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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Chapter 5

COOPERATIVE, HOUSEHOLD
AND CHILD WORK ON THE FARM

Ruong sau trau nai khong bang con gai dau long
A first-born daughter is worth more
than a piece of fertile rice land or a good buffalo
(Local saying)

Introduction

This chapter examines children’s work in the agricultural sector. It attempts to analyze the changing patterns of children’s farm work since the collective economy was abandoned and rice land was redistributed to individual peasant households.

Traditionally in Vietnam, children’s work in agriculture is regarded as a fact of life that “has existed from time immemorial in one form or another”, it is an integral part of family life that children should work alongside other household members, often under the direct supervision of their parents. This often “helps keeping them safe from more extreme forms of exploitation to which children may be subjected when working on their own or for third parties” (Vu Ngoc Binh 1994:47). Such a view presumes that children’s work occurs only within the family context and therefore should pose no problems at all. Furthermore, it suggests that children’s work on the farm is, by its nature, unchangeable, as if children’s involvement in agricultural work is immune to changes regardless of social circumstances. Such ingrained assumption is, to say the least, oversimplified and should be reconsidered.

Based on empirical observations on children’s economic activities in Giao village, this study assumes that decollectivization and the advent of the household economy have brought about significant changes with regard to children’s work in rural Vietnam. Such changes can be observed in terms of work organization, gender division of tasks, the way in which agricultural work is perceived and valued in comparison to other economic activities, and the social relations involved in work.

Child labor studies in agrarian societies generally agree that children are regarded as a source of labor, to be put to work at an early age (Fyfe 1989; Sahoo 1995), and that children’s agricultural work is basically an apprenticeship and vital to women (Reynolds 1991:XXVII), which has often been clouded “unduly by moral considerations” (Nieuwenhuys 1995). The evidence collected from my own field research in rural northern Vietnam shows an increasing trend of children’s involvement in work since the economic system changed in the 1980s. The question can be raised as
to why child labor is much more extensive under the individual household economy than under the previous co-operative system and why peasant households make their children work. Empirical observations on the role of children in relation to the production system will be provided to understand this change.

Agricultural cooperative and child worker

“\"My childhood was bitter and monotonous. Just barely 12 years old, the plough-beam was already put on my thin shoulders, and when I went to work, I felt as if the sharp edges of the plough were poking at my legs. I used to get up early in the morning and went to work on the farm when the grass was still soaked with the night dew. My bare feet were frozen and the cold rushed to my brain. I used to get home when darkness already fell on the rice-fields and flocks of bat were flying out to search for food.

I did all kinds of heavy tasks, which were normally performed by male adults, such as plowing, harrowing, and carrying stuffs even though I was still a little boy. I also did other jobs, which were often assigned to females, such as weeding and fertilizing. I still remember that because I was so small, when I bent down to weed, I almost disappeared into the patch of rice plants while my face and neck were torn by sharp rice-leaves. What annoyed me most at the time was to hear all kinds of naughty stories told by middle-aged matrons whom I had to work with. Some women even pulled down their trousers and peed noisily right into the field despite my presence. I just stood there, next to them, deep in the mud, blushing with shame. It seemed that for them, I did not exist as a boy but something like a rock. I tried to ignore them and went on working in silence. But next day, next month and next year, I had to go on working with these village women. These were unpleasant experiences I endured during my childhood, but strangely enough when I grew up and left the village behind to fight on the southern front, these became sweet memory which followed me everywhere until the end of the war. (Quoted from life stories told by Nguyen., a village and veteran aged 45 years).

The story told by Tan who spent his childhood in Giao village during the 'American' war tends to support the view that agricultural collectivization provided the men for military mobilization, leaving women and children to handle agricultural production on their own. This was described by some as the wartime “feminization of agriculture” (Werner & Luu 1993). There is no doubt that the women did play a large role in “running the coops and brought in the crops” during the years of war but it does not, however, imply that when women played the main role in agricultural production, child labor would be intensified accordingly. My study on the utility of child labor during these years indicates that it was the organization of work and structure of employment under the co-operative system that put limits on children’s involvement in farming tasks. In order to gain insights into the nature and extent of children’s involvement in work within the co-operative framework, I traced back the types of work organized by production brigades and households, and ascertained how children were assigned to do these. Such an approach soon proved to be effective. Most villagers recalled their childhood during the wartime as a period of sorrow, poverty, deprivation and starvation, while little was said about the burden of work. I came to realize that the experience recalled by Ngoc Tan
above turned out to be one of the rare cases when children were burdened with work at a young age. My interviews with villagers confirm that it was the collective mechanism and socialist ideals that kept children from intensive involvement in farming tasks. To shed more light on children’s work on the farm in the previous period, an attempt will be made to reconstruct the structure of the co-operative’s employment in which the position of child labor will be analyzed.

**Relationship between collective and family economy in the co-operative of Giao**

- **Lam:** At the age of eleven and twelve I spent the whole day on the farm.
- **Chinh:** To work?
- **Lam:** No!
- **Chinh:** What did you do there for the whole day?
- **Lam:** Catching craps, fishing and tending the buffalo
- **Chinh:** Why didn’t you do farm work?
- **Lam:** Even if I wanted it, I was not allowed to do.
- **Chinh:** How come?
- **Lam:** The Doi (production brigade) would not assign tasks for children under the working age. My family was short of main laborers, so the doi assigned me to tend a buffalo for work-points.
- **Chinh:** I heard some children also did farm work as adults.
- **Lam:** Are you kidding? Only children from households without a main laborer were assigned to do farm work. Children tending buffaloes were no longer assigned farming tasks. Those who told you they worked on the farm, they perhaps referred to some pieces of work their parents had contracted with the doi and they worked as retainers for their parents, not for the coop!

A central feature of agricultural production under the co-operative system was that labor was organized and controlled by doi san xuat (production brigades). Between 1960-1976, Giao was a village-based cooperative with four production brigades. Since 1976, when the co-operative system was developed into the so-called “high level” agricultural co-operative (hop tac xa nong nghiep bac cao), Giao became a part of it while the production units (doi) remained as before. Like many agricultural co-operatives in northern Vietnam, the main task of the co-operative of Giao (after 1976, called Luong Dien) was the production of foodstuff, mostly rice. The agricultural activities of the co-operative were geared towards specialization. While the production of rice was considered as the major activity in implementing the state plan, animal husbandry such as pig-raising was also promoted, aimed at providing manure for rice cultivation and at the same time, ensuring the obligatory annual deliveries of meat to the state in accordance with the quotas fixed in the plan.

Besides these, other production activities which were defined as supplementary (nganh phu) involving occupations such as brick-making, manufacturing and repairing

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38 Writings on the organization of work in the cooperative of Giao are largely based on the *Lich su Dang bo xa Luong Dien*, (A history of the Communist Party, Luong Dien chapter, 1930-1990), a book prepared by local cadres who were formerly in charge of the co-operative. Giao village is a part of Luong Dien commune.
work tools and transport vehicles, processing food products, making cattle fodder, etc. These were also organized to meet the internal needs of the co-operative and its members.

By emphasizing the production of foodstuffs, Giao co-operative included both rice and subsidiary crops. As a rule, rice cultivation was predominant while sub-crops (sweet potato, maize, potato, soybean and vegetables) were to support mainly animal husbandry. The truth is that these secondary crops sometimes turned out to be vital for co-op members in struggling against starvation, especially in the periods between the two rice crops.

It was said that the co-operative was the best way to improve work conditions and increase production but after two decades of collective work, the material and technical foundation of the agricultural co-operative of Giao remained weak, apart from improvements of the irrigation system and the mechanization of a few tasks by the use of small machines. Manual power was intensively used in farming. Most of the tasks such as watering, plowing, harrowing, transplanting, weeding and harvesting were still done by traditional methods.

The cycle of food crops in the co-operative of Giao was based on two rice crops and one sub-crop. These are vu thang Nam (5th-lunar-month rice), transplanted in January/February and harvested in June, and vu thang Muoi (10th-lunar-month rice), transplanted in July/August and harvested in November. Subsidiary crop or vu dong (winter crop) started between October and February was for potatoes, maize, and various kinds of beans and vegetables. Although sub-crops were promoted, they did not figure among the targets of the obligatory items in the state plan but rather it was a way to diversify agricultural production and partly to help improving the co-op members' incomes.

During the co-operative period, nearly all the means of production of village households were collectivized and managed by the co-operative. The labor force came under collective management and was used for collective production. However, as many villagers could recall, the collectivized economy could meet only a part of their needs although they spent most of their time working for the co-op. To improve the household incomes, they had to rely on the so-called “5% land”. Five percent land was defined as “the patch of land reserved for each household member (after collectivization of land) which is not greater than five per cent of the cultivable area per inhabitant of the commune. It is allotted for the purpose of growing food crops, vegetables, fruit trees and raising family husbandry” (Nguyen Xuan Lai (ed.), 1975).

Despite claims from the agricultural co-operative leaders that the collectivized economy played a leading role in the local economy while the family production was negligible, peasants reported that this small piece of land (5%) was an important source of
their household incomes, from which they could get extra food, animal fodder, and cash to pay for clothes, medicine, education costs and house furniture.

The five-per-cent land was regarded as the center-piece of the individual family economy under the co-operative regime. This land was usually very small, its size depending on the area of land they cultivated for the co-operative and number of household members. In Giao village, the range varied between 150 and 500 square meters per household. It was here that the family labor was utilized for recycling crops and enhancing productivity. There was ample evidence to believe that labor was intensively utilized in family plots rather than on collectivized land. The productivity from collectivized rice fields was usually between 60 and 70 kilograms of paddy per sao (360 sq.m) while family plots were producing 120-130 kilograms/sao per harvest. Villagers said most families put more labor, care and fertilizer into their own plots than they did on collective rice lands. Most respondents told me that when they were still six or seven years old, they were already taken to work on their family's "five per cent land" because their parents had to spend most of their time working for the co-op. Interviews with former leaders of Giao co-operative reveal that more than one-third of household incomes of the coop's members came from the family economy.

Within the family economy, animal husbandry also played an important role. The co-op members were not, however, free to decide whether they should raise animals. Compulsory deliveries of pig dung imposed on each household imply that they had to raise a certain number of pigs, and this was computed on the basis of the area allotted and the quantity of paddy received yearly as remuneration. 39

Organization of work in the co-operative and the position of child worker

Labor force in the co-operative of Giao village was organized into two major groups. The first group consisted of specialized work-teams responsible for a particular activity, working directly on the farm (plowing and harrowing, transplanting, weeding, fertilizing, crop protection). The second group included irrigation teams, animal husbandry teams, small mechanical teams and subsidiary occupation teams.

We could not find from official local sources any mention of children's involvement in the specialized work-teams. However life stories and interviews with villagers reveal that in some cases, children were admitted to work in these teams when they were still under 16. Officially, the teams could only admit laborers at working age (16 or older) but these respondents said that they were accepted because their households had

39 A report by the Central Committee for Agriculture of the Communist Party of Vietnam indicates that the proportion of household incomes from collective economy in the Red River delta was about 40 per cent. This rate was reduced to 27 per cent in the 1976-1980 period. Agriculture was still the largest source of peasant household incomes (Ban NNTU, 1991:218).
Within the production brigades, we found that children were mainly involved in work of a temporary nature. Their main tasks were to carry out temporary projects such as preparation of beds for cultivation of sweet potatoes or sowing of maize, getting rid of rice parasites and serving in special production campaigns. Many respondents said they did take part in some types of work such as growing and harvesting sweet potatoes organized by temporary labor groups composed of workers of different age groups. Children performed light tasks such as gathering tubers while adults did the plowing and transporting crops home. A former head of production brigade estimated that the proportion of child workers taking part in such temporary projects was about 10 to 20 per cent of total labor force. Work in these labor groups were not regular because the groups were set up only temporarily, lasting from several days to a few weeks and were dissolved when the work was done.

In order to utilize fully the labor force within the production brigades, co-operative members were divided into two types, called *lao dong chinh* (main laborers) and *lao dong phu* (assistant laborers). Main laborers included those aged from 16 to 55 (for females) and to 60 (for males) while assistant laborers were persons older than 55 (females) and 60 (males) and those younger than 16. Main laborers were classified into various categories: strong workers (group A), workers of middle strength (group B), nursing mothers and weak workers (group C). Such a classification of labor formed the basis for work distribution (*dieu cong*), aimed at “utilizing all available labor force” (DBLD 1993). Tasks on the farm (plowing, planting, harvesting to name a few) were called *lao dong truc tiep* (direct labor) while other activities such as management and services were regarded as *lao dong gian tiep* (indirect labor).

It was expected that each category of worker would contribute a definite number of compulsory workdays per year for the co-operative. For instance, workers of group A were expected to contribute 230 - 250 work-days while those of group B was to work between 150 and 200 work-days. Those who did not work enough for the co-operative might be penalized. Assistant workers were not required to contribute a fixed number of workdays per year. They were encouraged to take part in craft teams or gardening where they could earn indirect work-points. As young assistant workers, children were often involved in two types of work: 1) miscellaneous tasks in temporary work-teams or contracted pieces of work and 2) tending buffaloes and cattle for the coop.

The payment system for the coop members was various. I could be based on a fixed daily payment (*cong nhat*), which was applied irrespective of the work done but on the basis of 8 hours working day, or based on piece-work (*cong khoan*), which was applied to the worker for each piece of work done individually and to the group for work requiring
the co-operation of several workers. Payment of this type was made on the basis of the quality and amount of work done.

As the jobs involved in crop-growing varied in nature, and conditions of production differed from one job to another, the head of work-teams had to base his judgment on *chi tieu* (work norms) fixed by the coop to evaluate the work result. Work norms were calculated in *cong diem* (payment points). For instance, the coop regulated that transplanting one *sao* (360 sq.m.) was paid 6 points, so if more *saos* were transplanted, more points would be paid accordingly. These work-points were paid not on the basis of work time or work amount but on work units. Such a way of payment encouraged peasants to pay more attention to payment points than the work itself. Consequently, work enthusiasm declined considerably.

During the second half of the 1960s, a new form of labor management appeared in Giao cooperative, called *ba khoan* (the household contract system). *Ba khoan* was a kind of contract signed between the production brigade and coop members. This new system was based on three main points: 1) households were responsible for their products or production based on the standards set by the co-operative; 2) production costs such as seeds, fertilizers, insecticides, fodder for draft animals, were calculated on the basis of specific norms set by the co-operative; 3) workdays and points were paid accordingly by the brigades.

With this contract system, the brigade transferred part of production activities to peasant households, aimed at “making use of its manpower as best as possible while the co-operative retained the right to dictate the terms of cultivation”. In practice, the application of the “three points contract system” was flexible. The brigade simply redistributed rice land to its members and households farmed for own their account and paid part of the crop at harvest time according to rates fixed in advance. It was said that peasants “breathed more easily” under this system because they could keep part of the products that exceeded the contracted quota. As far as labor utilization is concerned, the production would not interfere with its system of workpoints and workdays but rather leave them to households. Respondents told me they achieved better yields as all available labor force of the household, including children, was mobilized to work on the farm. Production inputs, mainly labor-intensive, were concentrated in paddy cultivation. This led to an increase of children being involved in the household labor force. The contract system did not, however, exist for long. It was criticized as “a return to small scale individual farming, contrary to the principles of socialist management of the co-operative” (DBLD 1993). The *Khoan* system then reappeared as a contract form for specific jobs for short periods of time, handed out to individuals or fixed labor teams, known as *khoan viec* (contracted tasks). Major jobs such as plowing, harrowing, planting, weeding and harvesting were normally assigned to fixed labor teams under a contract. Other tasks like
watering, clearing the rice-field borders, pulling rice seedlings and hoeing the fields that could not be plowed by tractor or draft animals, etc.) were distributed to individuals. Certain tasks (watering, weeding, pulling rice seedling) were also assigned to households without main laborers so that their children or the elderly could take part to earn “work points”. While there was no information on children’s participation in plowing and harrowing teams, many female respondents said that they did take part in labor teams contracted to work in planting, weeding, transporting and harvesting when they were still young (under 16). The production brigades split its labor force into work teams each consisting of 10 to 15 persons. A few young girls were put into various groups and these worked alongside other women as apprentices. Boys were expected to take part in such tasks as tending buffaloes and cattle, watering and transporting but no information was given about their participation in fixed labor teams together with male adults.

When I interviewed the former chairman of Giao co-operative, I found some notebooks called so ghi cong diem (workpoints records) of the plowing team (doi cay) recorded in the 1970s, which was still kept in his house. These notebooks did not give any indication of children under 16 working as members of the team, but talks with the former chairman and others who tended buffaloes for the co-operative gave me some ideas how boys took part in these plowing teams. Normally a plowing team consisted of five or six members who were male adults and four or five draft buffaloes/cattle. Boys tending buffaloes were assigned to serve specific plowing teams. Their tasks were to take care of the buffaloes while the ploughmen were working. These boys got up early in the morning, fed the buffaloes, took them to the fields and delivered them to the ploughmen. While the ploughmen were working, the boys went to cut grass and prepare food for the buffaloes. During the lunch break, ploughmen came home for a short rest while the boys took care of the buffaloes. In the late afternoon the boys again took charge of the buffaloes, giving them food and washing them. As my respondents recalled, tending buffaloes for the co-operative was no easy work. They had to work hard during the working seasons and look after buffaloes with a great care. If the buffaloes under their care were sick or not able to work, the tenders had to give them back to the co-operative. In case of neglect and the buffaloes under their care caused damages to the co-op’s property, penalties in various forms would be applied.

Children tending buffaloes were organized into a specific team called “hop tac xa mang non” (co-operative of young persons), functioning as a volunteer team promoting the tenders’ responsibility to the co-op’s buffaloes. This “co-operative of young persons” regularly held annual competitions among tenders to choose the best who would receive awards from the coop.

Generally speaking, draft cattle tending was assigned to households with numerous children or those without a main laborer. The production brigade would re-assign this task
after 3 or 4 years to ensure "equality" among the member households. In Giao village during the period of collective economy, there were about 20 draft animals and some calves tended by children. Earnings from this task were about 120 work-points (for a calf) and 180 work-points (for a buffalo) for a period of six months, which was equal to the average income of a main laborer for the same period.

Analyzing the organization of work under the co-operative system sheds some interesting light on the position of child labor during that period. While the collective economy was dominant and sources of work in that economy was well controlled by the co-operative, the family economy did co-exist with the "five per cent land". In principle, production brigades accepted only laborers at working ages (16 years upward) but in reality, younger children were also assigned to do some specific tasks within the work teams. Others worked as retainers of their household adults in "contract work". Obviously within the so-called "family economy", child labor was encouraged for raising more household incomes, but with such a small area of land, there was not much work for children to do although some households might cultivate three crops per year.

Another form of child labor outside the co-operative and family framework was work organized by schools and the Young Pioneer, such as pest control and anti-drought campaigns and other special actions at peak harvest time. Children were also required to work on school farms half a day per week and on weekends, mainly to learn farming skills or to raise public budgets. Work of this sort had a more symbolic rather than practical character and was practically abolished after 1978.

Generally speaking, one can say that child labor under the co-operative system was not so widespread as today. Labor management by co-operative and sources of work within a mono rice-culture did not provide many opportunities for children to be put to work. A question still remains to be answered: to which extent were children involved in work under the co-operative regime and how were they paid?

Available data from Giao village was insufficient for me to quantify the workdays contributed by the local children in the past, while no reliable sources or official documents exist in this matter. Based on a survey conducted among 300 co-operatives, including those in the province of Hai Hung of which Giao village was a part, on the use of agricultural labor during 1970-1975, it was estimated that laborers under 16 contributed on average 104 labor days per year, compared to 200 labor days for adults, and their labor was valued at 44 per cent of adults (see table below).
Table 5.1. Children’s participation in farm work as compared to that of adult workers (Calculated on the basis of workdays and earning points by person per year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workers by age groups</th>
<th>1971</th>
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<th>1973</th>
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<td>Days</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Workers age 16-60</strong></td>
<td>192</td>
<td></td>
<td>237</td>
<td></td>
<td>197</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female workers</strong></td>
<td>193</td>
<td></td>
<td>233</td>
<td></td>
<td>190</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Workers over 60</strong></td>
<td>128</td>
<td></td>
<td>143</td>
<td></td>
<td>124</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Workers below 16</strong></td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
<td>101</td>
<td></td>
<td>98</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The above statistics did not, however, differentiate the proportion of children involved in the co-operative labor force, the specific age and gender of these children and whether they were full-time workers or combined work with schooling. We therefore have no way to quantify the extent of child labor under the co-operative system, but data obtained from interviews with Giao people indicate that the number of children involved in farm work was relatively small.

Generally speaking, the system of payment was based on work norms set up by the co-operative. For the type of work paid by fixed daily basis, payment ranged from 7 points to 15 points for an 8 hours workday. Workers with skills and doing heavy tasks were paid higher than those who worked with low skills and doing light tasks. According to this system, child workers were always at the bottom of the pay scale, accounting for about one half to two thirds of payment for adult labor. In case child workers formed part of a work team, their performance would judged by members of the group who would decide on eventual payment. Such a way of collective evaluation known as *bình cong* (public evaluation of workpoints), was often carried out after the workday or when the contracted tasks were completed. In this system, child workers generally received fewer work points than the average workpoints received by adults doing the same job.

Data on children’s work in the agricultural sector collected at the village level suggest that the labor regime managed by co-operative did not give children many chances to work on the collective farm. For more than three decades under the collectivization, the economy of Giao was concentrated on rice growing. Animal husbandry did not develop as a major branch of agricultural production as one might expect while craft manufacturing was at a standstill. Annual reports by the co-operative of Luong Dien give a clear cut
picture of a surplus of agricultural labor right under the collective system, despite the fact that part of village young men were drafted into the army. Strong (able-bodied) laborers at working ages had work for only 190-200 workdays per year instead of 250 days as legally fixed. Work was not enough, and because of lack of incentive, co-operative members worked only 4 or 5 hours per day on average instead of the regulatory 8 hours. Rice mono-culture also created a chronic under-employment during the period between two harvests. Furthermore, strict labor control by the co-operative tied peasants so closely to the collective that there was no space for economic mobility and diversification, which had existed before the implementation of collectivization. It is interesting to note that most life stories recalled by villagers often spoke about the miseries and difficulties they suffered during their childhood, the daily struggle against starvation and poverty. It turned out that catching fish, crabs, shrimp and gathering wild vegetables, gleaning rice or sweet potatoes left over in the coop’s fields after harvesting were the main source of children’s work during the collective period. Such activities were so popular that almost everyone when talking about their childhood preferred to start with telling stories of catching crabs or tending buffaloes. These activities occurred haphazardly and quite often, were aimed at improving the family's daily diet.

Most children started to do some simple farm work for the co-operative at the age of 12, while girls tended to start earlier than boys. There was an increasing trend to involve children more intensively in farm work under the contract systems set up by the coop, the *three points contract* in the second half of the 1960s and particularly, the *output contract system* (*khoan san pham*) applied in the early 1980s. In the family economy, children were put to work at an earlier age, at the average age of 10. Although there is no clear-cut division as regards the nature of work between girls and boys in farm work, girls tended to do more in planting, weeding, fertilizing while boys took part in tending buffaloes, transporting and watering. Both girls and boys were equally engaged in harvesting. The idealization of children’s roles in society and the high rate of school attendance during the period of “socialist construction” imply that productive activities taken up by children on the farm were more symbolic and had a apprenticeship character rather than being absolutely vital for the survival of their families.

**Decollectivization and intensification of child work**

By the late 1970s, collective agricultural production in the Red River delta fell into

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40 Between 1962 and 1975, 728 men and 43 women from 353 of a total 927 households of the co-operative of Luong Dien had joined the army, among whom 101 persons died in battle. The co-operative made a contribution of 7,628 tons of paddy and 279,289 kilograms of meat to the government (DBLD 1993:122).

41 These crabs lived in small holes deep in the rice fields, canals and ponds.
a state of severe crisis. In coping with economic difficulties, the government gradually
came to acknowledge that family-based production rather than collective work was a
better route to improve living conditions. As early as 1979, co-operatives in Hai Phong
and in many parts in the Red River delta applied a new system of output contract to
peasant households, known as khoan san pham. This was in fact a return to the contract
system which had appeared in many agricultural co-operatives during the 1960s, then
strongly condemned by the CPV. This time the CPV accepted it as a good remedy to
improve the situation. In 1981, the shift in agricultural production system was officially
endorsed by the Party Resolution No. 100 which allowed individual households to
cultivate on contracted land. In return they had to deliver a specified amount of products
for the co-operative, but could keep any production surplus. This system of contract
became most common after 1986 when the Communist Party’s Sixth National Congress
officially adopted the market-oriented economy. In 1988, co-operatives started to
distribute land to peasant households under the contract system. The workpoint system had
disappeared by then. In 1993, the Law on Land officially allowed the distribution of land
to peasant households for a long-term use of 20 years or more.

Since the collective regime was abandoned and household was redefined for the
first time after 30 years as a “unit of production”, the land-use rights were returned to
individual households. There followed dramatic changes in the rural economy in the Red
River delta. As shown by a number of studies on rural transformation in Vietnam after doi
moi, this new system encourages peasants to enhance production inputs, mainly labor
intensive. As the new system liberated the peasants from all restraints by the collective
regime, they began to make their own decisions concerning household production
strategies as well as labor division within the household, thus having a direct bearing on
the utilization of child labor. There are at least three structural factors emerging under the
doi moi that affect directly the patterns, extent and nature of children’s work in the
agricultural sector.

First, the structure and mode of employment are now changed allowing male
laborers to search for work elsewhere in non farm sectors while the majority of women
stay behind doing farm work, a phenomenon that is labeled as “refeminization of
agriculture” (Werner 1997). In that sense, children, particularly girls, are put to work
alongside their mothers.

Secondly, when the collective regime was abolished and land was redistributed,
peasants suddenly realized that arable land per capita was very small. Rice land was torn
into various small pieces for allotting to individual households. Labor surplus and small

42 A similar trend of feminization of agriculture is also found in rural China since the agricultural
decollectivization was applied. Details are reported by T. Jacka (1997), and E. Croll (1995).
patches of land did not encourage peasants to modernize farming techniques but rather induced them to go for the labor-intensive option. Children as an available source of household labor were readily put to work.

Thirdly, labor, which was not regarded a kind of commodity under the collective period, now became a special item that can be sold in the market. The economic diversification with the emergence of non-farm sectors such as small-scale industries, family crafts and services absorb more labor. At a more general level, the gap between the rich and poor has been widening and children of the poor are expected to leave school at an early age for good because their parents could not afford education costs. Child labor in the agricultural sector occurs not only within the family context but is also for hire elsewhere.

The following is an attempt to analyze trends of children’s work in the agricultural sector of Giao village.

Farming is a feminine affair

The shouting from downstairs woke me up early one morning when it was not light yet. The mother’s voice sounded very loud and angry: “What kind of a girl are you? Is that the way you repay me for all my efforts to bring you up? If you want to stay alive, just go and bring those bunches of rice seedling to the field for me right now.”

I looked at my watch: it was 4:50 in the morning. Then I knew the cause of the uproar. The house then fell back to sleep again.
In the afternoon, when the little girl named Chi, aged 13, was back from the field, I approached her.
- Chinh: You were punished this morning, right?
- Chi: (a little shy) Yes.
- Chinh: Why was your mother so angry with you?
- Chi: I was asked yesterday to prepare 30 bunches of rice seedling for mother to plant this morning. I didn’t finish the job but left the field earlier for a feast at my uncle’s house.
- Chinh: Why didn’t your brother do the job?
- Chi: He said farming is a female’s affair, not for males like him. He’d rather work for wages. When he worked on the farm, his friends joked at him, calling him a woman.

As briefly reported in chapter 3, among 376 households of Giao village under the survey, 99 per cent of households were still working on their allotted rice land even though 96 per cent of households had one or more members earning extra incomes in the wood trade.

Household survey data reveals that under the coop management, no children between the ages of six and ten had to work on the farm, except in such jobs as tending buffaloes or performing Young Pioneers' specific tasks aimed at encouraging the coop’s production. The earliest age for girls to follow their mothers in planting rice seedlings was 12. Boys started farming activities even later, at the average age of 13. Economic reforms had a great impact upon the division of household labor. My observations at the village level indicate that a part of labor force (mainly male labor) began to move to the non-farm
sector (including seasonal migration) to seek better incomes, while the bulk of farm work was passed on to their wives and children. Sectoral analysis of labor force (from 16 to 60 years of age) among 38 households in Giao village in 1995 indicate that while 98 per cent of female laborers were regularly engaged in household farming activities, only 21 per cent of male laborers took part in farming, often on harvest days, and 41 per cent of them did not do any farm work during that year.

A similar trend was found among their children. In an intensive study of 73 children aged between 8 and 15 in the same sample of 38 households, 42 per cent of them participated regularly in their household farm work, 80 per cent of these children were girls. Another 46 per cent helped parents on harvest days and 11 per cent did no farm work in the year I was in the village.

The extent of children’s participation in farm work since the reforms varies according to their ages and gender. Half of children (53 per cent) in the age group between 8 and 12 (all of the girls in this group) performed some or most farm tasks together with adult household members. In the age group between 13 to 15, only 33 per cent of them (92 per cent of the girls) were regularly involved in farm work. The rest of the children was more or less engaged in woodcarving and only some of them joined their parents on busy harvesting days.

Although the measurement of children’s work by time allocation is problematic as it ignores productivity, the social organization of tasks, specialization and other elements (Munroe & co-authors 1984), working time is still used as an unit of measurement of the intensity of children’s work (Nag et al. 1978:300; Weinrich 1975:89). However, as suggested by Reynolds (1991:91), “the study of children’s work must take cognizance of seasonal changes in labor demand and food supply”.

The most striking feature of wet rice cultivation in the Red River delta is its seasonal character. The highest demand for agricultural labor in the year is concentrated in the months of May, June, July and November, December, January. During these months, peasants harvest the crops, prepare the soil and plant the next crops. Besides the two main rice crops, peasants have the subsidiary crops (known as vu dong, the winter crop) to worry about. They tended to grow vegetables such as tomatoes, cabbages, potatoes, sweet potatoes, beans and maize. While other villages in the region relied on the winter crop as extra sources of cash, Giao villagers’ winter produce was used for household consumption and poultry feeding. The area of winter crop cultivated by households took up only two per cent of the total arable land of this village.

Seasonal factors in farming demand that certain tasks must be done at specific periods when work load is much more intense than usual and where children’s labor may be required especially at peak demand.
In order to concentrate on children's involvement in farming at peak periods as well as in their daily activities on the farm, I categorize the main farm activities into three major groups of tasks:

- Group 1: plowing, hoeing, harrowing, ground softening and clearing field mounds.
- Group 2: seeding, transplanting, growing, watering, weeding, fertilizing, and exterminating pets and rodents guarding rice/vegetables fields.
- Group 3: harvesting (reaping, cutting, binding, transporting, sorting, threshing, drying and storing).

Only about one half of households in Giao village rented a tractor to plough their household land while all the above-mentioned tasks were done by individual households with primitive tools. On average, 6 households shared one draft animal (mainly buffaloes) for preparing soil. Households might take turns (one week each) in tending buffaloes or entrust this task to just one household and contribute payments to the tender. Payment to the tender was fixed at 400 kilograms of paddy per vu (six months) in 1995. As in the cooperative period, buffaloes were normally placed under the care of households with many children. But as we have seen earlier, girls now took over the task of tending buffaloes instead of boys who were more often engaged in waged jobs.

Households without a draft animal sometimes had to hoe the fields themselves. In case they could not afford to hire a buffalo, human power was used for harrowing. Buffaloes were normally available for hire after their owners had completed their own plowing and harrowing. In order not to lag behind in the farming season, peasants without buffaloes often asked their children to hoe before they could hire a buffalo.

During the year I stayed in the village of Giao, I did not find any children under 16 working as ploughmen or taking part in spraying pesticides. The farming activities of children were concentrated on tasks such as hoeing, embanking and clearing the moulds of rice fields, fertilizing, transplanting, watering, weeding, transporting, guarding crops and all tasks connected with harvesting. Some girls aged from 14 upwards began to practice harrowing (tap bua) on the rice fields, which was normally done by male adults. This may be due to long-term absence of male laborer(s) in the household. Statistical analysis of the types of work did not indicate a clear-cut difference between boys and girls’ farming tasks, though girls tended to work more in transplanting, weeding and fertilizing.

There was, however, a real difference between girls and boys in the time spent on agricultural activities. Only about 30 per cent of boys living in the households under the survey did take part in farming tasks at peak periods while 100 per cent of girls were engaged in farm work during the same period. Data from 24 hour-recalls obtained during

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43 Households having no draft animal often had to use their children to hoe the fields, but households who rented a tractor to plow their rice fields also had to hoe the field-edges themselves.
peak days in June 1995 from 68 children aged between 8 and 15 in 38 households give more details on work time by age group and gender. In the age group between 8 and 10, the average work time per day was 1.2 hours (boys) and 1.4 hours (girls). In the age group between 11 and 12, boys worked 2.4 hours and girls 3.5 hours while children from 13 to 14 contributed 2.7 hours (boys) and 5.9 hours (girls) per day. Up to the age of 15 and 16, children's average work time per day was 6.1 hours (boys) and 7 hours (girls), which was higher than male adults (3.5 hours) and female adults (5.6 hours). Most male adults performed tasks such as transporting crops home, threshing, sorting and drying paddy.

Obviously girls spent more time working on the farm at peak days as compared to boys and their fathers. But it should be added that besides working on the farm, girls also performed some domestic tasks such as cooking, feeding livestock, taking care of young siblings, etc. If we were to include the hours they spent for these activities, then their average working hours per day would be much higher than boys.

While some novelists continue to romanticize the country life, farming as an occupation is not desirable for most of the village children interviewed by me. Both girls and boys confidentially expressed their wish to search for a non-farm job and leave the countryside for good. In their views, it is too hard for young persons to work in the rice fields. Farming is but an endless chain of tasks, with low returns and therefore is not highly valued. Girls however tended to endure their "unfortunate status" while boys often openly mocked at farm work. The underestimation of farming was particularly visible among boys of 15-16 years of age who had been doing woodwork outside the village. For them, any activities with high remuneration were regarded as real work, the rest were just "odd" jobs.

Children attending the school of Luong Dien gave a similar view when they were asked to write about their daily work, motivation for study and wishes for their future. Most of them did not wish to work on the farm and live in the surroundings of their village. Given the choice, these children would want to escape from their rural existence. Among 116 respondents aged from 10 to 16 at the local school, 80 per cent of them said they went to school for the opportunity to escape from rural life and seek a better future in non-farm sectors.

I recall that in June 1995, I met a boy who just returned to the village from a Hanoi wood workshop to help his parents in harvesting. When I came to visit him in the evening next day, I found he was sitting on the carved bed, listening to foreign music while his younger sister was helping the mother to thresh paddy. He complained that farm-work caused him a backache and the weather was so hot in the village. He said it was a shame that the workshop was closed on harvest days, so he had to come home. Then he explained:
"I didn’t want to work on the farm. When I was about 11 or 12, I often scooped water with my female cousin. One evening, after having watered the rice fields with her, I came to play games with my friends in the *dinh* (communal house). There, some boys made jokes at me, calling me a woman. They ignored me and gossiped about their earnings. I felt so lonely. A few days later, I quit school and went to work in a village wood workshop. Since then, I did not work on the farm any more, except on harvest days. My father taught me that a village boy of 15 or 16 should learn how to earn some money to entertain his friends. If you just prowl for farm work with empty pockets, your friends will look down on you”.

I was so surprised to hear the confidence of this boy. His idea differed greatly from my own when I was still a village lad. I grew up during the war years and had little choice but to work on the farm, and I didn’t think much about how to make some quick money like most kids today. The social environment no doubt plays an important role in thrusting children into the labor market at an early age.

Most young girls performed farming tasks under their mothers’ supervision. Their intensive labor on the farm is deeply rooted in the cultural structure of gender-based labor division. Because male laborers seasonally migrate to work elsewhere, the domestic and farm tasks are passed on to them. Girls are put to work alongside their mothers because they are expected to become good wives in the future who should know how to manage the family affairs and farm work rather than earning money. Studies on impacts of seasonal migration on rural families show that the wife’s position in the family did not improve much even when she could earn more money than her husband (Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh 1998, Pham Huong Nga 1997). That the girls worked more on the farm and they were resigned to their *so phan ham hiu* (unfortunate fate) was not only a reflection of children’s economic role but also a function of the apprenticeship that prepare them for future adult roles.

It is interesting to add that male heads of household in Giao village often said that they were peasants and their main source of income was from farming. But while talking about their being farmers, it soon appeared that they knew little about their own agricultural production, particularly concrete details such as the exact area of arable land for rice planting or for vegetable growing, whether their household had to hire a tractor, exchange labor with others or hire extra manpower when necessary. Most of them were ignorant about the precise paddy yield, the kinds of seed planted, production inputs, types of taxes and other sorts of contribution to various public budgets. When they were pressed on such matters, their frequent answer was: “Oh, it’s just odd, let my wife tell you”.

*What would children do if farming is to be mechanized?*

- Tho (a girl): I must be the most miserable girl in this village.
- Chinh: Why?
- Tho: My age is the same with cai Chi (a girl friend). Yet I had to do all kinds of task such as hoeing, weeding, watering, fertilizing, planting and reaping when I was just 8 or 9. Chi only began to work on the farm a few years ago, when she was already 11.
Chinh: So where are your parents?
Tho: Only mother and I work on the farm. Father sometimes helps a bit.
Chinh: How much land does your household have?
Tho: Six and a half sao.
Chinh: Did your mother ever hire a tractor?
Tho: No! We even don't have a buffalo. When preparing the soil, mother just borrows a buffalo from my uncle. But just for a few days, after he already finished with his field. Mother and I hoed the rice fields.
Chinh: Why didn't you hire a tractor?
Tho: Mother said it would cost a lot of money, and she couldn't afford it.

Studies on children's work elsewhere suggest that changes of production techniques may affect considerably the use of child labor. Nardinelli, for instance, believes that, together with the application of laws on labor and compulsory education, the industrial revolution in Europe "gradually improved the situation of children", and "in the long run, it ended child labor by increasing working-class incomes, because as family incomes rose, child labor declined" (Nardinelli, 1990:102). In a sense, such a remark is useful to look at children's work in agricultural economies in transition. My own observations on the development of farming techniques in Gia o village may provide some insights in examining the intensification of child labor in agriculture.

While talking about children's work, the elderly often used the example of husking paddy to compare the difference between the two periods, then and now. They recalled that before rice mills were introduced into the village, husking and pounding were the daily task of children, which took them a lot of time. Such work was no longer required. Villagers expressed the view that nowadays children had to work harder because of the "regression of techniques": in order to save production inputs and maximize outputs, peasants prefer to use manual power, which is plenty in rural areas, instead of mechanization. Since it is assumed that children are not completely free from parental control and influence, they are always available to be put to work. I will look further into these aspects.

While the economy has been more or less liberated after doi moi, surveys conducted in various wet-rice growing villages in the Red River delta during the 1990s indicate there have been no significant changes in the technical modernization of rice production. On the contrary, it was found that the intermediary consumption such as purchase of fertilizer, improved seeds, pesticides, irrigation cost, etc. were on decrease while the utilization of manual labor was more intensified (Didier & Florence, 1995; Le Trong Cuc & T. Rambo, 1991).

Under the co-operative system, between 1974 and 1986, 82 per cent of total rice fields of Gia o village were plowed and harrowed by tractors DBLD 1993). Since the establishment of the household economy as a production unit, the area of rice fields plowed and harrowed by tractors was reduced gradually and as of 1995, tractors prepared only 50 cent of total rice fields. In neighboring villages of Gia o such as Binh Dien and Luong, the proportion of rice land prepared by machines was reduced to 20 per cent.
Particularly, 100 per cent of the rice fields of the village of Thai Lai were not plowed by tractor. Instead of machines, peasants used draft animals (buffaloes and cattle) and human labor to prepare the soil. Households without draft animal hoed their fields themselves. In some instances, several households even used human power to harrow paddy fields because they could not afford hiring a buffalo or a tractor.

Some leaders of Giao village explained this regression as a consequence of land allocation, which divided rice fields into tiny plots for individual households. He added that payments for hired tractors caused some troubles too. In the past, the co-operative paid the tractor team via its credit system. But now individual households had to pay in cash, which they could hardly afford.

The utilization of water supply in farming is another example of the decline of technology in farming. Under the co-operative management, 62 per cent of total rice fields was served by an elaborate irrigation system, and the rest by pumping with small machines or by hand. In 1995, water was carried into the main canals and the farmers scooped water by hand from lower fields to higher fields themselves. Some households even dug small ponds in the middle of the rice fields to store water for their own use. One big change was the disappearance of specialized brigades for providing rice seeds and pesticides, for irrigation and protecting cultures. This led the farmers to take personal charge of their crops, which were previously done by trained technicians with semi-mechanical means.

As a result, the disorganization of collective services and regression of mechanization in farming led to an increasing trend of labor intensification. Draft animals and human power are now mobilized to work instead of the tractor. Transportation of manure to rice lands, water scooping and weeding are all carried by hand in replacement of machines and other means. Labor utilization has increased at a rapid pace. How can one explain this reverse development in agricultural production? The cause obviously lies in the relative surplus of agricultural labor and rationale of peasants.

According to the villagers' calculations, to produce one crop on a plot of one sao (360 sq.m.) of rice field, an average of 20 labor days was required. Based on the area of rice land held by households, labor requirements on the farm and the household labor force, I shall attempt to estimate the labor demand for agricultural production in Giao

44 A similar situation was also found in a neighboring village (Nam Sach, Hai Hung) by Didier & Florence (1995).
45 The range was between 15 and 25 labor days per sao/crop. Estimation by the Agricultural Division of Hai Hung province, which serves as guidelines to farming, is 17.5 labor days per sao (BQLHTX Hai Hung, 1986). The estimation by a research team in a village of Thai Binh province is only 8.4 labor days per sao/crop. This estimation is not however itemized yet. (See: Le Trong Cuc & T. Rambo 1993:109). The high labor input invested in rice land is understandable because the amount of rice land is fixed at a low rate per capita, and therefore the only way to increase paddy productivity is the intensification of labor.
village. If an average household of five persons (having two main laborers) was allotted an area of 2660 sq.m., the family would need only 144 labor days to complete the necessary tasks for a six months crop. As we can see, there was just enough work for one main laborer. The relationship between rice land, labor demand and household labor force seems to indicate a low demand for agricultural labor. However, this low demand of labor does not mean that there is less demand for child labor in farming. On the contrary, this demand becomes greater than ever. A further examination of rice production in Giao village will help illustrate this point.

The state of farming in Giao village is precisely expressed by a local saying lay cong lam lai (using labor to make a profit), which means that farming is not a profitable trade, because it gives low return for hard labor.

Average proportion of rice land per capita in Giao village is relatively low, only 529 sq. m. per person (or 2,533 sq. m. per household), compared to an average of 572 sq. m. per head for the Red River delta (TCTK, 1995:74&299). It should be noted that this proportion has dramatically changed during the past 60 years. In 1931 the average rice land per head was 3,299 sq.m. compared to 529 sq.m in 1993. While the average paddy yield per capita did not change much, (327 kilograms/person in 1955 compared to 370 kilograms/person in 1993), paddy productivity has increased remarkably, from 1,600 kilograms in 1955 to 7,000 kilograms per hectare/year, thanks to the improvement of the irrigation system created by the collective regime.46

In 1995, the average paddy productivity was between 120 and 150 kilograms per sao (360 sq.m.). However, after the deduction of production costs such as agricultural taxes, water supply and various kinds of contribution, the quantity of paddy left for producers was only 50 or 60 per cent of total yield. The Table 5.2 will itemize the total production costs of rice growing.

Table 5.2. Rice production costs in Giao village (dong/sao/crop)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Average costs</th>
<th>As percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Taxes and fees</td>
<td>45,648</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Contributions to various public budgets</td>
<td>18,400</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Material costs (seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, etc.)</td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Labor costs</td>
<td>140,000</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total costs</td>
<td>236,548</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * dong, a local currency. In 1995, one US dollar was equivalent to 11,000 dong. One sao is equal to 360 square meters.

46 For more details about agrarian changes in Giao village, see chapter 3.
As indicated above, the total production cost (including taxes) to produce paddy on one sao per crop takes about 40 per cent of total yield. This means 60 per cent of total yield are left for 20 labor days. In 1995, the price of one kilogram of paddy was between 1,800 to 2,000 dong. The average return to a labor day is about 3,500 to 4,000 dong, equivalent to two kilograms of paddy. Assuming that the peasants had to hire extra labor or machines to work on their rice land, the total yield left for the household is surely much less. In such conditions, peasants on one hand had to utilize all available sources of household labor force to work on the farm, which helps minimize production inputs, but on the other hand, they also tried to maximize their share of land and other means to produce sufficient food. A research team working on Nguyen Xa village located in the heart of the Red River delta reported that peasants also used manual labor instead of that of draft animals to save a bit rice straw. As they put it:

There is a direct competition between use of rice straw as fodder for buffalo and as cooking fuel [...] The farmers keep fewer buffalo than they need to plow all of their fields. In place of buffalos, a team of men and women sometimes hitch themselves to the plows and harrows with ropes and drag them through the heavy soil using human muscle power alone. The farmers have opted to substitute their own labor power for that of buffalo thus maximizing the share of biomass energy available for direct human use in the short term” (Le Trong Cuc & Terry Rambo 1993:xvi).

For peasants, children are, without a doubt, a valuable source of household labor. Their labor is particularly important for poor peasants in reducing production costs. This was clearly explained by a farmer when asked why he did not hire a tractor but instead used his little children to hoe the fields:

It is not a matter of modernization or preference for the tractor. The problem is that if I hire a tractor to work on my land, what will my wife and children do. They need food to eat too.

**Work for wage: children’s employment in agricultural labor market**

Just returning from the rice field, Chi came straight to his father: “I want to go to extra class this afternoon. Examinations are coming soon but I haven’t studied hard enough.” The father: “Just go! Work here is endless. Let’s look for somebody to take care of the buffalo”. But the mother suddenly shouted: “Stay! There’s much of work still to be done: Tending the buffalo, getting vegetables for the pigs, and scooping water for rice seedlings. If you go, who will help me do these chores?” The father responded: “Maybe we can go to our neighbor and borrow his girl for a while. We’ll pay her two thousand dong.” The mother argued: “With such little money, even a dog wouldn’t do it. At least five thousand, but you’ll get a bad reputation for taking advantage of our neighbor’s kids”. The father relented: “OK. Go to the market and hire a worker. It’s better to look for a girl”.

For the year I stayed with my host family in the village, I often heard such arguments between the husband and his wife regarding their small girl’s work. Once, while drinking tea with them, I asked my male-host why he preferred to hire a worker

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47 Five thousand dong is equivalent to 40 $US cents in 1995.
instead of asking his daughter to work as others did and why he'd rather prefer a girl than a boy. His answer was that no boys would want to be hired to do farming work since such odd jobs (viec linh tinh) were suitable only for girls. According to him, girls were not demanding while adult workers usually asked for higher pay even for doing odd jobs. He blamed his wife for putting their daughter to work: "My wife just thinks of work. She does not care much about our children's schooling. That's why they're so ill-educated. Chi is our youngest daughter, she should go to school". But his wife disagreed: "What study, she's just a lazy girl! She always finds excuses to get away from housework and play with her classmates in the neighboring village. My husband's attitude may poison our girl." Talking to me, Chi said: "A lot of laborers are waiting out there, and cheap. Last year, my mother sold one ton of paddy and two pigs. We have more than enough to eat, but mother just wants me to work". Chi told me she did not want to stay home all day "listening to mother's songs".  

I learnt from these conversations that some peasant households in the village started to think of hiring laborers to work on the farm or doing housework as a temporary solution. When such needs became apparent, the so-called "cho lao dong" (labor market) came into existence in Giao village. It was here from the early morning till evening, a number of laborers, mostly women and their young daughters from the surrounding areas came and waited to be hired. The place they gathered was near the village communal house (dinh), where a small market selling daily necessities also recently emerged. Most of the workers looking for jobs to earn extra incomes were peasants who had finished tilling their own pieces of allotted rice land. They were to be hired for such tasks as plowing, tilling, weeding, watering, harvesting, gardening and running house chores. There were two forms of payment, by piece of work or on a daily basis, in cash or kind, but most workers from outside the village preferred immediate payment after the work had been done. As I could observe, some mothers working together with their daughters preferred to be paid by piece of work, particularly for such tasks as transplanting, weeding, scooping water or harvesting. However, jobs like these were not always available. If a village needed someone for odd jobs for a few hours or a whole day, he would just pick someone hanging around the "labor market". For example, the farmers of Giao used a two-person water scoop to transfer water from the main canal into their paddy fields. Since water pumping from the co-operative station was operated on certain days every month, if households had only one laborer available on those days they would need to hire an extra person to do the task.

Children were hired to work not only because they were "obedient" and cheap but also because of the lack of manpower created by the absorption of male laborers into

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48 In her word, "ca nhac", literally it means "sing a song". This is a slang word used by village children to allude to such abuses as insulting and scolding by their parents.
woodwork. For this reason, labor exchange between households sometimes occurred in case they could not find extra labor. The regular absence of male laborers on the farms of Giao village gave peasants and children from outside new opportunities for work.

Wages in the agricultural sector were not so attractive as in woodwork. Most children working as temporary laborers could earn about 5 to 7 thousand dong per work day (compared to 10-15 thousand dong by adult worker). In case they were hired to work for the whole day, their employers usually offered them one meal. If they worked as their parents’ retainers on pieces of work, they received no payment at all.

Apart from those children coming to the village from outside to look for jobs, some children from inside the village were also found working on the farm for wages. Among 68 children aged from 8 to 15 coming from 38 households under my survey, 19 percent of them at one time worked as waged laborers for the past six months and all of them were girls from 13 years of age upwards. Talks with these children reveal that work on the farm was rare, unstable and was available mainly in the periods of tilling and harvesting. For the past six months, the duration of work for wages of these girls ranged from 7 to 18 labor days. Most children interviewed by me considered this kind of work as a way “to kill time”, not a real source of income:

Mother and I do not have much to do on our own farm. I do not want to hang around. That’s not good for a girl. The neighbors often find that I have a lot of leisure time and ask me to help. Whatever task I can do, I do. Wage is not important. Everybody says I am a good girl. My mother often says: You can keep your own earnings for yourself, buy the things you like. But that is just only talk. If I get any money, she would borrow it and surely it won’t be given back. (Tin, 14 years of age).

While children working in the wood trade preferred getting jobs far away from home, most children engaged in farm-tasks as hired laborers worked within their village and in surrounding areas. Apart from kids from outside looking for jobs in the village “labor market”, employers and employees knew each other quite well. However, there was an unspoken rule that one should not hire children without their parent’s consent. It was common that before “borrowing” a child to work on the farm, the employer would come to talk with the child’s parents first. I once witnessed a village woman who came and asked the permission from a girl’s parents. This is what she said:

I should like to have some nhoi (words) with both of you. Please allow us to borrow your daughter for a few days and let her help us to finish transplanting some sao of rice fields. We do not have a daughter while boys are hopeless. We will take care of her and when the work is finished, we will surely pay her well.

This formality was strictly observed by the villagers. It was said that the formal procedure is made because on the one hand, it shows “mutual respect” among adults,

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49 Instead of saying “thue” (to hire), the villagers often use the word “muon” (to borrow) which makes the business of “buying and selling” children’ labor much simpler.
and on the other hand, it helps avoid abusing children and keep good relationships among local families. It is customary to deal with parents rather than with the child whose labor is at stake. And once the parents say “yes”, the matter is settled. It seems that formally children are not in a position to bargain about their work. However, in many cases, conditions of work were usually arranged in advance with the child worker, and the employer normally comes “to have some words” with the parents when things had been fixed.

There was not so much information available concerning labor disputes or children’s abuses by employers although some children reported they had been beaten by their parents for refusing to perform a certain tasks or for neglect while at work. The most common complaint from child workers was that their wages were not always paid on time. Employers preferred to pay them at harvest time and mostly in paddy. Working children disliked this because, according to them, their parents would be able to control their earnings more easily.

A close examination of children’s waged work suggests that the demand for child labor in the agricultural sector was not high and the source of farm work was not substantial enough to improve family income. However work for wage was a new development in farming in comparison with the recent past when labor was strictly controlled by the co-operative system.

Previously I have pointed out that there has been a great decrease of male laborers in the farming sector due to their switch to non-farm work. The regular absence of men has put the burden of farm work on women and girls led to an increasing need of labor exchange among households. My investigation on children’s economic activities reveals that their labor was used mainly in this fashion. Particularly at peak season, household labor force was stretched to its limits while a number of tasks such as watering and transplanting had to be done in co-operation with others. However, labor exchange mostly occurred among relatives. In a sense, labor exchange is the best way to concentrate work force to finish certain tasks in the short term, mainly with the help of children. However, the children themselves were often confused when it came to differentiate such concepts as “exchange” (doi cong) and “help” (lam giup). As they saw it, they worked basically out of "love" and did not expect anything in return. But I often observed that households receiving “help” always returned the favors by lending their labor when the time came. This could only mean children’s labor was valued as a kind of barter deal even though villagers tended to consider it as a kind of moral obligation in helping one another.
Conclusion

I have presented my research findings of children’s work—with emphasis on patterns and changes—in the agricultural sector of Giao village during the past four decades. At least three new trends of child employment in agriculture can be observed. First, children’s work on the farm is intensified since agricultural de-collectivization was applied. Secondly, although children’s employment for wage in agriculture is not rampant because of its low demand, their labor is now considered a kind of commodity that can be sold in the labor market. And thirdly, work on the farm today is dominated by women and girls.

Ever since the first land reform was launched in Giao village (1956) and subsequent campaigns which established the collective agrarian regime, peasants who did not work directly on their farm but instead hired others to work for them would be condemned as "feudal" reactionaries having to face dire consequences. This is something of the past and the idea of a child working for someone else on the farm would pose no problems for most villagers. Khi doi, dau goi phai bo (when you're hungry, you'll have to crawl), the head of Giao village quoted an old saying as he explained to me the phenomenon of children entering into labor market. Without a doubt, the problems of child labor and poverty are intimately related, but beyond that, one can perceive a change in popular attitude towards children’s employment in a fast-changing socio-economic environment.

Under the collective regime, production brigades directly controlled the labor force. An analysis of the work organization within the agricultural co-operation would be necessary to helped understand the situation of child labor in this period. Thus cooperative categorized children as “assistant workers” who were not obliged to work on the farm. Data obtained from interviews with villagers who grew up during these years indicate that children did take part in several types of work but in actual fact, their involvement in the coop’s work was only haphazard, temporary or under the guise of retainers of their family's “contract tasks”. Most of them started to perform farm tasks at the age of 12 or older. Girls seemed to start working on the farm earlier than boys. Tending buffaloes and taking part in work for temporary work-teams were the main part of children’s work. Within the family economy, children were also put to work on pieces of "five per cent” land where household’s labor force was intensified to raise more incomes. However, it should be noted that besides the coop’s labor control, rice monoculture and low average land per capita in the Red River delta were among the reasons supporting the contention that children were not burdened with work during the years of collective economy.
Decollectivization and redistribution of rice land to individual peasant households after Doi Moi brought about a great upheaval in the rural economy of northern Vietnam. Economic activities were increasingly diversified with the rapid development of non-farm sectors, particularly small-scale industries, and the intensification of seasonal migration of male laborers to urban settings in search of work. These new developments were taken into account while examining children’s work in agricultural sector of Giao village. With the labor division among peasant households, children are regarded as a real component of the labor force to be put to work, which was different from the time of the co-operative. Children start to work on the farm at an earlier age than before. Older children even look for opportunities to sell their labor elsewhere outside of households. However, the brunt of farm work today is borne by girls rather than boys. This trend is a result of the absorption of males into waged jobs in the non-farm sectors, which leads to the so-called phenomenon of "re-feminization of agriculture".

Under the work-point system of remuneration, one had no choice but to work on the farm. The gender division of labor at that time was mainly based on the views of “light or heavy” work in which women and children were assumed to do “light” work. For many villagers of Giao, work for wages in the wood trade nowadays represents a source of envy while farming was regarded as a lowly occupation, particularly in the eyes of young people and children. The gender division of labor tends to keep women and their girls behind on the farm while men and boys go searching for waged work elsewhere. Girls become their mothers’ subordinates as they are supposed to be trained to play the future role of wives within the family context. For some girls, this "predestined" role is something of a “undesirable obligation” which they could not avoid. Most rural people do not regard such a gender-based division of labor a discrimination against girls but rather a natural thing preparing them to be proper wives and mothers in accordance with age-old traditions.