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

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Chapter 6

DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL INDUSTRY
AND CHILD WORKERS

Ruong be be khong bang nghe trong tay
(Having a lot of rice land is no better than possessing a skill)
(Local saying)

Introduction

Much has been said about the sad fact that children in the developing world are often found in small “sweat-shops” where they work as cheap labor or apprentices. Their work is usually considered as “supplementary”, sometimes unpaid, and whatever meager wages they receive often go directly to their parents or relatives. Little attention, however, has been given to changes in the organization of production in small-scale industries, the dynamic interrelation between the labor market, socio-economic changes and local responses to such changes and how they affect children’s work. This is perhaps partly due to the lack of academic interest in the linkage between historical analyses and empirical observations on the economic role of children. The recent changes of agrarian regime in rural Vietnam offer a unique opportunity to look at rural children’s work in the conditions of a changing economic system. As analyzed earlier, these changes have freed peasant households from collective constraints and enabled them to manage their small allotted land, while a free labor market has emerged with undesirable effects of rural unemployment. Meanwhile rural industries have fast developed and their products are not only for domestic consumption but also aimed at lucrative export markets.

This chapter is to examine children’s work in the wood trade, a traditional craft of Giao village. It suggests that the nature of children’s work has changed since the wood trade became more commercialized with the emergence of entrepreneurs and the contracting-out system. The chapter will concentrate on production organization, the position of child workers, their working conditions and earnings. It will try to provide an understanding of different aspects of children’s role in small rural industries, viewed from a three-way relationship between child workers, their parents and employers.
Development towards a commercialized craft

The wood trade before collectivization

Although wood carving has a long history in Giao village, dating back several hundreds years, this trade did not change much in its production methods until recently. In the past, wood carvers usually worked far away from home. As different from other types of family crafts where craftsmen worked at home, wood carvers normally looked for jobs in public constructions such as communal houses, pagodas, temples, royal palaces or big houses of the rich. Their popular products were wooden fine arts, such things as pictures, statues, items of worship and internal decorative objects. Besides the popular products such as statues of Buddha and various deities, wood carvers mainly produced items inspired from Chinese classical stories, particularly paying attention to the four supernatural creatures (long: dragon, ly: unicorn, quy: tortoise and (phuong: phoenix) or the plants representing the four seasons (tung: pine, cuc: marigold, truc: bamboo and mai: apricot).

Traditionally, wood carvers were organized into different work teams, known as phuong or hiep tho (guild or association) including a foreman (tho ca), craftsmen (tho ban) and a few trainee assistants, called pho nho (little workers). The foreman was responsible for the whole activities of his group: finding jobs, organizing the production, and dealing with the problems related to the work-place. Generally, such an organization was suitable to mobile work where wood carvers only sold their skilled labor and rarely produced for sale.

While at work, workers were under the foreman’s supervision. Each group of wood workers normally consisted of carvers (tho cham) and carpenters (tho long) whose duty was to reassemble carved objects into finished products. Assistants were young trainees, often the son(s) of the foreman or fellow workers who assisted them with odd jobs such as shopping, cooking and sometime taking part in simple tasks. Because these “odd jobs” were relatively heavy so assistants were mostly older children from 14 years of age upwards. For their work, assistants were not paid, except daily meals and some time a little bonus.

The guild of carvers (hiep tho) was loosely organized, mainly based on verbal contracts for certain tasks and their affiliation lasted until the contract was finished. Apart from the kinship relations which formed part of the guild, the social foundation of the guild was collegial and hierarchical based.

As recalled by a number of life histories, craft men of Giao village in the past usually came home on harvests and special occasions such as Spring holidays (Tet).\footnote{Phan Gia Ben (1957) categorized artisans in the colonial Northern Delta into five different groups,
Their wages were normally paid on a daily basis or per piece-work, depending on the verbal agreement between the foreman and the employer. Earnings from woodwork were mainly to support the family. There was no woman involved in this work. Various sources of data indicated that wood carvers from Giao village had participated in building royal palaces in Thang Long (Hanoi) under the Le dynasty (18th century) and later in the capital of Hue under the Nguyen rule (Tang Ba Hoanh, 1984; the Vu family record).

The wood trade under the cooperative regime

Life histories show that the wood trade stagnated somewhat during the two wars against the Japanese and the French (1941-54), and the decline of the wood trade continued afterwards. The stagnation of the wood trade during the period of 1956-1980 can be explained by various reasons. As reported, there was almost no demand for wooden carved products in this period. The land reform launched in the village (1955-56) and later, since 1958, the movement of collectivization, brought about great changes in people’s lives. Public constructions were called off, rich families were wiped out and religious activities were curtailed or prohibited. Public works of a religious character concerning communal houses, pagodas and temples were negligible.

While the products of wood carving lost their market, wood workers themselves were regarded as subjects to be re-educated. According to the socialist reformers, artisans were generally considered as having liberal attitudes and being inclined towards private ownership. They should therefore be put under the overall administration of the co-operatives and the commune committee (Ban NNTU 1962:1). Under the communist party’s guideline, the artisans were advised to join the collective production teams where they worked as non-farm workers in the framework of agricultural co-operatives, producing construction materials, building public works and sharing the coop’s crops.

Though the private sector and family economy were not encouraged, some activities such as petty trade and family crafts were discreetly carried out on a small scale. For instance, some carpenters of Giao village, in spite of the cooperative regulations, produced household utensils for sale or on the orders from local clients. Petty trade of rice and agricultural products was widespread among villagers, making use of the station of Cam Giang located near the village, midway on the road linking Hanoi and Hai Phong. Villagers recalled that their children were actively engaged in this

including: a) mobile artisans, b) artisans producing goods as hired workers, c) artisans producing goods on the direct order from their clients, d) artisans producing goods on subcontracts, e) artisans producing goods on their own for sale. According to his classification, most wood workers of Giao village belonged to the group (a) and (b), who seasonally migrated to search for work away from home as hired workers.
illicit business to avoid the scrutiny of the tax authorities. They were asked by their parents/relatives to transport goods packed in small bags which they placed under the seats on the train and delivered them at the destination.

Notwithstanding these minor activities, non-farm economy and services were severely curtailed under the cooperative regime. On the one hand, work outside the cooperative confines was closely controlled but on the other hand, the people's low living standards during the wartime put a brake on private economic activities. The underdevelopment of the non-farm sector and family industries during this period implies that the opportunities for children to work under the co-operative system were quite low.

**Economic reforms and the revival of wood trade**

The revival of the wood trade in Giao village was due to socio-economic changes in northern Vietnam, starting with the severe crisis of collective economy which led to the initial reforms in agriculture (1979-1985). Economic difficulties also led to a relaxation of labor management whereby peasants could search for work outside the coop, particularly in non-farm sectors. In addition, low returns from collective farming induced former wood workers to return to their own craft in order to supplement their meager incomes. Moreover, the demand for wooden furniture was also rising as a result of the expansion of domestic market after the liberation of the South in 1975.

The process of restoration of the wood trade in Giao village can be divided into two stages: the period of recovery (1979-1989) and the period of consolidation (from 1990 to present, 1995).

In the early 1980s, some households in the village made use of their free time from farming to produce such household furniture as beds, cupboards, tables and chairs for sale. The bestseller at the time was a cupboard in traditional style with sophisticated carvings as decorations—a symbol marking well-to-do families in previous times. For only a couple of years, households producing wooden furniture for sale became wealthy quite quickly. They however had to pay a high price as they were condemned by local authorities for violating government policies. One head of family was put in prison, two others were suspected of having built their big houses from “illicit financial sources”. Despite the persistent policies against family crafts, wood workshops continued to

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51 A similar situation was found among peasants of the Philippines who had little income from agricultural production and became artisans working on crafts, (see R. Rutten, 1993).
expand and many parents wished to send their children for apprenticeship with the hope that they would help improve the household income.

As of 1995, data obtained from my village survey reveals that 341 of 376 households had one or more member involved in the wood trade. There were 524 workers earning regular wages in wood work, among whom 17 per cent were children under 16 years and 10 per cent were female workers.\(^{52}\) Fifty four per cent of the wood workforce worked far from home. My survey shows that about 78 per cent of migrants from Giao village worked in Ho Chi Minh City and in other southern provinces, some 1700 kilometers from their home village. The rest of the migrants worked in Hanoi and in the northern provinces. Money was sent home through work-mates or brought home during the Tet holidays.

The organization of production in the wood trade of Giao village can be categorized into three major patterns, as follows:

- Independent artisans who worked on their own, mobile or at home, producing goods on direct order from local clients.
- Household-based workshops which mainly used the family labor force, working on subcontracts and/or producing goods for sale.
- Enterprises which mainly used hired laborers, producing goods for the domestic market and for export.

In the first two types of production, artisans were still basically farmers who did wood work to supplement their household incomes. They bought materials, used their own labor force and marketed their own products. At peak demands, they might hire extra hands or use subcontracts elsewhere, but this rarely occurred. Production was usually at a small scale. Labor demand was limited, and so was capital. Lacking capital, independent artisans preferred direct orders from their clients who were willing to pay a part in advance with the rest to be settled when the contract was finished.

The third form of production emerged in the early 1990s, with the appearance of the “merchant-entrepreneurs” who enabled the wood craft of Giao village to have access to a larger market. It was apparent that mobility has been an important factor in the wood craft since the country’s economy was shifted to the market mechanism. Due to the relaxation of state control over the private economic sector in rural areas, some craftsmen took the chance to expand their production, aimed at manufacturing high quality products to meet the increasing needs of the newly rich, tourists and exporters.

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\(^{52}\) Those who had held a stable job in the wood trade for six months in 1995 were grouped in this category. Children working basically within their households while attending school and receiving occasional earnings were not included in this group.
and they themselves soon became entrepreneurs. An entrepreneur often ran his workshop in the village where carvers were hired locally. Because his products were mainly sold in urban areas, he usually established extra facilities there and brought in workers from the village. This created a new situation in the labor market regarding wood products. By setting up a ‘putting out’ system in the village, an entrepreneur could mobilize a large number of workers at short notice and at wages lower than those prevailing in the urban areas. Recently, some foreign investors and state enterprises started to cooperate with village entrepreneurs in producing and exporting wooden carved products. In this process, entrepreneurs have become the intermediaries between investors/exporters and village workers. Wood workshops established in the big cities (Hanoi, HCM City) with foreign capital investment attracted an increasing number of young carvers from Giao village because of the high wages they paid. Entrepreneurs from the village recruited carvers (adults and children) to work for their urban workshops. Obviously, the emergence of entrepreneurs in the wood trade changed the production patterns of wooden carved furniture in Giao village, creating an intensification of wood workers’ seasonal migration and of children’s involvement in this trade.

Most entrepreneurs working in wood carving of Giao village were former foremen although their ages might not be high, just between 25 and 35. To begin, an influential foreman usually started his business by establishing his own workshop, hiring workers, recruiting trainees, and working on subcontracts. After some time, he directly worked for the investors/exporters and built up his agents’ network in the cities. Since having to manage workshops both in the city and in the village, entrepreneurs who no longer worked as a foreman took on the role of employer/entrepreneur.

As of 1995, there were eight entrepreneurs who had established good connections between the wood workshops of Giao village and those in the cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Many independent artisans and household-based workshops in the village received sub-contracts form these eight enterprises and their products were transported to the cities for sale and export. A good number of village wood workers were also recruited by these entrepreneurs to work for their shops in the cities.

The production relationships in the wood trade have consequently changed since this traditional craft became commercialized.

53 The term “entrepreneur” used in this study refers to those who are mentioned in local language as “cai thau”. These cai thau mainly organize, manage and assume the risks of the wood business they set up but sometime also take part directly in work.
First, instead of the old-fashioned production by independent workers, manufacturing of wood carving began seeking higher commercial profit by establishing close links between the village and the cities, between the family craft holding by peasant households and the dynamic market at the national and international level. In a sense the family craft came under the influence of various factors of the market forces such as capital, materials, investors and exporters.

Secondly, the artisans became part of the cycle of commercialized production. Mobile groups of wood workers headed by the foremen were now no longer active. The foremen themselves became employees working for entrepreneurs. They could be hired to work directly in the entrepreneur’s workshops or took sub-contracts home and hired his own workers. These subcontractors preferred to use free-lance and female workers, and particularly young trainees at cheap wages.

Thirdly, the production system in the wood trade became more fragmentary with various types of manufacturing and labor relations. The trade gained greater dynamism due to the expansion of family enterprises and export/import activities. Attractive wages in the wood trade and its contract putting-out system provided farming individuals and their children opportunities to enter the employment market. And one could assume that children’s exploitation in these types of work might be less flagrant than those derived from the household-based production.

Although the entrepreneurship system assumed an increasing importance in the wood sector, the running of business was mainly based on family ties. This was particularly true in the management system of small industries in rural areas where relatives were widely employed in the entrepreneurs’ business. For instance, woodworkers and brokers working for an enterprise came mainly from the ranks of paternal or maternal relatives closely related to the employer while the supervisor at the workshop normally was the employer’s own brother or sister. In many cases, entrepreneurs ran their business through the kinship network. Trusted relatives were normally authorized to manage the production at the village workshops on behalf of the employer who were living in Ho Chi Minh City, such activities as ordering sub-contracts, collecting and transporting goods, and paying workers. Many parents wanted to send their children to work under the supervision of the foreman belonging to the same lineage, who according to them, were more reliable.

Such kinship-oriented relations were not only based on mutual trust but also had an economic motive. Workers owed their jobs to their entrepreneurial relatives, who were their employers. These, in turn, made use of this kinship relation for their business advantage. During my field study at the village of Giao, I often observed the practice of late paying of wages, the victims of which were mainly employers’ relatives. As a rule,
employers usually paid in advance part of wages and the rest would only be paid after the goods had been sold. This practice brought obvious advantages to the employers. Instead of borrowing money from the bank, they could take advantage of pending workers’ wages for intensive investment. And since these workers were more or less closely tied with their employers, they hardly complained. In fact wood workers of Giao village mentioned two kinds of wages, tien tuoi (fresh/quick money) and tien heo (withering/slow money). Those workers who were prepared to wait until the products were sold would receive full pay and those who wanted to be paid quickly might get a little less than that. It is interesting to add that most of services supplying necessities of daily life such as foodstuff, health care and tailoring, etc., also depended heavily on wages from the woodwork trade. Villagers bought things on credit and paid their debts after receiving wages from the employers.

Wage rates were influenced by the agricultural cycle as well. Between harvest times, wages were normally lower, particularly for unskilled jobs because labor supply was higher than demand.

Wood workers’ wages were mostly on a daily basis or per job, depending on the agreement between employer and worker. However, wage rates were based on the worker’s skill levels and the jobs done. Carvers capable of creating good designs and working on complicated objects such as statues and pictures got the highest wages. Those who worked as refiners and varnishers got lower pay, but a little higher than those assembling carved objects into the final products. The average wage for a labor day (about ten hours of working) in the wood trade in 1995 was as follows:

- Designer (duc vo): 35 - 50 000 VND per day
- Refiner (got lai): 15 - 20 000
- Polisher (danh bong): 7 - 10 000
- Varnisher (danh dau): 15 - 20 000
- Encruster (kham trai): 15 - 20 000
- Assembler (long): 10 - 15 000

In general, wage rates in urban workshops were higher than these, ranging from 15 to 75,000 dong per day, depending on the nature of jobs.

Generally speaking, wages in cash were preferred but wages were also paid in kind, often consumer goods such are TV set, cassette player, bicycle, motorbike and wood material.
Hard wood such as *po-mu* (*forkieniahodginisii*), *trac* (*delbergia cochinchinensis*), *mun* (*ebony wood*), and *lim* (*erithrophreum fordio*) were the main material used for wood carving. Exploitation and distribution of these kinds of wood were under state control and therefore, expensive and scarce. Most of the wood enterprises in Giao village used wood from unofficial sources coming from Northern Uplands, Central Highland, Laos and Cambodia. It was difficult to estimate the quantity of wood consumed by wood workshops in Giao village. An estimation based on 10 village workshops suggested that each shop used on average 20 m³ of hard wood and 60 m³ of normal wood per year.

As mentioned previously, the main products of wood carving in the past were items of worship (couplets, boards inscribed with Chinese characters, frescoes, statues) and household furniture (sideboard, wardrobe, carved beds, etc.). At present, besides these traditional types, woodcutting pictures, fine art statues, house decorations and gifts were produced en masse. Most carved objects made in the village were transported to shops in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City where they were to be shipped to far flung places such as Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Singapore.

While the market of wooden fine arts articles expanded rather rapidly, carving techniques remained almost unchanged. Only a few modern tools were added to the old craft such as the frame saw, polishing and varnishing machines and various kinds of wood glues.

A drastic change in the wood trade concerned its labor force. In the past, only male members from a small number of village households were engaged in woodwork. Nowadays, about 90 per cent of all households were involved in the wood trade, making up two thirds of the total village labor force, among them many females and children.

In brief, wood carving of Giao village has evolved in a haphazard manner over the past five decades. It almost disappeared under the collective regime (1958-1979), gradually recovered in the pre-economic reform period (1980-1985) and developed strongly ever since. Changes in the wood trade could be seen in such aspects as manufacturing scale, production organization and the nature of labor relations. Wood carvers of the past were mobile men working on direct orders from clients. At present the woodcraft industry became strongly dependent on the emerging class of entrepreneurs who seize new opportunities of a wider market both domestic and foreign. And while village workshops started to do subcontracting work for urban enterprises, many peasants still regarded these activities as of secondary importance after farming.

The revival and development of wood craft were a positive response of the peasants to the policy of decollectivisation, in coping with the scarcity of productive resources, low returns from farming and under-employment. One can assume that wood
Craft has created more employment opportunities allowing farming households to shift to non-farm for additional sources of income and consequently the household labor force was maximally mobilized for cash earnings.

It should, however, be noted that the case of Giao village was not unique. While Giao villagers were proud of their long standing wood craft tradition, wooden furniture manufacturing was now popular in many surrounding villages, which together with Giao formed an important center of wooden furniture industry in the Red River delta. With so many players in the wood craft game, pressure was bound to rise, the competition became fiercer, challenged further by the whims of market mechanisms. In this context a study of child labor in Giao village should not be separated from the larger context of the Red River Delta.

**Child employment in the wood trade**

*In terms of quantity*

As discussed previously, production of wooden carved furniture was performed in various ways, by independent artisans, households and enterprises. In reality, these types of production were fraught with uncertainties. Some family enterprises had, at their peak, 20 or more workers but maybe a few months later, their workshops might dissolve and workers all gone away. The vagaries of the wood trade largely depended on hardwood supplies, wooden furniture export markets and tax policies rather than labor supplies. Because of this, most households involved in woodwork kept their rice land and continued to regard woodwork as of secondary importance after farming. Uncertainty in the manufacturing organization and the mobility of woodworkers made the survey of working children in this trade more difficult. In order to understand the extent and nature of children’s economic activities in the wood trade, I conventionally grouped the children doing woodwork into two main categories for observation: group 1 included those children who worked within the household, under the direct supervision of their family members; and group 2 covered children working in enterprises and workshops owned by employers/entrepreneurs.

Child workers in the household-based production (self-employed households)

After having obtained general information from the households survey, a group of 36 households doing woodwork independently or taking subcontract from their entrepreneurs was selected for an intensive examination of their children’s involvement in woodwork. 73 children at the age between 8 and 15 living and working in these households were interviewed.
The findings indicate that only 42 children (57 per cent of total number of children under the survey) were involved regularly in their households’ woodwork (details are shown in Table 6.1). Among them, 12 per cent were female. About 48 per cent in these household-based shops worked part-time outside school hours and 52 per cent worked full-time. Only a small part (2 per cent) started their working life from the age of 8 to 10, began with simple tasks for a few hours per day. Almost all children began to take part in the wood trade as trainees at the age of 11 or 12 while spending half a day in school. It is worth noting that 72 per cent of children at the age of 13 and 14 started to work as full-time workers while 28 per cent were still spending half a day at school.

Table 6.1. Children involved in woodwork at 36 self-employed households (net number)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Total number of children under the survey</th>
<th>Of which, girl</th>
<th>Number of children found working in the wood trade</th>
<th>Of which, girl</th>
<th>Part-time child workers:</th>
<th>Full-time child workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 - 10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3, 0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11, 0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 - 14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1, 3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0, 2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20, 5</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>48%, 25%</td>
<td>52% [F: 0%]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own survey in 1995.

The finding shows a considerable variation between girls and boys in the extent of their involvement in woodwork. Only a small number of girls were found working regularly in workshops while no one worked as full-time workers at home. Girls started to learn the trade at the age of 13-14 while boys began earlier, most often between 10 and 12, and when they reached the age of 15, most boys were committed to take part, part-time or full-time, in woodwork.

In this type of production, children contributed directly their labor to the household’s incomes and their work was not paid.

*Child woodworkers in entrepreneur-owned workshops*

At the enterprises and workshops owned by entrepreneurs, the extent and nature of children’s work were quite different from the household-based production. Among 11 workshops under survey, we found 81 children under 16 years of age who were regular
workers, making up 60 per cent of the total workers performing in these shops. Most children worked under the guise of trainees. Over 60 per cent of child workers aged between 8 and 15 worked full-time and 64 per cent of them were unpaid workers. About 36 per cent of child workers who had been working in these manufacturing units for more than two years were paid, mostly in the forms of an allowance or a bonus. Girls took up 23 per cent of total working children. The children who came from outside of the village made up 42 per cent.

Table 6.2. Child woodworkers in 11 entrepreneurs' workshops

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Sex group</th>
<th>Work time</th>
<th>Payment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Of which, girl</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - 10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 - 14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As percentage</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own survey in 1995.

The above figures give a general view of the situation of working children, which may help elucidate the nature of their work in the wood sector. At the village level, my own survey of 376 households in 1995 indicates a total of woodworkers who earned regular wages in wood work was 524 persons, among whom 17 per cent were children under 16 years of age and 10 per cent were female workers. This only took into account those who had held a stable job in the wood trade for six months or longer in 1995 while children working in unpaid or underpaid jobs and those working within their households were not included. My own estimate based on household survey indicates a figure of about 300 children under 16 working as apprentices in the village. Among them one-third came from outside of the village. If we take all these children into account, working children under 16 made up 40 per cent of the workforce in the wood sector of the entire village.

In terms of education, findings in both groups reveal that half of the working children aged between 8 and 15 were no longer attending school. However, it should be noted that a majority of children working at their household-based shops were still attending school whereas 60 per cent of working children in enterprises did not go to school. At the age of 15, eighty two per cent of working children in both sectors had left school for good.

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In addition to this, the survey findings further indicate that while all of working children have at least attended primary school, none of them finished the secondary level. Those who finished the primary level tended to follow woodwork rather than entering the higher levels of secondary school.

Table 6.3. Education of children working in the wood trade by age group (in percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Lower secondary</th>
<th>Child workers still being at school</th>
<th>Child workers no longer at school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 - 10</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 12</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 - 14</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own survey in 1995, based on 154 child woodworkers.

By categorizing child labor in the wood trade into two specific groups: 1) children working under parental supervision in the household-based production, and 2) children working under their employers’ supervision in private enterprises, I would suggest that in these two forms of child employment, a close examination of such issues as job motivations, social relations at work, work-time and wages are of vital importance in order to understand the nature of children’s work.

In terms of work-time, my observation shows that those children who worked under family’s supervision did not perform as well as those who worked in an enterprise’s workshop. Children working at home often took breaks at will and were often distracted by their domestic surroundings. Many parents complained that the children working at home made little progress in developing skills. In their opinions, to become a good carver, an apprentice should work under the supervision of a serious foreman or employer who kept a strict work/learning regime and enforced discipline. At 11 workshops under observation, the average work time was about ten hours per day. A work day lasted from 6 a.m. till 6 p.m. but children normally started a bit earlier and stopped later because they had to prepare the work site in the morning and tidy it up after work. Lunch break was between 11.30 a.m. and 13.30 p.m. At work, children were not allowed to break without permission. Some children told me they had to learn how to refrain from urinating for several hours while working so that they would not be scolded by their supervisors for work interruption.
At household work sites, work time was applied casually but on average, working hours were not less than 10. Particularly night work involving children occurred more often in this type of production as compared to private enterprises, where children were only asked to take night shift during peak periods.

Night shift normally started from 7 p.m. until 11 p.m., some time longer. During my stay in the village, I witnessed that at peak periods, some worked up to 2 a.m. in the morning. Some tasks regarded as light work such as polishing, involving women and children, was often done at night. It was common to see children falling asleep during work hours.

However, one rarely found children between the ages of 8 and 10 working on night shifts. At this age, they still spent half a day at school and only learned the skills of wood work at home or in workshops with little seriousness. They were however encouraged to do wood work because, as their parents put it: “Just something for them to do instead of playing under the sun without supervision”. Contrary to their parents’ view, children at this age could not care less. Sometimes they just left their work to play games and as I usually witnessed, most of them got punished for their misbehavior.

Girl workers were not highly valued. What they did as wood workers was regarded as “extras”. Most of them reported they had to fight against the parents’ will to learn the trade. Parental attitudes were best illustrated by the fact that girls were often interrupted from their wood work to do house-chores or to help on the farm while the boys were left alone. It was true that the parents expected more earnings from the sons rather than daughters. This helps explain why girls spent less time on wood work than boys.

A close examination of work-time by child workers based on periodic visits and 24 hour recalls reveals more details on their working conditions. There was little difference in work time according to the children’s ages although younger children aged between 8 and 12 work a little less than older children. Full-time child workers worked on average 67.2 hours for boys and 53 hours for girls per week. For those who worked part-time, their average work time was 25.5 hours for boys and 23 hours for girls per week.

Child workers had no periodic holidays. They only took days off when they fell sick, or on important family occasions and feasts such as Tet. However, working days were sometimes canceled for lack of materials or because of slow sales. On these days,

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54 Tet (Spring Festival) is the main holidays for wood workers. These holidays often last from the last week of December to the third week of January in the Lunar Calendar. During these four weeks, wood workers spent their time visiting relatives, friends or simply enjoying themselves with various entertainment.
child workers were allowed to “relax”. During harvest time in May-June (vu chiem) and October-November (vu mu), part-time workers and girls were released from woodwork to help in the field.

Child wood workers, particularly boys, preferred to spend their free time to enjoy karaoke, billiards, electronic games, gambling and happy hours in “village bars”. Actually, such entertainment as karaoke, electronic games and billiards were introduced recently after the wood trade brought a degree of prosperity to the village. These were mainly aimed at village youths who worked in the city and took their holidays at home.

Work relations

Earlier in this chapter, I have discussed the hierarchical relations in the wood trade, according to which wood workers were divided into three categories: foremen, fellow workers and trainee assistants. I also pointed out that the emergence of entrepreneurs has changed the labor relations in wooden furniture manufacturing. In the past, wood carvers worked on direct orders from their customers and work relations among a group of wood carvers were basically those of colleagues. Today, standing between workers and customers were the brokers who actually controlled the whole business. From this starting point, I will further delve into the position of child workers in the wood trade.

At the outset, we should make clear that there are two kinds of wood workers doing different jobs. *Tho cham* (wood carvers) who create the carved objects and *tho long* (carpenters) would reassemble these carved parts into a complete object. Generally speaking, there were about 20 per cent of woodworkers who worked as assemblers. However, all children working in the wood sector were found to be carvers. Carpentry was not attractive for them because the work was heavier and wages were lower.

The main process of wood carving consist of wood selecting, designing, refining, polishing and varnishing. Most child workers were only involved in refining and polishing. Normally, the foreman makes the design of the objects first and child workers then refine them. Only a small number of child workers, mainly boys at the age of 13 - 15, were able to carve such complicated objects as statues and wood-cut pictures. As a rule, those who could independently make designs were highly regarded by their fellow workers and got regular pay. Refiners and polishers, regardless of their age, were considered as assistant workers and had lower pay. Similarly, the foreman’s qualification depended entirely on his skills, so that a highly skilled worker at the age of 16 or 17 could become a well-paid foreman himself. A striking feature of wood carving was that a foreman needed a number of assistants to do such tasks as refining and
polishing because these jobs took a lot of time and patience. This explains why there were so many trainee assistants at a wood carving workshop.

The fragmentation of wood worker's wages based on degree of skill provides some important implications for explaining labor relations in the wood trade. In many household shops, the head of household formally ran the wood business but because he was not a wood carver, so in fact he only worked as an assistant for his "little" son who knew how to carve. In case the son would leave his household and go to work for others, the household shop would have to shut down. Generally, children who worked for their households contributed directly to household incomes but they were not paid. In order to keep the children to work at home, parents often provided them with incentives such as pocket money, bonus and new clothes. Unfortunately for them, teen-age workers usually opted for working away from home where they could get paid properly and enjoy their own freedom.

Although one may see a fusion of friendship and kinship ties through work, the relationship between child worker and employer often goes beyond that. In its nature, this is the one between labor and capital, as found somewhere else in Asia (Lai Ah-Eng, 1982:581).

Generally speaking, child workers employed to work in workshops were under the direct supervision of a foreman/master. As assistant workers, children were assigned to do certain tasks, from simple chores to more complicated work. In the early stages of their apprenticeship, they performed those tasks usually done by unskilled laborers. For example, after carving an object, the foreman needed someone to refine and polish it with care, and this was done by a child assistant. As an employee himself, the master did not control assistants on his own. He was however authorized to use assistant workers for a particular job. In terms of labor management, the children were controlled by both master and employer. These two persons were entitled to punish trainees if they made mistakes or misbehaved. Working children told me that when they did something wrong, they would leave the work site quietly and come back later with their parents or relatives to apologize or indemnifying the employer for any material loss or damage, which may help avoid the punishment.

Recruitment of trainee assistants was done through family relations or other acquaintances. There were no official standards of working regulations. Agreement on working conditions of children was often made between employers/masters and their parents. Such relations were built on trust and moral ethics rather than legal regulations, and they were considered sufficient guarantee for children to work. Employers would not accept children without sponsors because they had to make sure trainees who came from afar were reliable enough to be allowed to stay in their house for a long period.
Living far from home, working children from outside village were rather vulnerable and their well being totally depended on their employers. As I have often observed, these children tried their best to please their masters and employers. They worked hard with hope that after a few years of training, they would become carvers and earn a living for themselves. In our confidential talks with employers, masters of wood carving told me often they taught children not only carving skills but also “the way of real men”. These premises turned out to be quite blurring, often leading to abuses because “turning children into the real men” might mean forcing them to do all kinds of tasks outside wood work, such as running house chores, taking care of their bosses’ young children and farming.

In brief, labor relations in the wood trade were not based on work alone. Other factors such as kinship and acquaintance, the relationships between master and learner, between employer and employee all played an important role, and which were sometimes the deep roots of abuses. Additionally, child workers, regardless of their skills, were always treated as premature kids. They were called pho nho (little workers), the lowest rank in the hierarchy of the wood trade. This implies that child workers could not expect to receive the same treatment as their adult work mates.

Work for wages

Apart from those children who worked for their households as unpaid workers, the proportion of child workers actually paid by their employers in 11 workshops under my survey was relatively low, only about 36 per cent of total working children. So the majority of these children worked as unpaid trainees.

For those children who worked for wages, their earning rates varied considerably, depending on their skill-levels and the quality of products they made. In principle, wages could be paid on the daily basis or for piece-work, but generally employers preferred to pay them on a daily basis. In their opinion, such a way of payment allowed them to secure good quality for the work done. The child workers were in no position to bargain with their employers about their pay.

A child worker at the age of 14-15 who worked as designer/refiner could earn an average wage of 20,000 dong per workday, which was about two thirds of the wage of an adult doing the same job. Trainees with experience of two or more years in woodwork earned about 10,000 dong per day, while female workers who did polishing jobs earned about 7,000 dong per day. Because wage rates did not depend on age but on skill, adult workers who did simple tasks might get lower wages than child workers who worked with their skills.
Usually, trainee assistants were unpaid workers, but they were also offered a small amount of cash as bonus on special occasions, especially when sales were good.

Previously, I have remarked about the children's weak position in bargaining with employers. In fact they had no power at all to negotiate about their position as employees. Such issues as wage rates, forms of payment and working conditions were often contracted between their parents/sponsors and prospective employers. In order to avoid a bad reputation as exploiter of children's labor, and taking into account a number of relationships among adults (relatives, acquaintances, neighbors...), employers did not make direct contract with working children. Both parents and employers preferred that wages should be paid directly to the children's parents. Apart from some advance payment, employers normally retained the rest of children's wages for their business until the end of year. Meanwhile parents exerted direct control over their children's wages. A mother told me how she felt about children's earnings:

"We know better how to use money for the right purposes. Children are to help their parents. Who knows, their earnings may not be enough for their own consumption. Don't get the idea that we parents will spend their money for our own needs, we only worry about them".

The fact remains that most working children wanted to get paid directly. Some of them reported they sometimes had to use their own "weapons" to get part of the wages. One key informant told me normally he dared not ask his parents for money, but once he was sent to work far away from home under the conditions agreed by his parents and employer, he would ask the latter for some advances. If this demand was not met, he would leave the workshop or keep staying in bed. Though this ruse was often used with little success, it reflected well the position of working children and their labor relationships in the woodwork sector.

During my stay in the village, I heard stories of apprentices who sought a freelance job elsewhere at night to earn some pocket money. This was however not a common occurrence. Most child workers tried their best to work for their masters with the hope of becoming a real carver after three or four years of training. It was obvious that obtaining professional skills to earn a living was the most important thing for the children (and their parents) because they could not expect to learn these skills at school or on the farm. For many families in the village, the wood trade represents a way to achieve prosperity. This aspiration was reflected in the children's ideas how to spend their earnings. Based on my detailed notes taken from confidential talks with working children, 83 per cent of the children working in 11 wood workshops said they would keep part of it for themselves, and only three per cent said they would keep it all. In more detail, 59 per cent said they wanted to contribute money to their parents' plans to build a new house or to improve home comforts (such things as television, cassette player, motorbike). About 26 per cent of children (42 per cent of girls) wanted to spend money on new clothes, shoes and good food. Five per cent (only boys) wished to spend
their earnings on snacks, traveling and entertaining their friends. Most boys were relatively ambitious on spending their earnings for such "big things" like housing, buying expensive consumer goods while girls were less ambitious, saying that they wanted to keep money for themselves.

Children’s ideas on how to spend their earnings offer interesting insights into their motivation in seeking work. They tend to say little about "earning a bowl of rice" but rather more about improving their living conditions although in reality, earning money to cover the cost of their daily meals was of primary concern for most of them. There was ample evidence that children’s earnings played a central role in changing the economic situation of individual households. Villagers often mentioned children’s employment in the wood trade as a source of envy. Competition among villagers to improve their living standards and the attractions of a new life style encouraged both parents and their children to seek employment in the market economy, in this case in wood workshops.

Although children rarely mentioned how they spent their own money, my observations indicated that boys spent it on gambling, smoking, drinking, snacks and other forms of entertainment (karaoke, cinema etc.) Girls preferred to spend money on new shoes, clothes and school expenses. Some of them invested in raising their own livestock but many girls complained that their parents just took their chickens, ducks, geese and pigs and never paid them back in cash.55

*Job mobility*

I have discussed the increasing intensification of seasonal migration in Giao village where male peasants/craftsmen left their village and searched for jobs in urban wood workshops for long periods of time. It was the foreman/entrepreneur who played an important role in linking the rural craftsmen with the labor market in urban settings. This was also true for child workers engaged in the wood craft industry. However, while adult workers were attracted to the urban workshops for their high wages, the mobility of child workers was more complex. As far as geographical mobility was concerned, we could distinguish two different flows of children’s migration: the first involved children who *moved into the village* for apprenticeship; and the second involved children who *moved out of the village* to urban wood workshops. Viewed from the perspective of job mobility, we can see a upward direction among working children. They generally moved

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55 As a popular custom in many rural areas of the Red River Delta, girls are allowed to earn money from extra sources and keep for their own, called "von rieng" (own money). When married, they can bring their wealth to the husband’s home as dowry.
from the status of apprentices to that of waged workers, and after a training period in the village, they can be employed to work far away from home.

Regarding the flow of *in-migration*, my estimation based on surveying the village wood workshops indicates that 42 per cent of apprentices were from outside of the village. Most of them came from the surrounding districts of Hai Hung provinces, but also from neighboring provinces such as Ha Bac, Hai Phong and the northern mountainous provinces of Lang Son and Lai Chau. Surprisingly, some children from remote southern provinces such as Gia Lai and Lam Dong were also sent to the village to learn the trade.

Most working children who moved into the village for apprenticeship were from peasant families. They were sent directly to the village workshops through the network of acquaintances and relatives. Some of trainees were picked out by fine-art wood galleries to work for them after training. There were no children who came to the village in search of jobs on their own. Only a few girls came from outside the village for training. Most of these girls were between 12 and 16 and all of them had stopped going to school.

While child migrants *moved into* the village for apprenticeship, others *moved out* of the village to work for wages. My village survey in 1995 indicated that about 17% of wood workers who seasonally migrated to work elsewhere were children under 16 years of age. In the years of 1996-1997, I several times visited urban wood workshops set up by the entrepreneurs from Giao village in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to get more insight into the life and work of child workers there.

There were not so many children below the age of 15 moving out of the village to work for urban workshops as compared to those children who moved into the village for apprenticeship. Most children recruited to work in urban workshops had to spend some years as trainees in the village workshops before they could become qualified to work for wages. Only a few girl-workers were found working in urban workshops. One reason for this was the parents’ desire to keep their daughters at home to enhance the prospects of their marriage. Many foremen told me since living costs in the city were quite high, they had to limit the number of child workers in their workshops. But there were still child workers under 16 working in the city. There were two types of working children who migrated from the village to urban shops. The first group consisted of paid child workers who were recruited through verbal contracts between the foremen/employers and their parents. The second group included unpaid child workers still working as trainees. They were brought to the city by their masters who took care of their living expenses except wages.
Like in their home village, the “little workers” in these urban shops were mainly assigned such tasks as refining and polishing carved objects. They ate and slept right at the work site, usually in temporary shacks rented from the local owners. Employers or masters’ wives often cooked for the entire group. Food costs were normally deducted from the workers’ wages.

While talking to employers, I often heard them complain about child workers under their responsibility. They said it took lots of efforts to manage these child workers, and there were always professional risks and sickness which could be costly. On the contrary, children did not seem to worry much about the “money first” principle. Rather it was an excitement for them to work in the city, far from parental control. They were proud of their ruses to press their employers for advance payments so they could enjoy themselves, threatening to go away or work elsewhere if their demands were not met. This was in line with their parents’ complaints that children often neglected to send money home and some of them even returned home with nothing but debts. There was no doubt a high mobility of child workers moving between jobs. Nardinelli’s study assumes that children migrated to those areas where their wages were highest (Nardinelli, 1990:86). However, we should add that working in the urban settings was an attraction in itself for many young workers. Besides the wage rates which were normally much higher than those paid in the village, children also wanted to experience the excitements of the city lights.

Learning a trade for life: child workers, employers, and parents

Generally speaking, children’s work in skilled trades is normally linked with the history of apprenticeship. Studies on child labor in past Europe (Nardinelli 1990, Weissbach 1989) or working children in contemporary India (Burra 1995), Senegal (Moric 1982), Indonesia (White & Tjandraningsih 1992), and elsewhere (Goddan and White 1982), etc., regard the apprentice as a potential source of children’s exploitation. Nardinelli however adds that certain factors such as custom, law, and the bargaining strength of parents helped to reduce potential abuse of apprenticeship. He also assumes that exploitation of apprentices in skilled trades was not severe (Nardinelli 1990:87). However, this hypothesis is not backed up by empirical data while Burra’s observations of Indian gem polishers contrarily suggest that apprenticeship training is only a disguise of child exploitation (Burra 1995:90).

Observations on child labor in developing countries generally indicate that children are popularly employed in fine-art crafts and family workshops as apprentices. Unfortunately, there have been few comprehensive studies on the problem of children’s’ apprenticeship. This part is to provide more empirical data to better understand this aspect of child labor. It suggests that it is the shift to a market economy that led to a commercialization of apprenticeship in the wood trade. Since this business brought the
employers a good deal of profits, therefore, the main motivation of expanding apprenticeship was to raise incomes by using children’s labor. Having said this, one should not forget that it was the parents themselves who wished to give their children a chance to learn professional skills, enabling them to cope with an increasingly fragmented labor market.

*Employers: “We bring them a good future!”*

There was a story widely circulated among Giao villagers relating to wood carving: A hundred years ago, the founders of the wood trade held a ceremony at the communal house. They swore to the village spirit guardian that they would not pass on the wood carving skills to anyone who was not native of Giao. Those who violated this pledge would be punished by the deity. The attendants of that ceremony hammered a nail in the main pillar of the communal house to affirm their pledge.

For the wood carvers of Giao village in the past, to keep this oath was a sacred duty. And this old story is still retold today as an attempt to protect the technical how of carving from outsiders. It reflects the monopolistic character of wood carving guilds of Giao village that dated back from many years. It also suggests that the apprenticeship for commercial purposes in this trade was not so popular in the past. To gain more insight into the anthropological aspects as to how and why this tradition of the wood trade was broken, I will present a brief description of the conflicting views among those concerned on the question of apprenticeship.

A strong revival of the wood trade after the economic reforms and the wealth it generated has diminished the sacred character of the old pledge. Hundreds of children from various areas have come to the village for apprenticeship. In 1990, the *Association of Giao Village Carpenters (Hoi Tho Moc)* was set up, aiming at protecting the wood carvers’ interests. The first action this association undertook was to turn away children who came to the village from outside to learn the trade. This action however went against the masters/foremen’s interests and was strongly resisted. The conflict became so serious that the local Communist Party cell had to hold a meeting to discuss the matter. The foremost topic for discussion was what practical usefulness these apprentices could bring about and why children did not come to the state schools for training but instead heading for Giao village?

The argument of the open-training supporters was that the expansion of training not only contributed to the development of rural industries as set by the Party policy but also maintained the traditional craft that had almost fallen into decline and needed new
stimulating forces. Furthermore, it would create more jobs and raise incomes for many villagers.

Opponents of the open policy argued that the masters/foremen were solely motivated by financial gains in exploiting children’s labor and had little to do with wood carving revival. Moreover, they argued that extending apprenticeship for all would devaluate the fame of wood carving of Giao village, breaking the distinct features of Giao carving school, and paving the way to mass production of objects of little artistic value.

The struggle put up by the Association of Carpenters against open apprenticeship had an important significance if one was to understand the socio-economic aspects of apprenticeship training and the utility of child labor in wood carving. Based on direct observations and talks with working children, their parents and employers, I will further analyze their views and motivations on utilizing child labor in this commercialized craft.

The argument that apprenticeship in wood carving made a good contribution to reviving with new vigor a famous traditional craft, which almost disappeared for many years, was supported by some press reporters who visited the wood workshops (Do Quang Dan 1994, Thanh Sang 1994, Xuan Ha 1992). These reporters contended that it would be better to put those children who left school at an early age to work instead of doing nothing because without proper supervision, they would be easily drawn into social vices such as gambling, drinking and smoking. Others opined that children should be regarded as a potential labor force to meet the increasing demands of the market economy, while ignoring the prospect of their long-term development (Le Ngoc Hung 1998:40). Master-craftsmen and entrepreneurs were praised for admitting children to work so that they could learn a professional skill and earn money (Huu Duc 1992). This would ensure the smooth development of social order and public security. Among the villagers I talked to, such arguments in favor of apprenticeship training were particularly well received by the employers.

In giving prominence to their training, employers always stressed the advantages of sending children to their wood workshops. According to them, sending children to work was to enhance incomes for their families and themselves. If the children did their best in training, they would soon earn money to support their families. Even if they work for nothing, work would be the best way to keep them from hanging around. Those children attending school half a day, could spend the rest of their time learning new skills and maybe earning some money as well. When they grew up they would be qualified to earn a decent living. The masters also emphasized other aspects of apprenticeship such as learning discipline, obedience, and good personal manners.
Besides learning the wood craft, children were also required to do some odd chores like washing, cleaning and cooking, etc.

Masters/employers also talked about running their business as a moral commitment because of the costs involved. They pointed out it would take at least six months to teach a child how to do some simple tasks. Even then the quality of their work remained very low. Children often lacked patience to work on delicate objects. They usually wasted the hard wood, which was very expensive, and therefore making the manufacturing costs higher. Additionally, children sometimes left their work without giving notice, which might cause disruption in the production line. Some children were accused of stealing professional secrets and running off to work for competing shops.

Despite talking about the merits of their wood carving training workshop as a non-profit but costly business, the masters/employers often failed to explain why they kept on recruiting more child workers and opening more workshops for apprentices. A pool of information from child workers, their parents and the masters themselves helped throw some light on the matter. As it turned out employers often exerted enough control to keep apprentices in their workshops for a considerable period of time.

Generally speaking, access to apprenticeship was not free for everyone. The employer only accepted new trainees based on his knowledge of the applicant’s family background through the network of acquaintances or relatives. Such relations were regarded as a guarantee for a trainee to live and work in the employer’s house for an extended period of time.

Children coming from outside the village were preferable because they were expected to pay their monthly fees and food (in cash or kind) equivalent to about 30 kilograms of rice per month. Although this might seem a minor charge, it was in fact a considerable source of income for the employer. If an employer kept a few trainees like this under his roof, their total contributions would be enough to cover the living costs of both trainees and host family, even if the child trainees contributed nothing in terms of wood carving production. These fees had to be paid in advance on a quarterly or semi-annual basis and if the trainees dropped out, no money would be returned. Obviously, by doing this, the employer forced trainees to depend closely on him. Moreover, children coming from outside of village became more obedient when they totally depended on their hosts.

The age of apprentices was also the employer’s concern. It was said that the ideal age for learning carving is between 12 and 15. Children older than 15 were not preferred for the reason that they are not patient enough to follow a craft which normally takes them several years to grasp the basic techniques and their hands are no longer nimble. But the truth might lie elsewhere. My direct observations tend to dismiss the
myth of young children's nimble hands. The truth is that the children older than 16 are rather independent and they would protest against mistreatments while younger children are rather obedient.

Apprentices said they were normally assigned to do simple tasks even after they had acquired enough skills through a combination of observation and practicing. In their views, the master did not want to teach them every technical know-how of carving and they were thus not allowed to work with hard wood in the initial years of training. If they wanted to learn more, they had to work harder for more years. As said, this was the best way to keep occupational secrets because the master needed the children to work as unpaid assistants, not waged workers.

Employers not only used the methods of "push" and "trickle-down" to tie down working children, they also used various means to exploit effectively children's labor. Nardinelli assumed that "the payment of premiums provides strong evidence that apprentices in skilled trades were not exploited" (Nardinelli 1990:87). Actually, premiums were not wages and they could not compensate properly the children's labor. Moreover, premiums were offered only a few times a year, mainly on special occasions. Premiums should thus be considered a way of encouraging children to do more for their employers.

Those trainees who worked in the workshop for a couple of years were no longer required to pay the monthly contribution. Instead, they were offered daily meals and if doing a good job, they might get small allowances. This suggests that apprentices' labor was significantly productive because in principle, children could get paid only when the value of the work they performed was worth more than what went into their upkeep. To understand more in detail the question of how much child workers contribute to the production of goods, I will take up the process of making a cupboard as an illustration.

According to wood workers, it takes about 30 labor days to produce a cupboard with sophisticatedly carved decorations. Work can be itemized as follows:

- Wood preparation (splitting up): 4 working days.
- Having the leo (braces) and be (platform) carved: 10 working days.
- Refining the carved parts leo and be: 10 working days.
- Polishing, varnishing and assembling carved parts into a complete unit: 6 working days.

The foreman usually does some parts of work such as preparing wood, designing decorations and putting the final touches on the whole product. All of these tasks takes him about 15 working days. His assistants, mostly children, are assigned to do the rest.
If the foreman has to hire workers for the rest of the tasks, he earns only the wages of 15 working days. If he uses trainees to do these tasks, he will not have to pay them. And the wages for 15 working days done by his child assistants shall go to him.

This simple example illustrates how children's labor helped to raise the employer's income. As said previously, a wood workshop requires numerous assistants to do simple but precise tasks such as refining and polishing. This explains why so many children are employed in the wood sector. So it can be said that even though the employer was supposed to assume all the risks of business, the economic value the trainees brought to his business was evident.

*Parents: “Work makes them the real men”*

I have analyzed various attitudes regarding apprenticeship and the utility of child labor in the wood trade, viewed from the employer's perspective. It is obvious that a number of children sent to the village's wood workshops as trainees or waged workers were not from poor families, particularly those coming from outside the village. Poor parents apparently could not afford to make an advance contribution, an equivalent to 300 or more kilograms of rice for the upkeep of their child for one year. My survey among working children revealed that a majority of them (68 per cent) came to wood workshops under their parents' arrangement while only 32 per cent (among these, 58 per cent were girls) said they made the decision on their own. This reflects the parents' desire in driving their children, particularly boys, into waged jobs.

Listening to confidential stories told by the children's parents helped understand why these parents had chosen wood work as a worthy career for their children. A veteran who formerly served as chairman of the local co-operative, confided to me that if he just had one more son, his family would be much better off. He said his only son of 16 years was involved in wood work for a few years and he felt his family now was faring much better than before. Every month, his son earned about 500 thousand *dong*. Thanks to his son's earnings, he could afford such things as TV. He believed that without wood work, the villagers' standard of living would not be improved. And so the villagers vied with each other to send their children to work. But he worried that when his son grew up, he would not send money home. In his opinion, young children (under 16) were more dutiful than older ones. But he was worried that sending children to work at an early age might make them ill educated.

This story like many others I heard in the village was indicative of the desire of the native inhabitants to earn more income and improve their standard of living through non-farm activities, such as wood work. Peasants seemed to take these activities in
stride, after weighing the pros and cons whether to send their children to work at an early age or let them get more education, but finally decided that the family’s economic situation should prevail.

Some parents had a high regard for wood carving, an occupation in which “one’s face and head are protected from rain and sun” (*mua khong den mat, nang khong den dau*). This local saying reflects the popular belief that carving is a light and “clean” job as compared to farming where one has to dirty one’s hand in the paddy fields. In their reasoning, carving requires dexterity, artistic talent and patience rather than physical exertion therefore it is suitable for children. Moreover, it is a craft that could get you a reasonably good income while training costs remained affordable.

In addition to this type of thinking, some parents simply believed that work is the best way to train their children to live properly because, as they put it, “playing around is good for nothing”. They often quoted a popular saying “idleness is the source of all evils” (*nhan cu vi bat thien*) in their decision to send children to work.

However, most parents voiced their concern about the negative aspects of children’s involvement in work at an early age, fearing that a lack of a proper education might affect the children’s future development. Such worries seemed to be softened by the prospects of employment and earnings that would help to improve the family’s standard of living. Somehow they felt that sending children to work was to prepare them for a good future, and if the family’s economic situation was good, so would be the children’s lot.\footnote{Children’s pursuit of material life is manifested in their preferred folk sayings such as: *Van hay chu tot khong bang thang dot lam tien* (A well-educated man is worth less than an illiterate boy with a lot of money); *Dong tien la Tien, la Phat, la suc bat cuoc doi* (With money, you can be regarded as Angle and Buddha, and money made you stronger in life); *Dep trai di bo khong bang mat ro di Honda* (An ugly boy riding a Honda motorbike is more respectable than a handsome boy going about by foot).}

Although earning money is a desirable thing, many parents obviously worried that money might spoil their children, particularly those working away from home. These were often reminded of their filial duties, together with stern warning against smoking, drinking and gambling. In actual fact the child was only allowed to work away from home under condition that his/her wages should be paid directly to the parents and he/she was to be put under the supervision of the adult relatives or fellow villagers.

It should be mentioned that most professional woodworkers recognized the health hazards of their craft, which may have long-term effects on mental and physical development of children. The parents’ general attitude in this regard was rather neutral, if not one of downright neglect. Parents’ attitudes and motivations in sending children to woodwork, as presented earlier, help understand why rural children’s involvement in
this craft was on the increase. While most parents regarded their children’s work basically as a means to improve the family income, others expressed enthusiasm and pride as their children brought home money, and thus encouraged them to earn more. These contended that children’s lives would be improved as the family income increased. Some parents expressed their concerns about the children’s future in a new environment dominated by money, but then abandoned them to the luck while others declared themselves powerless in stopping their children to earn. In the context of a fast changing society, many parents became irresolute to make a choice for their children’s future. Behind their talks was a real struggle between the wish of bringing a good future for their children and the reality of survival, improvement and intermediate interests. And as usual, they finally left them “at the mercy of their fate”.

**Child workers: dutiful children?**

How did the children judge their work and assess their relationship with employers? What were their motivations, thoughts and aspirations? These questions were uppermost in my mind while I did field work in the village. Previously, I have analyzed to some extent children’s motives in working for wages and their ideas how to spend the money. Based on information gathered from many conversations I had with working children in the village, I shall try to elucidate the child worker’ moods, aspirations and feelings.

I often heard parents saying that sending children to the wood workshops was mainly to keep them from playing in the sun, which may harm their health. This simplistic explanation seemed to be at odds with the realities of the working children who often reported that if they did not work properly they would be punished. Work for them is decidedly not play.

**Case of a 15 year-old boy:**

Tin was a wood worker of 15 years old. He learnt wood carving when he was 10. His father worked as an “exported worker” to Bulgaria. In 1990, he was sent back to his home village. He then died in a traffic accident in HCM City in 1995. Tin’s mother tilled the rice land allocated to her household of four persons. Tin’s two sisters, 18 and 16 years of age, no longer attended school, the older worked as a seamstress in the village and the younger helped the mother in the field. Let listen to Tin’s story:

That year I was attending the fourth grade at the village school. My father one day told me that boys of my age who spent their days for fun were no good. He then took me to Mr.

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57 A closer look to the parents’ confidence in their children’s work may show that the belief that “as family incomes rose, child labor declined” (Nardinelli, 1990:102) sounds too much rational.
Nung, one of his close relatives and asked him to teach me wood work. My father said this trade would help me to earn money. During the first months, I didn't feel well. Wood dust constantly caused sneezing and itchiness, making me often feel out of breath. I felt weary after work and had little appetite. But then, all became normal after a certain period. I worked half a day while still following classes at school.

A year later, Mr Nung left for the South and I was transferred to Mr. Thau's workshop. It was here that I learned how to carve simple things. But Mr. Thau was so rough. Once working on a very thin carved object, I unfortunately broke it, so he beat me and heaped insults upon me. He did the same with my work-mates anytime he found their work was not to his liking. But all of us kept our mouths shut for fear of punishment. Things did not go well with me when I again broke another object. Too frightened, I glued the broken pieces together and left the workshop. I dared not to come home, so I went to my aunt's house in neighboring village. Next day, my mum came to me. She took me to Mr. Thau and made me apologize to him.

After that event, I did not go to school any more and started to work full-time for another workshop. There I got the chance to work with new and complicated models. After a few months working as a trainee, I got paid at the rate of 100 thousand dong per month. Work here was much more difficult. Workers were not allowed to trade jokes at work and they had to be on time, just like in the state-owned factories. Once Mr Manh (the employer) found I left the work site to watch my work mates processing a new model behind the house, he hit me.

Having worked with Mr Manh for about one year, I was sent to work for Mr Thep. This was a largest workshop in the village with many workers of my age. My mother said being admitted to work here was a good chance for me to learn more skills of carving. But even there I did not have time to think about good or bad. Work took me more than ten hours a day, and many times we were asked to work on night shifts. Apart from this, we had to study new models during breaks to work on them later. We actually didn't have time for rest. When somebody came late, his wages would be deducted. Although wage rates were higher, they were paid out only once or twice a year. Working conditions were so tight. I even had to learn how to suppress the need for pissing for hours during work. I often got headache and eye problems. Worrying about my health, my mother took me back to work at home on sub-contracts for my former bosses. At home, I did not have many orders but I was free to do what I wanted. My mother said I needed to get more work to buy this and that but until now, our house is almost empty.

Tin told me this story in a nonchalant manner as if it was a matter of no importance. Perhaps Tin thought every child worker had similar stories. He did not talk much about abuses but rather, about the hardships he experienced with work. Through the whole story, one can understand the uppermost concern, which is repeated time and again, with work constraints and employers' contempt towards working children. In his thought, work was somewhat boring and tiring, without rest and fun. In his experience,
he and other child workers were always haunted by punishments with scolding and beating.

Tin’s story and the available information from other working children reveal that the relationship between employer/master and child workers was paternalistic and children’s abuse at work occurred quite often. Though being mistreated, children normally did not tell their parents about how they were treated at work. Some said they were too frightened of their master’s power to report these incidents. Being little workers, they felt a dependent status and weak position to bargain. Hierarchy and parental control were constraint factors imposed on working children. That is why workers like Tin dared not to break working time even for pissing!

The strongest motive for children and their parent in learning the wood craft is to use it as a means to improve the household economy. The children were particularly proud of the money they earned. Although most of them gave money to their parents, or even when they worked without pay, they knew that by contributing their labor to raising the household incomes, they had achieved a certain power which adults could not ignore. Here is a confidential story told by Thiet, a worker of 13:

When I didn’t have to work, it was very hard for me to get money from my parents, even a few cents to buy petty snacks. My mum’s answer always was “No! I simply don’t have it. I am not a money-producing machine. If you want money, why don’t you go out and earn it yourself. Just look at your neighbors’ kids. They’re about your age, and they’ve earned enough money to build a house for their parents. What do you do for me then?”. She then started her ‘eternal song’, complaining that her children made her suffer. I felt so shameful hearing her talk like this. You know, the most dreadful thing for me was to open my mouth to ask my mum for some money to cover school expenses. But since I was able to earn a little money, I could easily get money from my parents. They no longer complained that I was a parasite exploiting their labor.

Unlike boys, girls were not encouraged to learn the wood trade. In the past, this was explained as a way of keeping craft secrets (girls would pass them on to future husbands) but surely this is no longer true today. In reality, their parents’ rationale had a lot to do with preventing them from learning the trade, reflected in a local proverb: “A daughter is someone else’s child”. This means that once she gets married, she would serve her husband’s family, so she should learn the art of home making instead of learning a craft. The tradition for a wife to live in her husband’s house after marriage deters parents from “investing” in their daughters. Furthermore, girls are regarded as their mother’s helper in the house and on the farm. Their involvement in wood work would deprive their mothers of essential help. Apart from this, a girl’s good reputation is always at stake in the rural community. Those girls who left home for work in urban areas were not highly appreciated and it would be hard for them to get husbands among the village boys. Girls and their parents had to keep in mind the “woman’s place” if they were to enter the wood craft. This is however not a decisive factor today. A number of girls ignored their parents’ advice and went to learn the wood trade on their own.
Case of a 13 year girl:

Since dropping out of school and staying at home to help my mother, I had to face with questions like: what job did you do today and how much did you earn. In the evening when I met my (girl) friends, these questions again and again came up. This made me burning with impatience. They earned money and purchased new clothes and make-up while I spent the whole day at home doing boring chores like cleaning, washing and cooking. Yet my parents always scolded me, treating me just like a servant. Since August last year, I followed Que (a girlfriend) to work in the Dung’s workshop. I knew some girls at my age were learning the wood trade there, so I decided to try it myself. At the beginning, my father was so angry with me that he took me home and beat me. But I just went on. Now he leaves me alone. He allows me to learn woodwork with only one condition: finishing all house work before doing wood work! But it’s all right with me.

My mother once asked me: Being a girl, what’s the use of learning a trade? But I thought if I work, I could earn money myself and I would not bother my parents any more. I will have freedom to buy things for myself. Although girls earn less than boys, at least it’s my own money. You know, before whenever I asked my parents money to buy something, all I got was abuse. Now I want to earn my own money. After the training here, I plan to go to Saigon and work for my uncle there.

I have observed that most girl workers were assigned to do simple tasks such as refining and polishing with low pay. Like the girl with the above story, most girls who took up wood work did it on their own and for themselves. They wanted, above everything else, to earn money, to have a chance to get out of their village and free themselves from restrictive family ties. This may be indicative of a change in attitudes regarding the women’s role in rural society.

Whether boys or girls, they all had their own reasons to enter the wood trade. Their stories help find some common patterns of children’s entry into the labor market. As we have seen, the most popular reason was to have a job to earn money to meet their personal needs such as clothes, shoes, or simply some pocket money. In rural areas where rice culture was the only source of cash which often fell short of household and individual needs, the wood trade represented a welcome opportunity for earning extra income.

My empirical observations also reveal that from an early age, rural children already started thinking about sharing family responsibilities and helping their parents. While still quite young, they expressed the wish to prove their worth to their peers later in life. In their stories, they talked about how they would one day be able to improve the family’s living standards, purchase expensive things, even build a new house for their parents etc. Such thinking suggests the long tradition of children’s filial duty imposed by Confucianism for many centuries, and which still runs strong in today’s society. In all
fairness it should be stressed that the money motive should not be considered as the
overriding factor. The whole process also has something to do with the social and
moral fabrics which places emphasis on children's duty towards their parents. 58

Most girls and boys said their entry into the wood trade was one way to escape
the monotonous world of farming with hard work and low returns. There were,
however, differences between girls and boys' motivation with regard to work. While
boys were prepared to take on the future by learning a trade, girls tended to take
woodwork as a temporary measure. Boys dreamed of high salaries and adventures far
away from home while girls wished to get rid of their domestic environment, dependent
status and ethical codes imposed on women. Such factors were constantly impacting
upon children's work that should not be ignored.

The effects of wood work

Much emphasis in child labor studies has been placed on such issues as
children's exploitation and abuses and the hardships of their working life while there are
still precious little empirical study on the impact of typical work situations on the
physical and mental development of working children. This may be due to various
reasons. It seems that social researchers prefer to leave the task of determining the
effects of work on children to the pediatricians. Moreover, the distinction between
different types of work, and the assumption, for example, that domestic or farm work is
"healthy" while waged/industrial work in workshops is harmful often tend to overlook
the question: what impact does work have on children's lives.59 In practice, it is difficult
to draw a clear line as to what kind of children's work is acceptable and harmless and
what not (White 1996:10). Such an approach often assumes that children who work with
their family are far less subject to abuse than those who work away from the home, thus
assigning them lower priority (Myers 1989:15). It is obvious that the lack of scientific
evidence and observations has made the assessment of the effects of a specific work on
children's development very difficult. In this connection, data collection from empirical
studies is of vital importance.

To have a deeper understanding of working children in the wood trade, this
section presents some examples of how the people concerned-- child workers, adult
workers and local health staff -- talked about the hazards of woodwork.

58 Chapter 7 will further elaborate the concept of children's filial duty to their parents in the Vietnamese
society and how it impacts upon their daily activities.
59 For instance, according to Shah, "by working along with their parents or older siblings, they learn
various skills without any ill treatments and prepare themselves for adult life. Work of that type is
practically free from harmful effects and can be interesting, educational and socially useful" (Shah
When I for the first time entered the village of Giao, I was mildly amused when the children started calling me “sep” (chief). They followed me everywhere as if I was a subject of curiosity. They burst out laughing when I told them jokingly that I was no chief but a woodworker who came looking for a job. It was the way they talked and joked about me that drew my attention to the effects of woodwork on the children’s health conditions. Their idea of a wood worker was someone who looked as thin as a reed, often bowing his head and with his back bent at a dangerous angle. I brought the children’s stories to Vu, the local doctor who was in charge of medical service in Giao village. Interestingly, Vu taught me a lot about diseases suffered by workers in wood work. He told me most wood workers suffered from chronic illness such as backache, paralysis, neurasthenic, allergy and headache. His logbook filled with case histories showed ten villagers with tuberculosis. In the last few years, 6 villagers died from stomach cancer. Vu added that accidents involving wood work occurred very often.

Talking with working children, I found that most of them were having health problems. They were all thin and it was very hard to guess their ages accurately. They said they had little appetite after sitting for long hours on the ground in just one fixed position, with their eyes constantly glued to the carved objects. Furthermore, they said they often felt tired, dizzy and had problems with their stomachs. All children interviewed by me said wood dust caused them skin disorders: itchiness and pustules were commonplace. Certain kinds of wood gave out unpleasant smell that caused them headache. In addition, working with primitive instruments and without safety measures often led to accidents at the work place.

My discussions with the local doctor helped shed further light on the health aspects of child wood workers. According to him, one should regard wood work as a harmful occupation to children’s health although the detrimental effects may not be immediate but rather in the long run. These are:

- **Back-ache and curvature of the spine:** Typically, wood carvers had to sit on the ground for about ten hours each working day. Their body was bent constantly while their eyes had to be fixed on the objects being carved. The medical doctor believed such a sitting position for long hours every day would cause inevitable damage to the skeleton, particularly among young children. Moreover, sitting in one position would hinder blood circulation and often caused the legs to go to sleep.

- **Astigmatic eye condition or amblyopia:** Generally speaking, wood carvers had to deal with very complicated and detailed designs. They had therefore to concentrate not only their mind but also their eyes constantly on the carved objects. Fixing one’s eyes on the very thin and detailed objects for long hours would surely cause affections on the visibility.
- **Skin diseases:** Itchiness and pustules were popular complaints among wood workers. It was said that various kinds of dust, including wood dust and metal/glass dust mixed in the sand paper caused these disorders.

- **Respiratory diseases such as bronchitis, sore throat, headache and other allergic inflammations:** Wood workers believed that poisonous substances exist in some specific hard wood such as lim (ironwood), trac (cypress wood) and po-mu (a kind of pine wood), which caused allergy while working with them. The smell coming from these kinds of wood was said to have direct effects on the human nervous system causing severe headache. Some child workers said they felt out of breath while working with such kinds of wood.

Apart from health-related considerations, there was evidence that most working children were afflicted with nervous stress caused by social factors such as a constant anxiety that something might go wrong with their work, which might result in scolding, beating or outright firing. Such tension generally made children feel exhausted, leading to a syndrome commonly known as “stress” and even nervous breakdown.

Actually, most adults interviewed by me recognized more or less the negative effects of wood work on their children. However, the rather high income from the trade was often the main reason for them to “turn a blind eye” (*nham mat lam ngo*). Talking about children’s health, parents often quoted a popular saying “*sinh nghe, tu nghiep*” (to be born into the trade and to die for the trade) to argue that their ancestors worked for hundreds of years with this wood trade, why should the children drop out now? “For heaven’s sake, don’t try any nonsense! Many generations from my family worked with the wood trade, and nothing ever happened. Let them do their job, all will end well!” an old wood worker with a number of trainees told me. He compared his wood work with a life buoy which saved many families in the village from poverty. As he put it:

I’m not so stupid that I don’t know how poisonous hard wood dust is. If you want to know how it affects children, do a test yourself. The most poisonous is ironwood dust. I once threw saw dust to my pigs, I saw blood come out of their noses. If pigs sweat out blood, how about children? But there is no other way, one has to make a choice between hunger, misery and having something to eat and something to cover one’s bodies.

Even though they knew quite well the harmful effects of wood dust, few children bothered to take safety precautions during work hours, saying that they felt uncomfortable to work in them. Employers at wood workshops tend to regard means of safety precaution the matter of workers, not themselves.

The examination of wood work effects upon working children in Giao village raised some questions about the health situation in the craft villages of the Red River Delta more generally. The recent expansion of family crafts and small-scale industries in
this area was regarded as a positive response to government economic reforms in the countryside. The environmental consequences of this rapid development have not been fully assessed as yet. A number of field reports suggested that as rural pollution was getting worse, there was also an increase of some typical diseases reported in specific craft villages. A survey of the health situation in various craft villages therefore would be helpful to determine disease patterns in specific villages. For example, medical consultants believed that wood dust and toxic materials were the causes of various allergies, skin and respiratory diseases, headache and chronic rheumatism reported in Giao village. As said earlier, most children worked in small-scale industries, family crafts and other informal sectors. The children's underweight and physical weakness can therefore be examined in relation to the nature of their work, taking into account such factors as age, physical exertion, duration of work, nervous tension, social pressures and environmental conditions at work.

From a health-care point of view, it should be noted that the mobility of people in the craft villages was particularly high. Previously, I have mentioned that the flow of in and out migration of children was on the increase since the wood trade had become commercialized in Giao village. This situation might increase the potential of disease transmission among the craft villages compared to "regular" types of village.

One should not underestimate the effects of social behavior on working children in rural industries. Tension at work and the masters' authoritarian behavior, particularly the way they punished their trainees were always potential causes of stress among the little workers. Furthermore, the social environment of craft villages was different from that of agricultural ones. Because of high population mobility, social pollution such as the abuse of alcohol and drugs, gambling...was commonplace. Living and working in such an environment, children were the most vulnerable to be victimized. As suggested by medical sociologists (Locker 1991:18-30), social factors, environments and behaviors are also causes of illness that should not be ignored while considering various aspects of child labor.

**Conclusion**

I have examined the ups and downs of the wood craft in Giao village, which had become commercialized recently, and children's involvement in this trade. As indicated,

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60 A survey conducted in some craft villages of Hung Yen province revealed an alarming state of pollution in these villages. For instance, lead pollution found in the village of Dong Mai, specializing in metal craft, is 4.3 mg of lead in one kilogram of soil, 46.4 mg in one cubic meter of air and 0.04 mg in one liter of water. Examination of 32 artisans working in this village showed that 78% suffered from respiratory diseases, nervous breakdown, headaches and chronic rheumatism. (Huong Giang, Kinh Doanh & Phap Luat, Business and Laws, 12.11.1998).
Agricultural decollectivisation in northern rural Vietnam has opened a new opportunity for the revival of traditional crafts, among which the fine-art wood craft. Unlike the past, the wood trade today has developed on a much larger scale together with the expanded export market of wooden furniture, mainly in Asia. Furthermore, work organization and labor relationships in the wood trade were much different from the past. In previous times, hierarchical and collegial social relations were at the core of the wood sector. Nowadays, with the emergence of new forces including investors, exporters and entrepreneurs, social relations between employers and employees in the wood sector have been substantially changed: they were mainly controlled by capital-related factors. It was in such a social context that my study of children’s entry into the labor market was conducted.

My research findings indicated that working children made up about 40 per cent of total labor force in the wood trade, most of them worked as trainee assistants. Village children started to make acquaintance with wood work at a rather early age, a small number started at the age of 8 while the majority started between 11 and 12. Normally, it took a child from three or more years to grasp some basic skills of wood carving. A comparative analysis between children working at home, under the supervision of their parents/relatives and those employed to work in private workshops yielded some remarkable statistics. In both sectors, the majority of children worked full-time, varying from 52 to 60 per cent as compared to the part-time child workers. Most working children, about 60 per cent, no longer attended school, and more than 80 per cent of them had left school for good at the age of 15. Generally speaking, the proportion of waged child workers was low. In the household sector, working children were generally not paid while in the larger enterprises, only about 36 per cent were paid, in full or in part. In the household sector, girl woodworkers made up only about 12 per cent while this was 23 per cent in the manufacturing sector. About 42 per cent of children working in enterprises came from outside the village. It was interesting to note that both children and their parents preferred the large workshops rather than a master’s home, despite harsh discipline and the long hours. In the parents’ view, their children would make good progress with enterprises where they had to work harder, more discipline was imposed and there were opportunities to learn new models.

“Many employers became rich thanks to their trainees”, my host in Giao village put it in no uncertain terms. As pointed out earlier, employers preferred to employ children as apprentices rather than waged workers. Relations such as friendship and family were often involved, and apprentices were coerced into working for their masters/employers for a couple of years as unpaid workers. It was these unpaid working children who helped employers reduce their production costs, making their goods more competitive on the market, and thereby increase their profits. On the other hand, the close links between foremen/masters and apprentices facilitated job mobility in the
wood trade. The development of wooden furniture manufacturing in the village
ehanced the exchange of commodity between urban and village workshops, helping
generate more employment for rural dwellers. Furthermore, urban-rural relationship of
the wood trade intensified the geographical mobility of wood workers. Children were
absorbed in the web of wood sector as well. From elsewhere, they moved to the village
of Giao for apprenticeship while others migrated out of the village, heading for urban
workshops in search of higher wages. Labor mobility in the wood sector reflects the
impact of on-going stratification of the labor market where rural children were flocking
into non-farm waged sector (Nardinelli 1990:86). The mobility of wood workers also
reflects a potential labor surplus in agricultural sector where peasants worked on their
small plots of rice land with low returns. This help explain why the hardships of trainee
assistants in the wood sector were evident, still learning a trade for making a living was
greatly desirable for both parents and children.

The low ratio of girls in the wood sector indicated a difference in attitude
between boys and girls regarding work where boys were more geared toward waged
work than girls. However girls’ participation in this trade was symptomatic of
something of an upheaval in the work force. It should be emphasized that non-farm
work, led by wood work, was becoming an important source of family incomes in the
village of Giao, fueling the peasants’ desire to improve their living conditions. Parents
sent their children to the wood trade with the rational wish to launch their children on a
profitable career path while trying to improve the family’s living standards with their
earnings. Most children, however, entered wood work just to earn money for
themselves. In fact, many parents told me that earnings by kids under 16 were “more
solid” than those of older children. By this they meant older children tended to keep
wages for themselves instead of sending money home. In order to control their
children’s wages, parents often negotiated in advance about payment with the
employers.

Children’s motivation of entering into waged employment also suggests
changing attitudes of rural youngsters vis-à-vis traditional ethics. Their preference to
work away from home and to satisfy their own needs is a testimony of the general
attitude of the young generation to be free from old norms, social constraints and family
obligations. Work for wages to cover one’s own needs was particularly popular among
those girls who dared to go against their parents’ wish not to take up wood work.
Although dowry was no longer a prerequisite for marriage, girls who were able to save
and bring their wealth to the husband’s family were highly appreciated. Girls who
worked away from home or seasonally migrated to urban areas in search of work were
not highly valued in social terms.
Contradictions inherent in children’s work, their earnings and social roles all reflect the socio-economic changes taking place in the rural landscape since the market mechanism was introduced and children’s employment is only part of that process.