):

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INTRODUCTION: INSIDE STORIES OF RURAL CHILDREN'S WORK

Between the country life, personal experience and academic interests

"I wish I were a boy"

Among the children working in the wood workshop owned by the son of my host, there was a girl who lived in the neighbourhood. I shall call her Tuyet. Tuyet was 14 years old, daughter of a 54 year-old veteran. Tuyet's mother was a humble peasant who had never traveled farther than 20 km from her village. Tuyet left the school 3 years ago and had been working as a trainee for more than one year now. Tuyet's brothers also worked as wood carvers in Ho Chi Minh City.

I met Tuyet regularly in the workshop. Unlike other trainees, Tuyet often came to the workshop later and left earlier. She explained to me that her parents did not want her to work in the wood craft. Her father often said to her: "You're just a girl. You'll get married in a few years' time and then you'll work for your parents in-law on their farm. It's a waste of time for you to learn wood craft". But Tuyet did not think so. "I wish I were a boy," she said. A girl's life, in her opinion, is full of obligations and constraints, in contrast with a boy's life. Her parents let her go to the wood workshop only when the house chores had been done. And Tuyet was often asked to drop her woodcraft to assist her mother on the farm. In our conversations, Tuyet said she dreamed of becoming a seamstress, which is quite suitable for girls, or having whatever jobs in the non-farm sector. But since she had no money to learn such trades, she had to follow the woodcraft. Tuyet complained that she was no longer treated kindly by her parents. Instead, they often scolded her if she neglected her house chores. As a 'good girl' in the village, she did not want to bother her parents for money to cover such things like clothes, shoes and so on, and she began to earn her own money. More than once, she attempted to raise livestock from her own "capital", but her parents didn't let her keep any profits from these undertakings. And they didn't want Tuyet to spend time to earn her own money...

One early morning, while taking pictures of some wood workers waiting for the bus bound for Ho Chi Minh city for work, I saw Tuyet among them. She stood behind the advertisement board, together with two other girls. The bus station was set up recently to serve the increasing number of wood workers leaving the village to search for work in the

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1 Names of the persons used in this book are disguised.
south. But Tuyet could not get on the bus. Having found out that Tuyet was not going to
the workshop, her mother became suspicious and immediately came to the bus station.
There she found Tuyet trying to get on the southbound bus. She took her home, scolding
and beating her. After that Tuyet was not allowed to work away from home.

For about two weeks after the incident, I did not see Tuyet again. Then one day
Tuyet's mother came to see me and told me in tears: "My little girl has left home for ten
days now. We don't know where she went. We don't think she could go far because she
had no money. My husband guessed that she might have gone to the wood workshops in
Hanoi or Dong Ky to search for work there, together with her fellow villagers. If you go
back to Hanoi, please find out whether she works there?"

Afterwards I did make inquiries among several wood workshops in Hanoi run by
natives of Giao village, but I was unable to locate Tuyet. Back in the village, I advised
Tuyet's parents to ask Hanoi Television for help with its 'Missing Persons' program, but
they refused to do so, fearing this would bring Tuyet's and the family's name in disrepute.
They still believed that Tuyet had found work somewhere in Hanoi. By the time I left for
Amsterdam (February 1996), Tuyet had not returned home. Rumours had it that she had
been tricked by criminals who smuggled her across the border into China.

"Don't cry if I die"

9.30 a.m. I was talking with my host about the situation of the children in the
village, when we suddenly heard terrific noises coming from the neighbourhood. Moments
later, my host's grand-daughter rushed in and told me excitedly: "Thanh from the An
family has wounded himself in the belly. Why don't you go and have a look?" I didn't feel
like going, but curiosity took over and I went outside the gate to see what happened.
Children and adults were milling about in the yard. Someone shouted for a Honda. After a
while, they brought out a stretcher and two bicycles which served as a sort of ambulance
that was to take Thanh to the hospital. I saw the blood-stained bandage wrapping around
Thanh's belly. But he still retained consciousness.

Back in the house I asked the children what had happened. They told me that this
morning, after a brief period at work, Thanh began to complain about being tired. He then
left work without permission, and climbed up the guava tree to pick fresh fruits. His elder
brother told him to get down and go back to work. Thanh refused to do so, saying that his
back was aching and he needed some rest. Their mother joined in the quarrel, taking the
side of Thanh's brother, shouting out loud that Thanh was a lazy boy who was always tired
before doing any real work. She forced him back to work and left for shopping. When she
got home and saw Thanh back on the tree, she became very angry and lashed out at him.
He climbed down from the tree and went back to the work place. But his mother went on abusing him. Thanh suddenly shouted: "Mother, you want me alive or dead?" Still angry at him she said: "I don't care if you just drop dead." Without a word, he took a chisel and stabbed himself deep in the belly. Blood started to flow from the open wound. The mother in panic shouted for help. Neighbours came running to the house. While his wound was being dressed, Thanh took it calmly and said: "Mother, I am just a bad son, so don't cry if I die."

A few months later, I met Thanh again. He looked healthy. It was a very hot day, and he did not wear any shirt, so I could see the scar on his belly. Noticing that I was staring at his scar, Thanh's face turned red. He asked me if I knew something about electricity. "Something went wrong with my paddy sorting machine," he said. "My dad saw smoke coming from the plastic covering the engine, he bent down to blow out the smoke. Unfortunately, he got an electric shock and collapsed on the ground. He's so scared now that he won't touch the machine. If no one can repair it, I have to sort paddy by hand and it would waste a lot of time."

I said he should look for a professional electrician, but he just shrugged: "That won't happen until Tet", which means that there was no professional electrician in this village. Then he turned to me: "We're going to gamble for a bit of fun, would you like to join us?" I asked: "Aren't you afraid of your mother?" He said: "No one dares to touch me from now on."

Thanh was 15 years old. He left school at the age of 9 and had been working as a wood carver for 6 years.

"Undutiful children"

Giao villagers do not mention the name of the dead since this is considered taboo. They believe that if one does so, the soul of the dead would not rest peacefully. In accordance with this practice, the person involved in this story will remain anonymous.

He was a father of three sons. The eldest son was 20 years of age and the youngest was just 13. None of them finished primary education. They all worked as wood workers away from home and only returned for visits a few times each year.

When he was still alive, he often quoted the old Chinese saying: "Tam nam bat phu, tu nu bat ban", (Three sons do not make you rich, four daughters do not make you poor), in referring to his current circumstances. He often complained about his sons. In his opinion, they earned a lot of money but they did not give him any. They lacked filial piety, he told me. They always said 'no' when he asked them for money. When he had to buy
liquor for himself, he had to sell paddy for cash. He believed that his children spent all their money on gambling while they told me they would not give their father any money because he would gamble it away.

He told me that he often reminded his sons of their obligations towards their parents. He wished they would follow the example of their village workmates and send money home regularly. Surely he would know how to use their money for the right purposes. But none of them heeded his appeals.

One day before the Tet festivities, like most wood workers of Giao village, the three sons returned home for the holidays. He expected them to bring him money as the other young wood workers in the village would for their parents, but his sons came home empty handed. He decided to use a little blackmail, threatening that if they did not listen to him, he would leave home or even die. No one took him seriously. They even made a joke calling him, "ong gia khot-ta-bit" (a slang phrase, referring to an old and conservative man). That night, after taking a bath, he sharpened a knife and brought it with him to bed. He cut his own throat and died.

These stories among many others concerning children's life and work were collected during the year I spent in Giao village. In recounting them I do not wish to add sensationalism to a situation that was already fraught with vagaries and surprises. The stories, though specific to Giao village as they might be, to a great extent reflect the ongoing conflicts between parents and children--the generation gap further exacerbated by the fast changes of rural Vietnam.

From the very beginning of my field research, I regularly noticed the deep concerns of many parents as regards their children's life style, their work and education, which they considered to be greatly different from their own experiences at similar age.

My host was a 76 year old man who had once earned his living as a skilled wood worker. Having lived through French colonial times, Japanese occupation and American war, he had also witnessed the upheavals that took place in his village during the first land reform (1956) followed by the collectivization period (1958-1981) and recently the economic reforms (1981-1995). During my stay in his house, despite our difference in age, I somehow became his confidant with whom he often shared his thoughts on his family and on what was going on in the village. He was well respected by fellow villagers for his honesty and rich past. Naturally, the subject of children and the young generation of the village came up in our conversations, particularly about his own grand-children.

One day, he brought out a large scroll, put it on the table and dusted it with a great care. He told me this was a poem in classical Chinese he had written many years ago and
which he used to hang on the wall to teach his grand-children how to live in a correct way. He read it aloud, explaining to me its finer points. He gazed at it for a moment, then, to my surprise, took it to the yard and burned it. Let us listen to his story:

I am respected by the villagers because all my life, I've tried my best to lead an honest and exemplary life. I wished my grandchildren would follow my example but now I've given up all hopes. In the villagers' eyes, my third grandson is a bad, bad boy. He left school early and went to work. Now he spends his wages on drinking and gambling, and often gets involved in fights with other children. It's a great shame for us. I spend sleepless nights worrying about his future. Nowadays the kids just don't give a damn about the moral values I try to teach them. They even makes jokes about my poem. That's why I burned it.

He was sad because children these days are so different from his own childhood. He mused:

"In my time it was a natural thing for a boy of 16 to wade naked into a pond to catch crabs and shellfish, without a thought of making money. Nowadays, children of 12 or 13 already know how to make money. If they don't get along with their parents, they just leave home. I've spent all my life in this village and never saw such things until now."

In my conversations with other villagers, it was quite obvious to me that their children's welfare was the major concern of most parents in Gia o village. The general complaint was that children were becoming more and more selfish; and their main interest was to earn money for themselves. A number of parents worried about their future, about their old age when they would be neglected by their children whom they tried their best to bring up in a proper way.

Generally speaking, parents often passed judgments on their children based on their past experiences. Through their life stories, I was able to understand to some extent the changes and conflicts, perceptions and attitudes, thoughts and actions in the daily interactions between them and their children. While young adults and middle aged people tended to appreciate the ability of children to earn money at an early age, older people often worried about the erosion of moral standards and the low education level of their children as a result of their leaving school prematurely. From these stories, I could discern the great changes that were taking place in the life of children in a rural setting which had a direct bearing on their education and employment. In fact the subject of children was the foremost concern of every household in the village.

Naturally while examining children's life of Gia o village and talking to their parents, I often thought of my own childhood. My school-age was spent in the countryside, in the midst of agricultural collectivization and the destructive war by the Americans. I left my home village to study at the University of Hanoi when I was 18. During the years I spent with my family in my village, we children often went hungry because of food shortage. Being the eldest son of a family with 6 brothers and sisters, I was taught to do some house-chores at an early age. Such work as collecting fire-wood, fetching water, cooking, feeding pigs and livestock and taking care of my young siblings were part of my daily activities from the time I was about 9 or 10. What I mostly liked to do was the
cooking. Because rice was a scarce staple in those years, we only had one rice meal daily. Children were often allowed to eat rice while adults had to contend with potatoes, cassava or maize with very little rice at meal times. I used to volunteer for cooking because I could help myself to a little extra beyond the regular meagre portion of rice, particularly during the periods between harvests. Apart from the house chores, I spent half a day at school. I always found plenty of free time to play with other kids in the village. At the age of 16, I was asked to work on the farm to help my parents, and still found time to attend school half a day.

My own childhood and family background are more or less related to my work today. The person who made the greatest impact on my future career was perhaps my grandfather. He formerly worked as a village teacher of classical Chinese under the colonial regime. After the revolutionists had come to establish themselves in the village and classical Chinese studies had become redundant, he moved to work as a carpenter and wood carver. Living in hard conditions, he did not stop studying his Confucian books, most of which were classic poetry, ancient Chinese philosophy, ethics and historical texts. Whenever he found something interesting from these texts, he would ask me to come up and explained them to me. Although I did not understand almost everything he said, I became his 'beloved pupil' if only for my patience in listening to him. I was often asked to serve tea to his numerous guests who came and talked to him about everyday matters, particularly about the fate of their sons who were serving the army during the war. Later, when I grew up and studied at the faculty of history at the University of Hanoi, I understood how important my grandfather had been to me during those formative years.

Comparing my childhood with that of rural children today, I think the generation I grew up with during the early period of agricultural collectivization was lucky because we had access to a free education at all levels. This explains how a poor rural boy like me was able to follow through to the university level.

Like the peasants of Giao village, I realize that many changes have taken place in the countryside particularly in the economic field since de-collectivization. Children today generally no longer suffer from hunger and from lack of clothing as we did. They however are more interested in earning quick money than in having an adequate education.

My youth spent in the countryside and the present-day concerns of the peasants regarding their children lay the basis for the study I am pursuing: The economic roles of children in a transition economy in our society.

Among many scholarly writings on child labour that have been accumulated recently, the economic roles of children are often tackled in terms of poverty, demand for labour in peasant households or as a result of the seniority system, as if the economic importance of children in peasant societies was immutable. There have been very few
studies that focus on the dynamic roles and patterns of children's activities in a fast-changing socio-economic system. This is understandable because most of the child labour studies tend to dwell on underdeveloped societies where the subsistence agriculture still exists on a large scale and changes at a slow pace. Moreover, these studies tend to approach child labour basically at the micro level. While this approach enables the researcher to measure in detail economic activities of children and their contribution to the household economy, it often leaves out the socio-economic and cultural environment in which children's work occurs.

This situation may be worth reconsidering if one takes into account the tremendous changes in the so-called "underdeveloped societies", particularly in Asia. The thrust behind these changes is the introduction into traditional agriculture of strong market forces, bringing with them new production processes, which in turn create an increasing demand for child labour outside the agricultural sector. In the Vietnamese context, these changes lead to the fast expansion of a non-farm sector in the rural areas, which was previously confirmed within the household context and usually carried out between the two harvests. The growing practice of subcontracting in this new production system, the competition of manufacturers and informalisation of labour have rendered child labour more attractive and more accessible for employers. Urbanization at a fast pace increases demand for manpower and serves as a magnet in luring male labourers from rural areas to the cities, mainly on the seasonal basis, leaving the farm and rural non-farm work for women and children to shoulder.

Beside these changes in the rural production system, which is geared toward diversification, social stratification has become more apparent, not only in material terms but also with regard to access to education. The high drop-out rate from school during the years of economic reforms in Vietnam is another indicator of children's intensive involvement in work. The marginalisation of a sizable number of the rural population puts extra pressure on parents in passing the earning burden on to their children.

Based on these hypothesis processes, the fundamental question that has been raised for this research is whether the transition to a more diverse economy in Vietnam has any impact, and if so to what extent, on the nature and patterns of children's economic activities in response to these new conditions? What are the agents involved in this process? To prepare for an empirical answer to these questions, a theoretical framework of analysis will be required (chapter 2).

As an insider observing his own society at first hand, I have both the advantages and disadvantages in carrying out a study of children's work. The personal experiences of my childhood spent in a village of the northern delta are no doubt helpful to my study, but they should be regarded at best as recollections rather than scientific sources to evaluate
the changes in children's economic activities. However, these experiences had brought me in intimate contact with the world of rural children, which still stays with me up to this day. This is perhaps why I have chosen a rural setting for my field research.

**The field work**

**Selection of research setting**

The choice of the rural Red River Delta for field research is not based alone on personal familiarity. There are several reasons for such a choice.

Firstly, the Red River Delta has a long history of wet rice cultivation. It is the most densely populated area of Vietnam, which is among the highest densely populated areas of Asia, next to the delta of southern China, the Indonesian island of Java and Bangladesh\(^2\). In the colonial period, the density of the Red River Delta was 430 persons/km\(^2\) (Gourou, 1936:197). The 1989 Census showed a density of 932 persons/km\(^2\) and a recent survey indicated a density of 1,104 persons/km\(^2\) (Nguyen The Hue, 1995:109). In spite of a long agricultural development, 83% of the population of the Red River Delta (or 13.6 million people, according to the 1989 Census) were still living in the rural area, their main source of livelihood being rice cultivation. With high population growth, rice land per capita has decreased considerably, from 1200 m\(^2\) per capita during the 1956 land reform down to 540 m\(^2\) per capita in 1993, the year of redistribution of land to peasant households (TCTK, 1995). Demographic pressure on economic activities of peasant households with little access to arable land may offer an interesting opportunity to understand children's work in the peasant society. In fact this question has been raised since the 1970's, where one often links the economic roles of children to high fertility rates (Mamdani 1972; Nag 1972; White 1975; Hull 1975; Mueller 1976).

Secondly, the Red River Delta has long been involved in a long process of socio-economic transformation. The land reform (1954-56) and subsequent agricultural collectivization (1958 onwards) were first launched in this area. And more than anywhere in northern Vietnam, the collective economy under co-operative management was vigorously carried out in the Red River Delta. This no doubt had a direct bearing on the life of every peasant in this area for over 20 years (1958-81). Because of this, the shift from the collective and centrally-planned economy to an economy based on individual peasant household has become a significant factor in the rural society of the Red River Delta. Because of the change in the production system, one may assume that the economic

\(^2\) The population density of the Pearl River Delta in southern China is 638 persons/km\(^2\) in 1986; Java and Madura in Indonesia: 755 persons/km\(^2\) in 1985; Bangladesh: 726 persons/km\(^2\) in 1988, (see: Le, T.C & T. Rambo (eds., 1993: ix).
roles of children would change accordingly. However, this question cannot be cleared up by a large scale survey. The difficulty lies not only in the methods employed in such a survey and the evaluation thereof, but it is also a very time consuming process. Moreover, the qualitative aspects inherent in this process of change are likely to be overlooked by surveying techniques.

This is the main reason why the research project will concentrate on just one village, aiming at gaining substantial empirical data on the impacts of economic reforms on children's work. Because it is mainly a case study, in some instances the characteristics of the village under the study will stand out. But it is not an isolated unit. From an socio-economic standpoint, the inhabitants of the village have lived in a similar environment and shared comparable experiences under different systems, past and present, with the bulk of the rural population of the Red River delta. Hence the findings collected from the research carried out in this particular village would give a fair description of the larger geographical area.

From the empirical viewpoint of anthropology, finding an ordinary village with favourable conditions for field work is highly desirable. For that reason, I spent considerable time visiting a number of villages located in three different provinces of the delta with a view to getting a general picture of rural children's economic activities, before deciding on the selection of just one village. A close examination of these villages brought forth some important starting points. While these villages tend to diversify their economy after the introduction of reforms, they do not necessarily follow the same path. Those villages previously well-known for their traditional crafts have now restored their old trades with some new forms of production organization, ranging from single households and inter-households to co-operatives. The villages of Da Hoi (Ha Bac) and Van Chang (Nam Ha) for example, were previously well known for their metal crafts (forging and casting). Over 20 years of agriculturalisation had turned artisans of these villages into farmers while the development of these crafts was seriously curtailed. Economic reforms provided a new opportunity for these villages to raise again their non-farm economy. Between 1986 and 1994, 19 per cent of households (212/1070 households) of Da Hoi had established workshops for processing metal wastes and producing construction materials on a small scale, each employing more than 5 wage workers, (reported by UBND xa Chau Khe). In Van Chang village (Nam Ha), 80 per cent of households (504/625 households) owned their small smitheries, most of these were self-employed, but some hired extra hands. These smitheries produced home utensils and machine tools targeted at the rural

3 For a further reference on the process of economic diversification taking place in traditional craft villages since economic reforms in the Red River delta, see, for example, reports by Central Committee for Agriculture of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), Kinh Te Xa Hoi Nong Thon Viet Nam Ngay Nay (Socio-Economic Situation of Rural Vietnam Today), Hanoi, 1991, 2 vols.
markets of Laos, Cambodia and mountainous areas of Vietnam. While rice cultivation was still practiced in these two villages, the non-farm sector played a dominant role in the village's economy, fast becoming the major source of income for most families.

In both villages, I found a kind of informal "labour market" where labourers (males, females and children) from the surrounding villages came and waited for being hired to work in various types of farming, non-farm and house-chores. I also found that in these two villages, a considerable number of children were working in processing raw metal materials and forging. I was told that a number of these children were hired on a daily basis from the fore-mentioned "labour market". Their wages were about one third of those of adult workers. Employers said they used child workers mainly as assistants in unskilled types of work, which was cheaper than hiring adults. In Van Chang village, child workers were used as assistants and apprentices and generally their work was unpaid.

In the villages where the non-farm sector was not well developed and rice cultivation still dominated, a large number of male labourers went out in search of work in urban areas. As a consequence, children were involved much more in agricultural activities, particularly girls, while a number of young boys were sent to vocational training elsewhere.

Initial examinations of economic activities of a number of villages in the northern delta led to the assumption that a dominant feature of economic diversification in rural areas after "renovation" (doi moi) was the expansion of non-farm activities, which involved an increasing number of farming labourers in these sectors. There were also indications that there had been an increase in children's paid employment in rural non-farm sectors. This phenomenon of children entering the labour market was a recent development and it would seem to be an interesting theme for a research project on child labour during the transition period from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented economy in rural Vietnam. For that reason, I preferred to choose a village for an in-depth study where a mix between farm and non-farm activities existed. Most villages I had visited were interesting enough for such a research, but their sizes were usually too large, ranging from 625 to 1075 households per village, which is difficult to cover for an empirical study. While I was looking for a smaller village, one of my ethnology students invited me to visit his home village, located in the heart of the Red River Delta (Hai Hung province). This is a middle sized village with 459 households, where wood carving has become an important economic activity besides farming since economic renovation. I eventually chose this village because it is an ordinary village sharing similar socio-economic conditions with many others in the area. Besides its size, my personal acquaintance with a number of villagers should prove to be a great asset in conducting field work.
Data collection

A former student who later became my assistant provided valuable help at the initial stage of field research. From the very beginning, I was aware that the theme I was pursuing — the impact of market-oriented economy on rural children's work—would require an understanding at the macro level (changes of socio-economic system) as well as at the micro level (economic activities of children in households), both viewed from a historical perspective (before and after economic reforms). This was no easy task. In practice, a range of methods were applied for data collection.

Household survey

Like many other villages in Vietnam, statistics and other written sources on Giao village were hard to obtain. To gain a comprehensive view on economic activities, education and life styles of its inhabitants, I began with a household survey. I had planned to survey about one fourth of households (100/459 households) but at the end, the survey was extended to 376 households, thanks to the collaboration of the village headman and his assistants. The survey was designed to collect detailed information on the composition of households within the village, their productive resources (land, tools, capital, drafts, etc.), the number of household members engaged in the production process, and other sources of household income. Furthermore data were collected on life styles (housing and comforts), education level and the involvement of children in work. (The survey results will be analyzed in chapter 3).

Counting the labour

Data obtained from the survey of 80 per cent of households within the village was very useful. It served as a basis from which I was able to select the right target group for further study while making sure that specific groups of households would not be excluded from observation.

During the field research, although my observations and interviews involved many respondents, including males and females of different ages and backgrounds in a large number of households, in-depth observations and interviews were principally concentrated on a sample of 49 households with 117 children between 6 and 15 years of age. Among these, a group of 11 households owned rather well-established wood workshops which employed 82 child workers (paid and unpaid) were particularly interested. Additionally, 116 pupils aged between 11 and 16 attending primary and low secondary schools in the commune were asked to write briefly about their lives, work, attitudes and wishes.

An important aspect in this study of child labour is to assess the extent of children's involvement in various types of economic activities. Two students helped me to
do this, as we call it, "counting the labour", which follows the principles of instant records and 24 hour recall, developed by Reynolds (1991).4

This enumeration of labour were carried out in two periods in accordance with the agricultural cycles. The first round was conducted in May and June of 1995 when demand for farming work reached its peak, and the second round was in August and September of the same year, when agricultural activities were at the lowest level.

However, counting the labour is not the ultimate aim of this study. It is only a measure to gain a quantitative view of the extent of children's economic activities. To shed more light on the nature of children's work which undergoes rapid changes in recent years, it is necessary to utilize data from interviews and other observations.

*Interviews, a child-focused approach*

While interviewing the heads of households, it became apparent that the male heads did not know exactly about activities of their children, particularly about work on the farm. The reason was that most male adults were no longer regularly involved in farming. For that reason, 24 hour recall and interviews were conducted on individual situations in one-to-one encounters. Conversations with children were often interrupted by adults, who tended to answer on their behalf. Moreover, children's shyness to talk in the presence of their parents was another drawback. A number of conversations between me and my children respondents therefore took place at their workplaces away from their homes, in groups of several children at a time. I found that such informal interviews were very useful. I also relied on key informants for obtaining sensitive information and making cross-checks.

*Life histories*

As an "insider" more or less familiar with village life, I was able to gather useful information from the villagers through their life stories rather than formal interviews. Adults liked to talk about their own youth and compared it with their children today. Data on the children's work under the co-operative system (before economic renovation) were mainly obtained from this source. And in keeping with the perspective of socio-economic changes, respondents from 49 households were separated into 3 groups:

1) Those who were born between years of 1969-1979 and therefore spent their childhood during the days of early economic reforms.

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4 According to Reynolds (1991), the technique of '24 hour recall' is applied to collect data on child labor in which all activities done by the interviewees over the 24 hours leading up to the moment of the interview were strictly recorded.
2) Those who were born between 1954 and 1968 and had experience with the collective economy of the co-operative as a child.

3) Those who were born before 1954 and lived through the periods of changes from colonial times to the present.

Respondents were picked from these 49 households. Specific topic-interviews were arranged to acquire such information as at what age a respondent performed a specific type of work, with whom and for what purposes, as well as his/her family's socio-economic background at that time.

Life stories were mainly collected at the later stages of the field research. The respondents were encouraged to talk about their own childhood: life, work, education, etc., in connection with a particular period of the village history. These stories are very useful to understand not only the work itself, but also attitudes, thoughts of the children and the environment in which they lived. Although this wealth of information would better serve the case-studies approach rather than quantitative analysis, it does help this researcher to obtain valuable insights into the impact of socio-economic changes on children's life and work.

**Observation**

While studying child labour in an African village, P. Reynolds used observation as a single technique to supplement other techniques in which "observation of two-hour spell of activity, during which time behaviour of and relationship between those present were recorded minute by minute", (Reynolds 1991:46). Such a method requires great patience and is time-consuming. Moreover, it is almost impossible to cover all types of children's activities.

For me, observation is a continuous process of participating in the daily life of the villagers, sharing their activities, observing their joys and sorrows, following their customs. The information gathered will be screened so that they remain relevant within the socio-economic context of the study underway. For such purposes, I spent one year with a family in Giao village as a paying guest. I shared their food, talked about the interests of the children and shared the vagaries of their family life.

As it turned out, my host had several grandchildren. His only son owned a small wood workshop which employed a few children as apprentices with whom I became quite close. The information I got from them were not through interviews but rather by way of informal, confidential chats. Having regarded me as a "member of the family", and as someone who 'knew' everything that was going on in the village (a teacher from Hanoi, imagine that!) they did not bother to tell me until near the end of my stay in the village, about their habit of going to the pagoda and the communal house to worship the Lord.
Buddha and the village's tutelage god -- a practice quite common among adults. One evening, my host's children invited me to go with them to the Pagoda. There I was surprised to see children from other families as well. Unlike adults who went to the Pagoda in day-time, children often went there in the evening on the first and the fifteenth day of the month of the Lunar Calendar. With burning joss-sticks they prayed the Buddha to bless them with a good life. And children before leaving home for jobs away from the village or after their return often came to the pagoda to pray for their protection. This is just an example of having the advantage of being an 'insider' whose eyes and ears are constantly alert for that extra information. If I had not been in this privileged position, I would have missed this interesting episode and maybe many others.

*Child, work and classification of work*

*The child*

A definition of "what is a child?" does not seem to be immutable but changes with the passage of time and varies from culture to culture. In 20th century Western societies, a child is defined as someone who has needs (Woodhead 1990:60). The term 'needs' implies the distinctive status accorded to young humanity and which gives priority to protecting and promoting their psychological welfare. This is in contrast with former times and at variance with other societies where adult priorities have centred more on children's economic utility, their duties and obligations rather than their needs. From this perspective, a child is considered dependent on adults. This notion that overlooks the socio-economic values of children is understandable because in modern Western societies, one relies heavily on chronological age to define a child. However, from an anthropological viewpoint, the system of classification based on age is variable according to specific cultures. Schildkrout, for example, argues that a girl of 10 or 12 years of age in Hausa culture is normally considered suitable for marriage. And one she gets married, she is classified as a woman, and in this case, work performed by her would not be described as child work (Schildkrout 1981:96).

The child-adult relationship is an important element while considering the "child" concept. A number of studies on low-income countries show that children make a considerable contribution to the economic survival of the family and that they support their parents in old age. Apart from economic considerations, children are generally regarded as having a symbolic value and playing a central role in their family and society. In many cultures, children not only make adults into parents but also confirm their respectable roles among the adult world-- a position which someone without children cannot possess. However, in this interdependence, adults universally have some power and authority over their children, which are determined by the kinship system, gender
hierarchy and social-political system in a particular society. Authority over children is manifested by children's respect and obligations towards adults, while adults often exercise their power over children regarding work.

It is obvious that criteria involved in the definition of a child such as biological (puberty), legal (labour law), and customs (status), etc., have limitations because their basis is mainly chronological. This suggests that it is not easy to reach an universal definition. At this stage I think that an analysis of the "child concept" in the Vietnamese cultural context, in both traditional and modern senses, would be useful before tackling the problem of children's work.

Traditionally, Vietnamese determine the "maturation" of young people according to age and sex, by a simple definition: "gai thap tam, nam thap luc" (a girl is mature at 13 and a boy, at 16). This definition implies the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence, readiness for marriage. However, it should be noted that in Vietnamese culture, age is usually determined according to the lunar calendar. This system of age is called "tinh tuoi mu", which means that a baby is believed to have been formed by the 'goddess' before actual birth, and as such, a new born baby is considered to be one year old. This is something completely alien to western chronology (tuoi tay) based on the solar calendar. The "tuoi mu" system in counting age is still popular in rural areas while the official census applies western chronology standard for determining age. Because of this, Vietnamese adults are often confused when they talk about their children's age and the researcher may not always get the exact chronological age from his respondents. Moreover, the tradition of showing reverence to the elderly encourages people to mention their "tuoi mu" rather than "tuoi tay".

The "goddess age" system and traditional attitudes towards the maturity of young people are among the reasons behind a practice called "tao hon" (premature marriage). Though considered to be illegal, this practice still exists and has become more frequent recently (Do Thinh, 1994:36-37). It is apparent that the traditional definition of the maturity is not always in line with legal regulations and therefore, should be taken into account while considering the concept of the child in the cultural context of Vietnamese society.

Another aspect which influences the position of the children, their rights and obligations within the family is the kinship structure. My observations indicate that there are at least 3 factors involved. Firstly, the difference between the first-born and the last-born child in which the last-born child is customarily given more indulgence by parents. Secondly, the difference between children borne by the legitimate wife and by concubines. Although polygamy has been officially abrogated by law in Vietnam, men who have more than one wife are tolerated by local customs. Children borne by the first wife have
precedence over those borne by other wives regardless their age. Moreover in the system of extended family the relationships among individuals of the same lineage are based on a certain order of precedence. In this system, children of the same chronological age may belong to different generations and therefore have different obligations and authority. These factors will be taken into account in understanding the work performed by children in Vietnamese society (detailed analysis will be given in chapter 7; for more reference, see also Luong Van Hy, 1989).

While the traditional concept of the child is flexible, to put it mildly, the child concept as applied by official laws is fraught with ambiguities as well. The 1992 Constitution, by stipulating the right to vote for all citizens aged 18 and older (article 54), recognizes that those under 18 are not adults. Following this line, various laws and regulations (The Law on Marriage and Family, The Law on Military Service, The Law on Nationality, etc.), all recognize that people under 18 are socially not adults. Similarly, the Labour Code defines "an under-age worker is someone who is younger than 18 (article 119, SRV: 1994:97). However, it is worth noting that while chronological age is used as a benchmark, all these laws do not give a clear cut definition on a boundary age of a child. There are legalistic ambiguities in determining the age of "the child". The 1994 Penal Code stipulates that people aged between 14 and under 16 years have to bear penal responsibility for serious, intentional offenses and those aged 16 and older shall bear full penal responsibility for any offense they commit (article 58, SRV 1994: 145). The 1993 Law on Education is determined to universalize the primary education for the people between 6 and 14 (article 1) while the Labour Code "prohibits the recruitment of workers who are less than 15 years old (article 120). Interestingly, while all existing laws do not recognize people under 18 years of age legally as adults, they do not consider people aged between 15 and 18 as "children". The Law on the Protection, Care and Education of Children includes only those under 16 (article 1; Vu Phap Luat, 1994). As it is explained by the law-makers:

People under 14 years of age are deemed unable to fully perceive and control their actions while people between 14 and 16 should be able to perceive what is good, what is bad. (Quoc Viet, 1993:141-142).

As pointed out previously, while it is difficult to delineate a clear-cut boundary age of a child, traditional practices and existing laws provide an interesting point of departure for approaching the child in the Vietnamese context: Those over 16 years old are no

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5 However, marriage ages for men and women are different. The Law on Marriage and the Family stipulates the minimum marriageable age for men is 20. For women, this is 18. (Vu Ngoc Binh (ed.), 1993).

6 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as some one who is under 18 years old.
longer considered "children". However, as suggested by Nieuwenhuys (1994), if we group those aged between 16 and 18 into "adult" category, we would wrongly suggest that they are socially adults. ⁷

In terms of age, the difficulty in determining the child concept reflects clearly that childhood is a long process of acculturation and socialization. One cannot one day wake up and become an adult. Therefore, a clear-cut boundary between the child and the adult should be regarded as a representative parameter for the research purpose.

Because of this, "children", as referred to in my study, are people under 16 years of age, and the focus will be on the age group between 6 and 15. This age group is also the target of various child labour studies (White 1976; Nieuwenhuys 1994; Reynolds 1991), which may facilitate comparative researches on child labour in the developing world. Moreover, the age of 15 is determined as the basic minimum age for employment by the International Labour Standard (ILO:1986). Nevertheless, to avoid arbitrary measures in the data collection process, observations were also extended to the age group of 16-18 and in some cases, data on labour of this age group are used for comparison.

Child work

The criteria applied to the concept relating to children's work vary widely, and the lack of such a conceptualization has been the main cause for the gap of information on the economic roles of children.

In general, current approaches to work performed by children are dominated by economic considerations. These approaches differentiate children's work as economic and non-economic, productive and non-productive, or sometimes use wages (paid and unpaid) as criteria of definition. Ahmad, for example, defines child labour as

"activities by children below the age of 14 years for remuneration, undertaken in institutional settings for third parties on regular basis with the underlying idea of earning a livelihood for themselves or their families" (Ahmad 1990:9).

This approach leaves some gaps yet to be covered if a more thorough analysis of child work is to be achieved. Because it deals only with the participation of children in the wage labour force, it neglects most children's work that occurs outside this sector. Additionally, empirical observations on the daily activities of children indicate that it is

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⁷ The exclusion of this age group from "children" is, in some instances, problematic because in most cultures people between 16 and 18 are not recognized as adults but as a loose grouping in-between, often referred to as adolescents. However, the concept of adolescent is very flexible. This situation also reflects that the transformation from a 'child' to an 'adult' is a process of gradual socialization. To my knowledge, this age group has been largely overlooked in academic literature.
very difficult to say what is economic and what is not, because in many instances children's contribution is indirect, and very often their labour is not paid.

In reality, the concept of children's work is quite a controversial subject. Its perceptions vary widely, depending on what cultural background and economic circumstances in which child labour takes place. Some work done by children is considered to be service rather than work itself, such as running errands for their parents or taking care of young siblings. Most parents do not consider such chores as work 'per se', or as the children in Giao village called it, "work without name". However, these activities can be construed as work, because if children do not perform these tasks, they would be done by others whose work may be paid in kind or cash. This situation requires that in order to understand children's work, we need to clarify the concept: what kind of children's activities should be considered as "work".

According to Morice, attempts at defining work at the most general level as a simple exertion of physical or intellectual energy is a somewhat unclear and undiscriminating concept. Morice proposes that a definition of work should be related not only to the activity itself but also to its economic and social contexts. He further advocates studying the question of work on the basis of whether or not it constitutes exploitation (Morice 1981:135-36), which often takes place outside the family framework.

Another attempt was made by Maria de la Luz Silva who defines work "as gainful activity for the production of goods or services" (Silva 1981:166). This is an interesting definition with which an approach to children's work can be made. Even though it does not emphasize too much the monetary aspects, it is still rather abstract. The complexity of child work needs more elaboration in a comprehensive definition, as argued by Schildkrout: "Work can only be defined in relation to the age and sex of the person performing a particular task and in the context of the cultural expectations appropriate to this person's status (Schildkrout 1981:94). On this basis, he proposes a definition of children's work as

"any activity done by children which either contributes to production, gives adults free time, facilitates the work of others, or substitutes for the employment of others" (1981:95).

This definition opens up various channels to analyze children's work in different situations and economic-cultural contexts. It allows researchers to approach child work from a broader perspective, which helps to understand the dialectical relation between work done by children and appreciation by society toward their work. For this reason, Schildkrout's concept of child work will be adopted as a guideline for data collection and analysis of children's work in this study.
By taking a wider framework for analyzing children's economic activities, I do not make a distinction between "child work" as something "acceptable" and "child labour" "unacceptable", which tend to be common in some recent literature on this subject (ILO 1993; George 1990). George, for instance, distinguishes child labour as "the employment of children and the extraction of their productivity for the economic gain of another, with debilitating ramifications on the psychological and physical development of the child", which is different from child work where the child is supposed to actively participate in the decision making and the appropriation of resources, and "the whole work process is a learning experience, entered into willingly." (George 1990:22-23). The differentiation of children's work into acceptable and unacceptable is, as criticized by White, "resulting from the awkward combination of protectionist approaches with the old 'abolitionist' legacy (White 1994: 47). Such an attitude towards children's work is, in fact, an adults' view which neglects the voices of working children, many of whom I talked with in the course of this study, just as White points out:

It is impossible to draw a clear and unambiguous line between 'child work' (the more acceptable forms of children's work, which are relatively unharmful and in cases may even be beneficial) and 'child labour', unacceptable, exploitative and harmful forms of children's work, a 'social evil' (White 1996:10).

Moreover, the exploitation of working children cannot be easily be determined by "the extraction of their productivity for economic gain of another", as a measure used for adult work (Nardinelli 1990; Nieuwenhuys 1995).

Personally I prefer to use the term "children's work" rather than "child labour" in my writing, because it not only refers to work as an economic activity but also covers its social significance in a wider context.

Classification of children's work

There are considerable differences in the existing literature on the criteria for classifying children's work. This situation, on the one hand, reflects that "the desirable typology depends on the analytical focus of the research" (Rodgers and Standing 1981:1). On the other hand, it reveals that a uncritical application of the classification of children's work into different environments and situations may drive the process of data collection and analysis into irrelevancy or inadequacy.

In an elaborate paper designed for child employment studies, Rodgers and Standing distinguish nine most important categories of child activity, including: 1) Domestic work; 2) Non-domestic, non-monetary work; 3) Tied or bonded labour; 4) Wage labour; 5) Marginal economic activities; 6) Schooling; 7) Idleness and unemployment; 8) Recreation and leisure; 9) Reproductive (1981:1-11).
This typology of child activities is fraught with problems. It covers all types of activities, including sleeping and eating, idleness and leisure, etc., which can hardly be considered as work. Moreover, the criteria for classifying are not clear-cut and tend to overlap, which make the task of data collection difficult.

In general, most classifications of children's work, for instance, Morice (1981:136), Dube 1981:201-203, White 1994:46, Sabattini 1996:168), are based on several criteria in which both sectors of work and their nature are combined. These criteria can be generalized into 6 main characters:

1. The sectors in which work takes place (agriculture, industry, service, or urban and rural)
2. The fields of activities (productive and non productive or reproductive/domestic).
3. Remuneration (paid and unpaid)
4. Time (full-time, part-time, seasonal)
5. The nature of work (tied, bonded, employee, self-employed)
6. Work site (at home and outside, indoors and outdoors)

While these criteria are useful for studying children's work in different environments, they still leave some vagueness. Dube's classification for example, separates 3 groups of children's work: 1) Domestics; 2) Productive; and 3) Income-earning activities (1981:201-204). As indicated by empirical observations, it is difficult to draw a dividing line between productive and income-earning activities because productive activities are, in many instances, aimed at earning incomes. Similarly, domestic work is understood as activities taking place in the home, and without pay. This is one of the most common activities of Third World children. In reality, many children are hired to perform this work for wages. And in this case, labour is performed as domestic work but labour relations are not the same.

This suggests that while approaching children's work, it is necessary to indicate the sectors in which work takes place and the social relations of such activities. My own experience with children's work in rural Vietnam reveals that their economic activities are quite diverse, full of complexity and mobility. While agricultural production is still the dominant activity of most peasant households, there are various economic activities in non-farm sectors in which children are engaged in large numbers.

As pointed out earlier, my research is to investigate the patterns of children's work in an economy in transition. In such conditions, one may suppose some types of work have
changed while others have developed recently. For data collection and eventual analysis, I categorize rural children's work into three major sectors in which work takes place: 1) domestic work, 2) farm work, and 3) non-farm work.

However one must assume that children's work has changed not only in types but also in nature. An important aspect in the study on children's work is the social relations connected with their labour. Economic activities take place in an intricate set of relationships, among them social relations among people, (Marx 1980:740). These relations are bound to change under different socio-economic conditions. It is therefore necessary to consider the social aspects of children's work in a proper socio-economic context if the nature and significance of their work are to be understood. This can be observed and analyzed through the way children work and how results of their work are controlled and how their labour is used and appreciated.

By taking the village as an unit of analysis and putting children's work in the context of a transition economy, I will take into account all types of children's work and analyze their work in relation to concrete socio-economic circumstances of two periods before and after economic reforms.

Doing fieldwork in one's own culture

The concept of field work is deeply rooted in the tradition of the Western ethnography. Generally, when anthropologists conduct their studies in an alien and exotic society, they often begin by establishing good relations with the indigenous inhabitants and observing their culture. During colonial times, following this fashion, French scholars conducted a number of researches on cultures of the local population in Vietnam, including the ethnic minorities (Kleinen, 1997). However, since the political change in 1954 up to the present day, there have been very few foreign researchers allowed to conduct field work for a lengthy period of time in this country. Meanwhile until very recently, serious field work has been neglected by native scholars.

Unlike most western anthropologists conducting their researches in alien societies, I have carried out a long term field work in my own society. There have been discussions on the advantages and disadvantages of anthropologists who do their field work in familiar settings (Razavi 1992:152-163). Personally, during a year doing field research on child work in a Vietnamese village, I have encountered some interesting experiences which may serve as possible topics for further discussions. Among these are the sensitivity of the subject of child labour and the relationships between the researcher and his respondents at both institutional and household levels.
Political factor

While preparing a research proposal on child labour in Vietnam, very soon I received various reactions from my colleagues and professors at the University of Hanoi and the Social Research Institute. Some confidential advices came up to me, to the effect that this particular subject is not serious enough from an academic viewpoint, and it does not augur well for my future and so on. While some seriously questioned about the scientific significance of the topic of child labour, others considered it an outright political issue rather than an academic one. Despite the fact that child labour has long been a social and economic issue, for many local researchers and policy makers, this is a totally new subject. And those social scientists who might be fully aware of the problem, preferred to avoid this sensitive area, fearing it may cause them undue trouble.

Those policy makers and government officials with whom I had interviews, tended to regard child labour as a political issue, somehow connected with sensitive matters such as human rights and children's rights, which are hot topics in the international arena at the moment. They insisted that the government has done and will do everything possible to promote the well-being of children, pointing out that adequate laws and regulations have been promulgated for the protection of children, and Vietnam was among the first to have ratified the United Nations Conventions on the Right of the Child (1989). It seems for them such a legal system is good enough to protect working children from abuses and exploitation.

I should add that while my research project on child labour was not received with enthusiasm, fortunately there was no interference. This was partly explained by the fact that I am an "insider", considered to be more trustworthy than an "outsider".

Researcher-respondents relationship

One of the most essential conditions for social anthropologists to carry out their field research successfully is the relationship between the researcher and their respondents. This will have a great effect on the reliability of qualitative data (Devereux & Hoddinot 1992; Streefkerk 1993). My own experience indicates that even though the researcher is an "insider" who does field work in his own society, speaks the same language as his respondents and has good knowledge of the local customs, he may still face difficulties if there is no confidence between the researcher and respondents.

As a matter of procedures, I started my field research by an official introduction from the local authority to the villagers. The head of Giao village took me to visit some families in his village. He proudly introduced me as a "central cadre" (can bo trung uong) who would come and stay in the village for a year to do a research on children's work and education. I was a bit surprised at being called a "central cadre", since I had told him I was a teacher at the University of Hanoi. The head of village later explained to me that there was no big difference between a teacher and a cadre, but a "cadre" is no doubt more
impressive than "teacher" in the eyes of the villagers, and this in the end would facilitate my field work.

The first week in the village passed smoothly while I spent time examining local reports and statistics kept at the commune's office. However, when I attempted to get to know the local people, I soon encountered a rather cold reception. While they did not refuse to see me, our conversations tended to be very formal. My requests to talk to the children were often turned down politely by their parents with such excuses as: "They are just children", and "they are too young and naive to talk any sense". Faced with such negative reactions, I began to think that my role as a researcher seemed to have aroused suspicion among the villagers. Eventually I found out that just before I arrived, there had been a robbery attempt in the village and the robbers were caught and killed by the local villagers. Later I found out that the villagers had taken me for a policeman who was sent to investigate the robbery.

My promotion to "central cadre" by the village head did little in facilitating my research at the earlier stages. A particular event made my presence more than suspect in the eyes of the villagers. When a band of gamblers was caught red-handed in a high stake game, I was considered to be a police informer. About the same time an inspector from the district came down to assess the taxes to be collected from the local wood carving industry. Again my presence in the village was suspected to have something to do with tax collection.

But somehow I managed to clear up this misunderstanding with the villagers at an early stage. And once trust was established I was able to carry out my work without any further hindrance. The lesson from this experience is that the indigenous researcher often takes for granted his relatively good access to local population and therefore might neglect to cultivate good relationship with respondents.

Great care in the way how children should be approached has also been learnt. The Vietnamese have a saying "ra duong hoi nguoi gia, ve nha hoi tre nho", which means that “if you want to know your way around, ask the elderly; if you want to know what really goes on in the home, ask the children". This saying reveals a behavioural pattern in the daily routine of the Vietnamese. It implies that one should not ask the children about "kitchen stories" in the absence of adult members of their families when you are still considered a stranger in their eyes. And the researcher should only try to interview children after a good rapport has been established between him and the head of the child’s family. This principle is relevant particularly in rural Vietnam, where "children affairs" are

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8 The term commune (xa) as referred to in this study denotes an administrative unit under the district level. In Vietnam, a commune may include several villages or a single village, depends on the size of village. In my case study, Gia o village is a dependent unit managed by the commune.
very sensitive and the patriarchal culture and the power of male heads of family are still very much alive.

Hull particularly draws attention of the researcher working on child labour to some obtrusiveness inherent in the process of participant observation which may change the children's work patterns in response to a researcher's presence (Hull 1981: 55). This is quite significant if the period of field research is limited. My own experience shows that one needs time and patience to gain the children's trust before they would talk to you. Moreover, the gap of age, gender and social position between the researcher and his child respondents, particularly girls, could be a handicap. In a society dominated by men, girls' opinions are usually overlooked. During my fieldwork in Giao village, I found that it occurred very often that a male head of household interfered in our talks by saying that his daughter (or wife) was "ignorant", making them more shy. But this bias subsided gradually when I was no longer considered an outsider in their eyes. I noticed that sometimes the participation of male heads in our conversations turned out to become an interesting discussion among the interviewer, parents and their children. But to do this, one certainly needs not only patience but also enough time in the field.

The book: focus, justification and presentation

This research is a description of children's work in the context of an economy in transition in rural Vietnam. The emphasis of the study is placed on qualitative aspects to investigate the economic roles of children in a changing society. Based on the analysis of changes of rural socio-economic life as a consequence of recent economic reforms, the study attempts to access their impact upon the patterns of children's economic activities in a village located in the Red River delta of northern Vietnam.

The problem of child labour is multi-dimensional and ought to be considered at several levels. First we shall examine changes of children's involvement in work under the collective system and their participation in labour process after the introduction of the economic reforms which recognized the individual peasant household as a production unit. In order to get insight into the patterns of children's economic activities, data will be collected and analyzed according to types/sectors of work, then classified under domestic, farm and non-farm activities.

At a higher dimension, the data of child labour collected from the case study of the village will be studied in the framework of structural changes of production, especially in the distribution of land and the development of small scale industries. The data will also be examined in the light of social-cultural constraints, intra-family relationships, kinship and social network.
Furthermore, we shall scrutinize the changes in the relationship between education and child labour, as indicated by the increase of the drop-out rate since economic reforms. While this may reflect the intensive involvement of children in the labour force, it also poses a dilemma to the authorities in the field of public education during the transitional period.

It is unavoidable that questions may arise concerning data collection, whether the quantitative data support arguments and to what extent the qualitative data are reliable.

Naturally, solid data on children's participation in the work process have to be a prerequisite if one is to examine the changes of their economic activities from a historical perspective. In reality, such an approach is not that simple. Firstly, children's participation in labour force has not always been covered by official statistics. The periodic census only focused on large scale industries and services in state-run sectors while most work done by children occurs at the household level and in the informal economic sectors. Secondly, the criteria for collecting data on working children are not always uniformly applied in statistics--such notions as age groups, work and labour, etc. For this, even when the statistical data on child labour is available, the comparison is often a difficult task. Thirdly, the quantitative data obtained from the field work of my current study, based on techniques of counting labour and time-location budget, may be incompatible with labour data of an earlier (pre-economic reforms) period collected on the basis of recall methods.

For all these reasons, the emphasis of this study is placed on qualitative analysis rather than quantitative. Meanwhile, the available statistics on child labour and education will be used as much as possible to support the qualitative data.

Another aspect is the subjectivity of qualitative information. This problem has actually been raised since the 1960s among social anthropologists who conducted their field work by participant observation. While the aims of social scientific studies are to reach the objective explanation, the subjectivity of the researcher still remains as an undeniable factor during the process of collecting and analyzing the data (Breman 1985; Nieuwenhuys 1994). On the other hand, respondents are liable to be subjective on the particular subject, which may lead them to idealize or to deny their past experiences. Fully aware of these biases during my field work, I have cross checked these data by interviewing different people at various times and confronting them with available written sources. Moreover, the dialectical approach to anthropological knowledge, as pointed out by Kloos (1988:288), is an interaction between the socio-cultural backgrounds of field workers and the people they study. It is fair to say that "the ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial-committed and incomplete", (Clifford 1986:7).

Focusing on the impact of economic reforms upon the children's work, this study is not designed to find a solution to the child labour issue. However, by pointing out the
changing process of children's economic activities, and analyzing the problem of children's entry into the labour market in a fast changing socio-economic environment, it is my wish to make a contribution to the on-going debate on this very topical issue.

The available literature, though still scarce at present, points to a similar trend in the increase of child labour and the decline of school attendance in other economies in transition, for example the case of China (Fyfe 1985; Croll 1995; see also: Carnoy & J. Samoff (eds.), 1990; Cornia & Sipos (eds.), 1991). These findings suggest the desirability for further comparative studies on child labour in transitional economies.

The research results are presented in nine chapters. Chapter 1 introduces principles and experiences while doing fieldwork on child labour. It particularly suggests a way to look at the rural children's economic activities by classifying their work into three major domains (domestic, farm and non-farm work) from which the social relations of children's work can be examined. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework for analyzing children's work in the context of social change. Adopting an approach to child labour as a social construction, the chapter analyses the structural changes of the socio-economic system and their possible effects on children. Chapter 3 expounds in details the process of rural transformation taking place in Giao village.

The second part examines changes in children's economic activities in Giao village before and after economic reforms in the 1980s, on the fields of domestic work (chapter 4), farm work (chapter 5) and non-farm work (chapter 6). The findings indicate that while gender and age are still the essential factors of children's work, their involvement in work tends to become more intensive and the nature of their work also change accordingly, particularly in the market employment sector.

The third part considers how the cultural constraints, social institutions and formal education impact on the process of childhood, socialization and work. Chapter 7 analyses the constraints of the family, patrilineage, traditional ethics in relation to the child and child work. It further points out that social value of children is often the deep cause of high fertility in rural Vietnam while the family morality (Dao Hieu, filial duty) imposed by Confucian ethics still prevailing in the society puts more obligations rather than rights on the children. Chapter 8 examines the linkage between children's work and education. High drop-out rate and the depressing state in schooling support the assumption of intensive involvement of children in market employment since economic reforms.

Finally, the conclusion will summarize the major analyses presented in the thesis. The implication is that it is worth considering the issues of child labour in the light of production system, socio-cultural constraints and public education, and that child labour studies which neglect the larger context of society might not yield valuable insights for practical actions.
Map 1. Vietnam and Hai Duong province