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

Van Chinh, Nguyen

Citation for published version (APA):
BETWEEN OBLIGATIONS AND RIGHTS: THE CHILD, CHILDHOOD AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Day con tu thuo con tho
(A child needs to be taught at an early age)
(Local saying)

Introduction

Despite the recently increasing number of studies on child labour, an essential aspect of children's work has been virtually overlooked: the socio-cultural context within which work takes place. Such studies tend to bear a "rational" character, based on economic hard facts, and mostly neglect the cultural aspects, which in fact influence greatly the extent and nature of children's economic activities. Among these factors, cultural constraints, attitudes to children and their roles, and social institutions are particularly important to understand the meaning of children's work as well as the process of their acculturation and socialization (Rodgers and Standing 1981:23). Although such moral-cultural factors are not visibly exposed in daily work, they actually play an important role in influencing decisions made at the household level concerning utilization of child labor.

Going beyond the economic explanation of children's work regarding children as an economic asset of their parents, this chapter will further analyze the social attitudes with regard to the child, childhood and their potential influences on activities of children in the context of social change.

The Vietnamese culture is traditionally influenced by Confucian values, especially in education and family organization. However, there are few studies on the influence of Confucian doctrine vis-à-vis children's socialization in Vietnamese society. Questions can be raised, for example, like what is the position of children within the family in modern Vietnam? How did the social attitudes to childhood change during the decades of socialist transformation? What is the prevalent attitude to children's socialization nowadays? How does the traditional concept of childhood as well as network of children such as family, kinship, village community and society at large influence children's life and work?

This chapter does not intend to deal with all these questions. It will however raise some issues such as the high fertility rate and child labor, the cultural structure and the social values of children, which have been touched upon by various studies on Asian peasant societies. During my field research, I have tried to put these aspects in the context of Vietnamese society and re-examine such controversial issues. Indeed, my
observation was directed at daily interaction among the children and their parents, siblings and relatives. These daily practices and behavior were then examined in relation to social attitudes, norms and ethics, which were prevalent among the villagers. Confucian ethics, which served as inspirational models nationwide in the past were considered together with several life histories of Giao villagers to understand the concept of childhood in pre-revolution era. The knowledge I gathered during one year staying in Giao village and my own childhood spent in a village near Hai Phong during the movement of collectivization are helpful in studying rural childhood in the context of social change. The available data suggest that children play an important role in the socio-cultural life of the Vietnamese. Traditionally, the emphasis of Vietnamese childhood was on obligations rather than rights. And this does not seem change much during the period of transition [towards socialism] and still remains as an important factor of the socialization process of children at present. Consequently, an attempt will be made to define the status of the child in the family, identify the obligations that their status requires, social values of children and the changes through times. By providing such an ethnography of childhood, I hope it will supplement a comprehensive view to children’s work.

**Lineage, family and children**

Deeply immersed in a rural community, which entails a web of socio-economic relationships, the peasant as an individual does not seem to exist independently. In all likelihood, there are always memberships of a number of social networks functioning within the village. Like many other Vietnamese villages in the Red river delta, Giao village was traditionally formed on the basis of integration of multi-components, which may be called sub-structures (Tran Tu 1984). These sub-structures consist of a number of sub-village communities. Among them are residential communities (ngo and xom), the neighborhood of the same hamlet and alley ways, blood communities (patrilineage or dong ho), religious communities (village guardian spirit cult or tho cung thanh hoang; Christians or Thien chua giao and Buddhists, Phat giao), gender communities (organizations for males and females, such as giap-- an organization of male and age groups and hoi chu ba-- elderly women’s Buddhist association) and many other guilds and associations like phuong nghe nghiep (craft and trade guilds), hoi ho (credit association), hoi dong rien (the association of the same age people), hoi tu van (the association of Confucian scholars), etc. Through many years of revolutionary movement, apart from a few associations like giap and hoi tu van that disappeared,

---

61 This phrase, textually: qua do len chu nghia xa hoi, has been widely used in official documents of Vietnam government, referring to a period that, according to socialist theory, is an early stage of the process of socialist construction.
almost all of these organizations have shown their resilience and have become active with renewed vigor since the economic reforms of the early 1980s while having to contend with so many relationships. However, for Giao villagers, the family appears to be of the foremost importance of their life. It is significant to note that the native term gia dinh (family) refers not only to a nuclear family consisting of a couple and their children but also to a relatively larger unit known as chi ho (extended family) including grandparents, their sons' families and grandchildren. Although there has been a strong tendency of nuclearization of the family in recent years, this latter form of family still plays an important role in the life of Giao villagers. Therefore, to understand the position of children and their social values, one should not overlook the structure of the family within which a child was born, raised and developed.

Traditionally, Giao villagers belong to different lineages (dong ho). The organization of lineage is based on the male-oriented model with favored sons and other patrilineal relatives. Under the local customs, marriages within the patrilineage are strictly prohibited. Although in recent years, the trend of marriage with "outsiders" was increasing, village endogamy was still strongly supported by elders. The preference for marriage among villagers was primarily based on the traditional attitudes such as mutual understanding, convenience and particularly, marital alliance within the village. Consequently, village endogamy creates a complex and interlacing linkage among the villagers. In such relationships, children are taught at an early age to recognize who is who in the system of complicated kindred relationships. Bad behavior to relatives, particularly to senior ones is hard to forgive. In order to understand clearly how the kinship relationships impact upon the position of the child within the family in general and the childhood in particular, an attempt will be made to gain more insight into the structure of patrilineage and the family.

*Patrilineage (dong ho)*

The Vietnamese kinship system is formed on the basis of the male-oriented model, called ho, dong ho or gia toc. The members of ho share a common ancestor (thuy to, the founder), whom they have an obligation to worship and expect to be blessed by. A patrilineage normally consists of a number of branches (chi ho). As a principle, worshipping the common ancestors is the responsibility of the head of patrilineage

---

62 Houtart and Lemercinier (1981) suggest a proposition of increasing nuclearization of the family while Luong Van Hy (1989) tends to support the 'bilateral' relationship of Vietnamese kinship, which "still persists as the fundamental parameters of household formation and gender relations throughout twentieth century Vietnam" (1989:741-742). My own observation in Giao village in 1995 points out that the nuclearization of the household (tach ho) likely increased during the years of 'output contract system' (khoan san pham) and redistribution of rice land for peasant households (1981-1995).

177
(truong ho) while the branch members only worship the ancestors counted from a couple of the fourth generation (tu dai) down to the head of branch (truong chi). This division in fact reflects the various levels of kind relationship in the patrilineage.

Before agricultural collectivization (1958), most patrilineages of Giao village had some plots of land, called ruong huong hoa (cult-portion land) to cover ancestor cult expenses. The cult-portion land was under the management of the lineage’s head and it was not allowed to sell such land. Since the establishment of co-operatives, this sort of land was collectivized. All the ancestor cult expenses were since then to be contributed by the patrilineal families.

The patrilineage normally has a gia pha (family record) in which names, professions, dates of birth and death of ancestors were recorded from generation to generation. Some family records even spent a large part to mention about the history of the lineage, which aim at teaching offspring to follow the ancestor’s steps. The most important activity of a patrilineage is the common ancestor’s death anniversary (gio to). On this day, the male members are expected to come to the ceremony held at the ancestral hall (or at the patrilineage head’s house). After the ceremony, they will have a collective meal, reminding the children about the achievements of the ancestors concerned and discuss the common activities of the lineage.

The patrilineage members feel an obligation to provide mutual assistance, materially and morally, particularly on the occasions of wedding, house-warming, funeral and harvesting. Exchange of labor and production tools among households of the same lineage are more common than with others. Since the wood trade became commercialized, the form of enterprises based on family relations was preferred. Children engaged in apprentice of wood carving were mostly sent to foremen who belonged to their kin. Disputes among individuals often took the family’s involvement and sometimes became disputes between patrilineages.

Undoubtedly, the kinship system, as a social network, has an important significance in daily life of Giao villagers. However, the relationships among kinship members are not homogeneous but stratified.

While the term ho is used to refer to a common kindred, there is a distinction between father’s patrilineage (ho dang cha or ho noi (inner ho) and mother’s patrilineage (ho dang me or ho ngoai (outer ho). Within this bilateral relationship, there is also a distinction between distant relatives (ho xa, referred to members of the same patrilineage but different offshoots) and close relatives (ho gan, meant members of the same patrilineage branch). Furthermore, kin relationship is distinguished in ho ruot in

63 This mutual support is often explained by a saying: “giot mau dao hon ao nuoc la.” (a drop of kinship
particular and ho in general. For instance, siblings who were born of the same father and mother are called anh chi em ruot (full siblings), in contrast to anh chi em ho (patrilineal/matrilateral same-generation cousins). While “the bilateral distinction of ruot and ho relatives, among others, suggests the implicit recognition of the importance of bilateral and nuclear familial relations” (LuongVan Hy 1989:747), it also does, in fact, point out an implication of different degrees of obligations and right between ruot and ho relationships. For instance, for a child, his/her cau ruot (mother’s blood brothers) are more important than his/her cau ho (mother’s same-generation male cousins) and in turn, cau ruot surely feel they have more rights and responsibilities with regard to the chau ruot (nephew/niece born by their blood sisters) than chau ho (born by mother’s same-generation cousins).

In order to highlight the ethnographic significance of the kinship system, let me take the case of Vu Xuan lineage as an example.

At the Vu Xuan ancestral hall, a family document is still preserved in which historical events of this patrilineage, dating back to the 18th century, were recorded. According to this document, the Vu Xuan family was granted by the King (Le dynasty) some land in the area now called Giao village for their work in building royal palaces in the capital of Thang Long (Hanoi). From a family of five sons in the 18th century, the Vu Xuan has developed into five branches with 326 members (186 males and 143 females) in 1995. Apart from female members who got married and settled down with their husbands elsewhere, Vu Xuan family members nowadays make up 33 households within Giao village.

To get more insight on kindred relationships of the Vu Xuan family, my observations have been primarily focused on two households. The first household is headed by Vu Xuan Huan, 74, who was my village host. The second one is headed by the 70 year old Vu Xuan Bech. These two households reside next to each other in the same neighborhood.

According to the patrilineal order, Vu Xuan Huan, is the father’s same-generation male cousin (chu ho) of Vu X.Bech. For this kin relationship, Bech’s children have to call Huan ong ho-- ho grandfather, and Bech’s grandchildren refer to Huan’s grandchildren as chu/co (ho--father’s same-generation male/female cousins). Such kinship person-references do not depend on chronological ages but on the father’s position in the patrilineal hierarchy.

Indeed, the complicated system of references in the patrilineage reflects not only the male-oriented model of the patrilineage but also the status and obligations of its

blood is even much more precious than a pond of water).
members. In the context of a household, labor division and behavior among the household members also reflect the gender relations and their status. In the Huan’s household for example, the ancestral altar and surroundings are an almost exclusively ‘male area’. Huan’s daughter in-law rarely came and sat in this area. Every morning, Huan’s daughter in-law got up earliest, at about 5 a.m., and as usual, woke up her daughters. While the females were doing their household chores such as cooking, carrying water, washing clothes, cleaning up, feeding pigs and livestock, the male members kept sleeping. They only got up when the breakfast was ready and the house was already tidied up. In daily meals, Huan, his only son and sometime, the eldest grandson were sitting at the dinner table while his daughter in-law and the children always sit on the floor. This practice did not change during the year I stayed in the house.

On occasions when common meals held at Huan’s house were attended by Bech’s family members, differentiation between the senior and junior branches as well as gender could be observed through the sitting arrangement. Bech’s wife, though old as she was (72 years old) always insisted to sit together with Huan daughter in-law and her peers. Bech’s grandchildren often took part in serving food, drinks and at the end, did the washing up. They willingly did these chores to show their respect to the senior relatives who might younger than themselves. Disputes between Huan’s and Bech’s grand children were usually solved in favor of Huan’s grandchildren, who were of the higher branch in the patrilineage.64

Sons and the eldest son

Kin relationships based on the male-oriented model put sons, particularly the eldest son, in an important position. Previously in chapter 3, my survey points out that while a majority of households in Giao village was based on the nuclear formation consisting of parents and their children (69 per cent of total households), 30 per cent of the households still counted three or more generations under the same roof. My conversations with the villagers revealed that the old fashion, which regarded a big household as a symbol of the solidarity and happiness is still popular among elderly people. In the past, the household formation in which four or five generations lived together under the same roof was encouraged by the Confucian ideal and the State.65

64 Local proverb: “Be nguoi con nha bac, lon xac con nha chu”, meaning “though young as [he/she is], he/she is the child from the higher patrilineal offshoot; though old as [you are], you are only the child from the lower branch”.
65 Feudal states, from the Le to Nguyen dynasty (the 15th till the first half of the 20th century), commended this as an ideal symbol of family happiness and set up special awards for the families who kept up its recommendation.
Since the August 1945 Revolution, however, this symbol has lost its legal and political support. It is interesting to note that most three generations households of Giao village today were headed by the eldest sons, who after having married, resided in the same household with their parents and unmarried siblings. Younger brothers were usually supported by their parents to build a new house and established separate households after marriage. The eldest son normally continued staying with parents. He would inherit from his father not only the estates but also the obligations to worship the patrilineal ancestors. For this obligations, the eldest son was carefully looked after by his parents from an early age. He was referred as *dich ton* (the eldest son who will inherit and continue the lineage). Such ceremonies of marking ritually important dates in the life of young children as *day cu* (full-day old), *day thang* (one full-month old), and *day nam* (one full-year) were often prepared with great care. From his early age, the eldest son was usually sent to patrilineal activities to get acquainted with his prospective role.

For families with a number of sons, the youngest son was often at a disadvantage compared to his older brothers. This was often true since the age gap between older and younger children was rather large, the youngest son often grew up when his parents were already aged while the elder brothers had established their own families. Because of this many mothers tended to show more love to their youngest son as a compensation for his material disadvantage. The local saying expressed this trend as *giau con ut, kho con ut* (For better or for worse, the parents prefer to stay with the last-born son). Families with only one son always show a particular indulgence to him. The only son was often exempted from manual labor and household chores well into boyhood while his sisters might be put to work much earlier.

At advanced aged, parents seem to expect more from their sons rather than daughters although practically, there is no evidence of discrimination against daughters. These expectations, particularly from son(s) is manifested in the way parents try to offer the best of care to their children in the hope that they will gain better life in the future and “to shed glory on the race”. As parents of Giao village often said: “A family where the son fares better than his father is the one blessed with good fortune”.

**Daughters**

“*Daughter is someone else’s child*,“ this common expression indicates that daughters had a lower position in the family compared to that of their brothers. In chapter 4, I have indicated that girls started to do house-chores earlier than boys. This domestic orientation of girls was deeply rooted in the social attitudes towards women’s
prospective roles within the family. The principle of patrilocal residence after marriage put the women in the position of an 'outsider' in the paternal kinship system (a local saying said: nu nhi ngoai toc, females are outsiders of the patrilineage). Starting with marriage, the voice of daughters were no longer influential in their parents' household although they still maintained contact with their own relatives and observed various obligations with regard to their parents and natal patrilineage. Girlhood was primarily considered a process of socialization or apprenticeship. Alongside her mother, the daughter had to learn how to manage domestic tasks, which required her to show obedience towards her future in-laws. The success of a woman, in the eyes of her in-laws, would depend on how she managed domestic affairs and whether she would give birth to sons for her husband's family. In Gia o village, the local custom also allowed the daughter to inherit the property from her parents while dowry was not essential. Those who had no sons also accepted that the son in-law would reside with the wife's parents. However, matrilocality is not a preferred mode of living for most males, as this saying reveals: Trai o re nhu cho chui gam chan (son in-law living at his in-laws is just like a dog living under the pantry).

Half-siblings

Although prohibited by the current Law on the Marriage and the Family, polygamy is generally tolerated by local custom. For instance, among the living married men of the Vu Xuan patrilineage, there were 12 with two wives and one with three wives. The main reason behind this is the wish of having a son to ensure the continuity of lineage and to carry on the cult of ancestor. In terms of lineal continuity, a woman would feel secure only when she gives birth to a son for her husband. Otherwise, her status would be vulnerable in her husband's family. In a polygamous family, the children's status depends on their mother's position. According to local customs, children of the second wife have to refer to the children born to the first wife as their senior half-brothers/sisters (anh/chi cung cha khac me), regardless of their ages. If the first wife has no children, children of the second wife have the duty to take care of her with due respect. In case the first wife has no sons, the eldest son born to the second wife is bound to inherit the parents' estate and ensure the continuity of lineage and ancestral worship.

daughter is someone else's child, a daughter in-law is a real child bought by the parents).

67 According to Dao Duy Anh (1938:125), polygamy was not only a means to beget a son to perpetuate the lineage, in his times it also served other purposes, for instance, well-to-do people needed more household members to manage their estates. It was also a sign of prosperity to have many children among the upper class.

182
However, acrimonious disputes among children of polygamous families were often mentioned by the villagers. Abuses of a defunct first wife’s children were subjects for village gossiping.

Adoption

Adoption has been a popular practice in Giao village in the past as well as at present. However, two forms of adoption should be distinguished, namely lap tu and nhan con nuoi.

The first one, lap tu, was a form of “nomination of a male heir”. This custom aimed at ensuring the continuity of lineage. According to this custom, old spouses without a son/child would look for a boy from their patrilineal relatives and adopt him as a son. A boy from outside the patrilineage is not accepted by custom. The son by adoption as a male heir has the full status of a son by birth. Nomination of a male heir was more popular in the past. This custom was linked with Confucian ideals and supported by law. At present (1995), only one couple of Giao village adopted their nephew as a male heir while a few childless couples accepted their nieces by adoption. It is however worth adding that a study by Trinh Thi Quang (1984) in a village of Thai Binh reports that among 400 households under the survey, 16 childless couples adopted children for the same reason of ensuring the continuity of patrilineage.

The latter, nhan con nuoi (accepting a child by adoption), was more popular. This was provoked by various reasons, emotionally or rationally, and was not linked by blood relationship or gender. Under the current legislation, children by adoption have equal rights as those of children by birth but in practice, it is not always so. Several families in Giao village who adopted children said that adoptees were not reliable. Some of them wanted to keep a bilateral relationship or left home when growing old enough. While the life stories of adopted children in the colonial period often mentioned about the miseries they suffered, little was heard about complaints of contemporary adoptees. However, Mai Huy Bich’s observations (1991; 1993) at various villages in the Red River delta suggests there exist some forms of economic exploitation of children by adoption.

Childless means undutifulness

68 This phrase, in Vietnamese: “khong con la bat hieu”, which is widely circulated among Giao villagers and often quoted by them while talking about their fertility practice, is actually extracted from a classical Confucian ethics: “Bat hieu huu nam, vo hau vi dai”, meaning that “among three acts condemnable as undutifulness, to be without a son to continue the lineage is regarded as the first and foremost guiltiness”.
Considering the influence of Confucianism on Vietnamese society, Dao Duy Anh came to a conclusion that all Vietnamese, in their whole life, "breath Confucian atmosphere, drink Confucian milk, eat Confucian rice, and live until the last day the Confucian ritual cycle" (Dao Duy Anh 1994:23). In his opinion, Confucian ethics, for many centuries, were embedded in the legal system with strong support from the state. These ethics were further strengthened by the male-oriented structure of the Vietnamese family system. A well-known Confucian text, the Book of Rites (Kinh Le), regulates that the man has seven reasons to abandon his wife, among them:

1. Childlessness (khong con);
2. Lewdness (dam dat);
3. Disrespect to her in-laws (bat kinh voi bo me chong);
4. Garrulousness (lam dieu);
5. Kleptomania (trom cap);
6. Jealousy (ghen tuong);
7. Malignity (ac tat).

In Confucian ethics, childlessness is the primary reason for a woman to be repudiated (Dao Duy Anh 1938:117-118). This section will deal with empirical data to examine the question whether and to which extent the remnants of Confucian ethics on 'childlessness' still influenced fertility practice in Giao village.

**Cases of childless married couples**

In Giao village, there were a few couples who had been married for a long time but did not have any children. These cases could provide insight into the question of how important children are to the family and lineage. They point out very clearly that as long as children are not born, married couples find their lives meaningless. Apparently, looking at cases of childlessness is, in my opinion, a good way to see how children are socially valuable to their parents. My attention was focused on three 'infertile couples', who were willing to confide their stories to me. To understand the significance of ethnographic cases in relating to socio-cultural framework of a larger context, these cases are then connected to the "climate of public opinion" within the village.69

**Case 1: 'Something wrong with their machines'**

Pham is a veteran who participated in the war against the Americans in southern Vietnam. He returned to Giao village in 1975 and got married the same year. After 6

---

69 Informants in these stories are kept anonymous.
years of married life, the couple had not produced any children. Pham’s wife felt a life without children as something meaningless, so they decided to divorce. In 1986, Pham remarried with a former comrade in-arms. Up to now (1995), the second marriage produced no children.

Concerning his first marriage, Pham said he did not believe in supernatural forces. For that reason, he had never sought a consultation with a priest for a propitious date and never thought of making offerings to the deities on his wedding ceremony. Pham’s parents thought that their son’s wedding ceremony had been held on a day of ‘ill-omen’ and his childlessness was a severe punishment by the deities. Following a local custom, they decided to arrange re-marriage (ceuoi lai). To do this, Pham’s wife was asked to return to her native home for a few days before the ‘re-marriage’ was to be carried out. After consulting the fortuneteller on a ‘good day’ for wedding, Pham’s mother and some patrilineal relatives were invited to bring the ‘bride’ home. The traditional rituals of wedding ceremony such as praying to the ancestors and preparing the bridal chamber by a patrilineal woman with a large family were strictly followed.

This symbolic ‘re-marriage’ did not, however, change their situation. Pham’s first marriage ended with a divorce a few years later as a consequence of infertility. Unfortunately, Pham’s second marriage was again childless. In doubting his capability of having a child, his father confidentially advised him to allow his wife ‘at large’ (tha co), so that she might get pregnant by some one else. Pham said he did not care much about that but it all depended on his wife’s decision. He often became angry when he heard joking comments that something was wrong with his ‘machine’.

Case 2: ‘A heirless family’

Vu is also a veteran. He was the only son born into a ‘notable’ family of Giao village. For many generations, the Vu lineage dominated the village politics. His grandfather occupied the position of village’s first notable (tien chi) for many years and his father was the village mayor (ly truong) under the colonial regime. Vu married in 1973, after his graduation from secondary school. As he told me, he was not yet in love but he accepted the pre-arranged marriage with a village girl ‘to please the parents’. Vu’s father was well-known in the village for his ‘great learning’. He was one of a few men who could read Confucian texts such as the Four Books (Tu Thu) and the Five Classics (Ngu Kinh). To arrange the marriage for his only son, he himself searched for a number of old horoscope books and selected a ‘propitious day’ for the wedding ceremony in the hope that the marriage would produce many sons. Unfortunately, after

---

70 Leaving the wife ‘at large’ was an old custom of Vietnamese, local people named it ‘tha co’. According to this custom, the husband tacitly allows his wife having relation with another man to get pregnant. A folk saying confirms this custom; ‘Ca ao ai vao ao ta, ta duoc’, meaning that ‘If a fish comes to my pond, it is
many years of waiting, there were no sign of any children. Vu’s father became overwrought with anxieties about the family’s future and fell ill. He wanted Vu to marry a second wife but Vu did not follow his advice. In a fit of deep depression, Vu’s father threw all his Confucian texts into the pond. Some years later, he passed away. Vu’s wife lived in a state of nerve-racking situation. She worked very hard to forget about the qualms of conscience about her infertility. She wanted her husband to marry a second wife or adopt a child but Vu refused to do so.

Vu told me a story, which is to use his words, a ‘resentment following him till his death’. Once upon visiting a friend, he put his newly purchased Honda motorbike at a shop near the gate of the village. While he was talking to his fellows inside, children flocked to his Honda and unfortunately, the bike fell down. Its lamps were broken. Being angry with the children, he slapped down on them and whipped the boy who pushed his bike. Just after his getting home, the mother of that boy followed and lashed out at him. In her words, Vu was a ‘blockhead man’, ‘a son of unhappy and heirless family’. She shouted: “You had have no child, how can you love children. Your forefathers had ruled this village for generations. They sowed such ‘good seeds’ that’s what you are reaping now!”

These abuses were a great shock to his mother because of being labeled as an ‘heirless family’ (gia dinh tuyet tu) was a terrible affront to the dignity of any villager.

Case 3: ‘Selfish people’

Hoang came from a family of poor woodworkers. Since the wood trade became a boom in Giao village, he moved into wood trading and became a well-to-do entrepreneur. He often traveled back and forth between the uplands and the cities to supply hard wood for the workshops. He owned a two storied-house at the best location next to the village gate. Looking at him, one might have an impression that he was a happy man. But this was not to be the case. The most terrible misery he suffered, as he told me, was that his wife could not produce a child after almost 20 years of married life. He often stayed away from home. Rumor had it that he got a concubine elsewhere. Hoang’s wife said that without a child, she had to bear strong pressure from her in-laws. They often talked about her and her patrilineage as ‘selfish people’ and her being childless was a retribution (qua bao) for their selfishness. To overcome this, the best way to do, in her parents in laws’ advice, was to pray for a male heir. Following their advice, she had made several pilgrimages to the Perfume Pagoda (and also the temple of Deity Tran)71 with the hope that Buddha would bless her with a child. Under the

---

71 Perfume Pagoda (chu Huong) in Ha Tay province, famous for its “sacred responsive”. The temple of Deity Tran, i.e. Tran Hung Dao, a well-known historical figure against Mongol invaders in the 13th
guidance of a priest in the Perfume Pagoda, she had performed a number of symbolic acts. For instance, she was asked to drink some drops of 'holy water' coming from the Goddess's breast and to touch the 'head of male heir' (xoa dau cau), which meant that she accepted the milk from the Goddess and invited the heir to come home with her. On the way back home, believing that the heir (cau) was accompanying her, she dropped money down to the streams and along the road "to offer the male heir some pocket-money for petty snacks". Before getting into the buses and boats, she always bought an extra-ticket for the cau. For many months after pilgrimage, she continued to practice more 'symbolic acts'. While preparing the daily meals, she usually laid an extra bowl and a pair of chopsticks on the tray "to invite cau to join her. All these ended in failure. There were no children, Hoang's parents kept administering him: "you earned a lot of money, but for what if you don't have a child to take care of? Think about your parents, your family and your lineage!"

Hoang's wife told me that she felt guilty for her childlessness and she insisted that she would do all she could to get a child.

**Under the ancestors' shadows**

*Lineage continuity versus family planning*

The cases briefly presented above indicate that long-standing traditions and Confucian ethics still exert a strong influence on fertility practices of Giao villagers. While it is hard to deny the major changes in gender relationships during the past five decades, the way in which 'villagers talk and do' suggest that the structural factors of kinship system, such as a strong male-orientation and the ideal of the continuity of lineage, do not seem to change. Within her husband's family, the wife's role becomes significant only when she could produce son(s). The motivation of having a son was so strong that one was willing to go beyond the official limits to achieve the goal. Field surveys conducted in the Red River delta show a remarkable change in the desired number of children during last ten years as indicated by Nguyen Lan Phuong's survey from the same village of Thai Binh province in 1984 and in 1994. In 1984, 59% of respondents said they wanted at least three children, 16% wanted to have more than four. The 1994 revisit reported that the rate of respondents wanting three children decreased to 14% while almost no respondents wished to have four or more children. It is interesting to add that in 1984, no one wanted to have just one child. In 1994, this rate rose to four percent. It should be, however, noticed that no respondents said they wanted century. He is worshipped in many places in northern Vietnam.
no children (Nguyen Lan Phuong 1995:49). While a majority of peasants wanted to have a family size with two children, 88.3% of women and 86.8% of men said they wanted to have at least one or two sons (Tran Lan Huong 1995:53-54). This may help to explain why family planning has often broken down at the household level, before it could be implemented nationwide.

Family planning was recognized since the early 1960s. In 1961, the government issued the first decree regarding the education of fertility practice among the people (Dec. 216/CP, 26.12.1961). Two year later, in October 1963, the government officially attacked the ‘feudal attitudes towards fertility practice’ and started to control birth rates (Dec. 99/TTg). However, birth control policy only became a topical issue during the years after the war (1975 onward). Decree no. 29/HDBT, issued by the Council of Ministers, officially stipulated that a couple should have a maximum of two children. A number of strong measures have been proposed to control birth rates. For instance, administrative sanctions were to be imposed on those giving birth to a third child, ranging from paying a fine to being dismissed (for state-run workers) or expelled from the Party (for CPV members). Free contraceptive services were established at the village level to ensure the achievement of family planning program (Vien TTKHXH 1995:48-72). Contraceptive knowledge has been widely promoted by public media and local communication networks. The family planning targets were particularly aimed at densely populated areas (Vo Quy Nhan 1991:115).

In Giao village, various administrative measures were applied for those breaking family planning regulations. Spouses who gave birth to a third child were to pay a fine of 150 kilograms of paddy. In case of fourth child or more, fines increased to 300 kilograms of paddy. Those villagers who worked for state-run sectors or engaged in government -paid jobs had to adhere strictly to family planning policy. Three village teachers were dismissed and several party members were expelled from the Party for breaking family planning regulations during the 1990s. However, these strong measures seemed to have little effect on couples who had no sons. Empirical data from Giao village suggest that the pursuit of having son(s) for continuity of lineage still strongly remains and is one of primary causes of high fertility rate in rural areas.

According to the health services of Luong Dien commune, in 1995 there were 96 people from Giao village who used contraceptive devices, among which 12 (five men and seven women) accepted sterilization. The Intrauterine Device (IUD) was widely used as a main method of contraception for women in Giao village while pills and condoms were used to a lesser extent. Abortion was rather common with 75 cases in the

---

72 By focusing on the peasant motivation of having children, Nguyen did not provide the actual average number of children per household in 1984 and 1994, which might be useful for understanding the fertility decline between the two periods.
two-years period of 1994-1995. A cadre in charge of village family planning reported that it was difficult to know exactly how many percent of women at fertility ages were still having IUDs. This cadre said only spouses who already had one or more sons used contraceptives or underwent sterilization. Side-effects in using contraceptives were commonly reported among villagers.

Recently, local authorities particularly encouraged men with two or more sons to accept sterilization. However, conversations with villagers indicated that popular opinion was not in favor of this method. Many men said sterilization would make the body fat, lose sexual drive and change accent. Some even equated sterilized people with a castrated animal or old eunuchs. Moreover, a corrupt bureaucratic system was a considerable hindrance to family planning policy. The medical staff I talked to mentioned that there was a big gap between statistics reported by local authorities and the actual number of people using contraceptives. By exaggerating these statistics, the cadres in charge could reap extra benefits. On the one hand, they might get a quick promotion for their ‘remarkable achievements’ in carrying out the state policy. On the other hand, more medical supplies, free of charge for local family planning, would be forthcoming ‘to meet local demand’ but as usual, no one knew how these extra resources were used. When I was in the village, people often mentioned the case of Giang as a typical victim of such corrupt practices. Seriously affected after a sterilization operation, she could not afford proper medical treatment. Her case was reported to the district level for urgent assistance. Three months later, after many inspection tours and meetings, she was given five bottles of penicillin, which she did not need any more.

In terms of costs, changes of the economic system had apparently influenced people’s fertility attitudes as well. Before the economic reforms, children’s education costs and health care were totally or partly subsidized. These expenses were now passed on to the peasant households. Undoubtedly, people felt an increasing financial burden on their children’s care, which consequently forced them to rethink about the number of children they should have. However, as pointed out earlier, most people would feel satisfied only if they could get at least a son. In pursuing this goal, many men and women were willing to accept any administrative punishment. Particularly, the motivation of having many sons was most obvious among families where the father was the only son of his lineage. These men were under the intense pressure from their parents and relatives to have more than one son. Among the households in my neighborhood at Giao village whom I knew well, I found that out of 14 male households head with five or more children, 11 of them were themselves the only sons in their families. Vu Dan, one of them, told me the following story. Once he had been party member and served as deputy head of Giao village. But he had to step down and paid a
fine of 300 kilograms of paddy after the birth of his fifth child, a son. After that, he asked his wife to undergo sterilization. Unfortunately, his parents found out and stopped her. From that day, Dan’s father often runs down his daughter in-law with innuendoes by telling his grandson with loud voice: “Good boy, stay with me for your dad and mum are going to the clinic to get castrated (di hoan).

**Impact of fertility decline**

Annual population growth rates in Luong Dien commune of which Giao village is a part indicates a decline over the past thirty years, falling from 3.5 per cent in the 1960s to approximately 2.0 per cent in the 1990s (DBLD 1993). The average number of children born to women also give some ideas into the fertility trend. The Family Planning office of the commune reported that currently married women aged between 45 and 49 had on average more than five children while women aged between 30 and 39 had an average of three children. The average number of births per woman was about 3.2. This small sample is supported by a national survey on the fertility trend over the last years. The inter-censal demographic survey shows that the fertility rate has declined over the last six years, from 3.3 children in 1988 to 3.0 in 1994 (TCTK 1995:20). This decline is partly attributed to the family planning campaign that has been enforced with increasing intensity by the government since the 1980s. Furthermore, socio-economic changes play a major role in the fertility decline. In the past, an abundance of children was considered a testimony to family happiness and was greatly appreciated by society at large. In village life where competition among lineages was a common place, families tend to strengthen kinship alliance by having more children. Moreover, due to lack of social security for elderly people, children are an important source of support for their parents in old ages. Nowadays, the fertility motivations seem to be changing. Decollectivization and land re-distribution have given young spouses more autonomy, relatively free from the constraints of the larger family, which was implicitly supported by the collective economic system in the past. The economic liberation of young nuclear families allows them to make a choice of having fewer children. The policy of per head-based land distribution also allows elderly the right to use their own allotted plot, which they can lease out to get a part of the benefits without their children’s support. For these reasons, the family size of two or three children is mostly preferred in the countryside today.

73 The 1989 Census reports that the rough birth rate in the whole country for the period 1955-1959 was about 45.0 per thousand. It decreased to 38.0 per thousand in the period 1970-1974 and fell to 31.0 per thousand in the period 1985-1989 (TCTK 1991:98).
Table 7.1. Age-specific and total fertility rate in Vietnam between 1989 and 1993

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>1989</th>
<th>1993</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>0.197</td>
<td>0.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>0.209</td>
<td>0.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>0.155</td>
<td>0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>0.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total fertility rate  
1989: 3.8  
1993: 3.1


Hareven (1989) suggests that demographic change has considerable impact on the position of children in the family (Hareven 1989:15-36). This notion can be useful when looking at the case of Giao village, where household size was in the process of nuclearization and number of children in the family was decreasing. As a consequence of change, the age gap between the eldest and the youngest child became shorter and child care should be better. My interests are not solely to focus on demographic change but also to understand how this change has an impact on the children, viewed from their social values. An ethnographic overview of local customs regarding child care would help to gain more insights in this respect.

**God's children and god's custody**

Commending children to the god's protection is a long standing custom of Vietnamese. In the past, those children who were not healthy or the only son of his

---

74 The term 'god' used here commonly refers to a number of supernatural forces and historical figures worshipped by people. In Giao village, a majority of children was recommended to Duc Thanh Tran, i.e. Tran Hung Dao, the famous marshal under the Tran dynasty fighting against Mongol invaders in the 13th century; Duc Thanh Giong, a mythical heroic against northern invaders; Goddess Mau, Duc Thanh Mau, i.e. Mother Lieu or Lieu Hanh, a mythical character who was believed to be the Creator; Duc Thanh Phuung, i.e. Pham Ngu Lao, a historical character in the resistance against the Mongols in the 13th century; The village Guardian Spirit, Than Thanh Hoang, a mythical hero; and Buddha (Phat).
parents might be ‘offered’ (*ban*)\(^{75}\) by their parents to the child-guardian deities with belief that under their custody, these children would be protected against evil forces. According to this custom, the parents have to invite a priest (*thay cung*) to prepare a ‘contract (*khoan*)’, written in classical Chinese, in which are indicated the name of the child, his/her date of birth, the duration of protection and several pledges. The duration of this ‘offer’ is to be decided by the parents themselves, ranging from a few years to the whole life of the child. When the period under the contract comes to an end, the parents will hold a ritual to take their child back or they can extend the contract for another period. The ritual should take place at the temple or pagoda where the child is to be consigned. Under the contract conditions, once the child is offered to the guardian deity, the child shall be considered the deity’s child (by nominal adoption) although in reality, the child continues to live with their parents at home. However, parents and other siblings are not allowed to abuse such children, or commit such things as beating, scolding or making them do heavy chores. And when such a child gets really sick, the parents have to pray to the Deity for his blessings. If death occurs, this must be regarded as the will of the Deity who takes the child away with Him.

As far as Giao villagers could recall, the practice of “offering the child to the Guardian Deity”, was strongly censured by the revolutionary authorities during the 1960s-1970s, because it was considered a “feudal practice” to be abolished. Since the early 1980s, this custom has been gradually revived and recently, it became socially quite acceptable by the villagers. Apart from those children who had been previously “adopted” elsewhere, there were more than one hundred children in Giao village offered to various Guardian Deities and the Lord Buddha during the past ten years. Their files and joss-stick bowls were preserved at the village pagoda and the communal house.\(^{76}\) The intensification of this practice today not only emphasizes the social value of children but also reflects the growing importance of the religious revival. It goes on to show that parents, having fewer children than before, feel more vulnerable about losing them, and therefore turn to supernatural forces for protection.

In 1995 I was invited to take part in the ritual of ‘commending the child to the Guardian Deity’ organized by my host family in Giao village. The child who was being sent to the village Spirit Tutelary was a girl of three years of age. She was quite healthy. Because her parents were still young, the ritual was held by her grand-parents. As far as

---

\(^{75}\) The local people used the term *ban khoan* (sale by contract) or *gui con vao cua thanh* (commending the child to the deity). These terms symbolically mean a special ritual of sending children for the child-guardian protection. In some cases, children might also be ritually adopted by other families who have raised successfully a large number of children.

\(^{76}\) This number was provided by the monk in charge the village pagoda. The village headman was shocked by this high figure. According to him, before this custom was banned in the 1960s, only a few children of Giao village, who were in conditions, were commended to the deities.
I could see, the offerings to the Tutelary God included sticky rice, a cooked chicken, a bottle of rice liquor, betel and areca-nuts, bananas and golden joss-paper. Two copies of the contract previously prepared were also put on the same tray, one of which was to be burnt after the praying ritual. The ritual was first held in the communal house by the priest and after that, at home. Praying to ancestors was also done by the family head.

Close relatives and friends were invited to join in a meal with the family. Guests brought with them gifts for the girl (toys, cakes and clothes) but more often, money, rice liquor and beer to congratulate the girl who was from now on under the God’s custody. There was nothing special about the girl except she wore good clothes on that day. According to local belief, one should not make remarks on the girl’s beauty and health for fear that the devils might hear about these and pester her.

The girl’s father explained to me that he did not expect much from this custom but added: “What can I do? Most children of this village are under the Deity’s custody, why shouldn’t we. I’ve got only two children, if something happens to them, I would live in regret the rest of my days!”

Generally, it takes a few hundred thousand VND or more to organize such a ritual. For many village families, these expenses were rather high. However, they did not complain about the costs because they felt contented for ‘having fulfilled duty towards their kids. And the children themselves wanted to be sent to the gods because in their opinion, being the god’s children, they would not be badly treated by their parents.

Besides the custom of ‘sending children to the gods’, praying for having a male heir (cau tu) is also a common practice nowadays in Gia o village. Birth control policy causes young couples to think hard about the number and gender of children they wish to have. Those who have no offspring often turn to supernatural forces. They went on pilgrimages to well-known pagodas and temples to pray for a male heir.

Considering the increasing revival of rituals in northern Vietnam, Luong Van Hy came to the conclusion that economic reforms had a major impacts on local ritual practices while the state relaxed its controls (1993:259). This remark is quite relevant to the case of Giao village. It is however, worth adding that the revival of these old practices reflects a weakening of the socialist ideology, as the result of a legitimacy

77 I was told that the offerings were not necessarily the same but depend on the Deity to whom the child will be commended. For instance, in keeping with Buddhist doctrine, offerings to Buddha must be vegetarian food (co chay), including fruits, flowers, truncated cone shaped cakes (cooked sticky rice), meat is not allowed. Offerings to Goddess Mau, besides usual things such as sticky rice, golden joss-papers, flowers and fruits, other things made of joss papers (clothes, hat, etc.) with different coloration, should be included.

78 Nguyen Thanh Binh, in her article on “Another Form of Selling Children” described this custom in Cam Binh district, Hai Hung province as a costly ritual which burdens the peasant household’s budget. See Nguyen T.B, Phu Nu Viet Nam, 26 September 1993, p.3.
crisis among the masses when the planning economic system—the back bone of such ideology, has been in decay. The intensification of rituals regarding the raising of children as described above reflects a revival of the past (Kleine 1995), further influenced by the general trend of fertility decline. From this emerges new ideas about the value of the child not merely as a personification of family/patrilineral continuity but also as an individual who needs to be protected against unforeseen calamities.

**Filial duty and childhood**

In this part I shall examine traditional values attached to the role of children, which was imposed by Confucian ideals for many centuries. The analysis first documents some popular texts referring to these; a presentation of the empirical data resulting from field research in Giao village will be followed to show how these values were put into daily practice viewed from the perspective of social transformation.

Pre-modern Vietnam was characterized by the monopoly of Confucian doctrines, particularly in the fields of state management and education. The state laws under the dynasties of Le and Nguyen (from the 15th to the early half of the 20th century) incorporated the basic principles of Confucian ethics into the administration of society (Phan Dai Doan 1992:5-7). These laws especially emphasized family morality, such as relationships between the husband and wife, parents and children. The absolute authority of the father within his family was recognized by laws, as pointed out by Dao (1938:116):

1. The father, as the family head, had full power to manage all property of the family.
2. The father had an explicit ownership of his wife/wives and children. He could mortgage his children or force them to work for wage.
3. The father had full rights as regards to his children’s education and marriage.

Under these laws, children were regarded as their father’s properties and therefore, they had to fully comply with his authority. Being children, they had no rights at all.⁷⁹ The Gia Long Code (Nguyen dynasty), for instance, regulated that the father had

---

⁷⁹ Confucian ethics such as Three Principles (Tam Cuong) emphasizes the absolute power of the father over his children, of the husband over his wife and of the King over his people. Five Ethics (Ngu Thuong) discusses love between the father and his children, loyalty between the people and the King, the respect of the wife for her husband, hierarchical order between older and younger brothers/sisters and trust among friends. These classical principles of Confucianism were transliterated into Nom (modified Chinese-Vietnamese) in the form of rhythmic prose for learning by heart. In Giao village, some families still kept these books, such as Nhi Thap Tu Hieu, (Twenty four filial duties of the children), and Huan Dich Thap Dieu (Ten Commandments). These works were also used as text books in the past.
the right to hire out his children. In case the child was beaten to death by the father, the father would be only punished with 100 truong (lashes of wooden stick), (Dao Duy Anh 1938:122). These regulations were principally based on a key point of Confucian ethics, namely dao hieu (Filial Duty). Filial duty was regarded the primary virtue of children towards their parents (Vu Ngoc Khanh 1985; Vu Tuan San 1995; Dao Duy Anh 1938). On the one hand, filial duty regulated children's obligations to take care of their parents (and grandparents, if any) in order to repay their labor in raising the children. Caring for the parents means that children should dutifully provide adequate material means and pay special regards to their parents. These were to be manifested in respectful attitudes and regular visits to their parents. On the other hand, filial duty emphasizes children's obligations to obey their parents. For instance, children were not allowed to argue with their parents or bring legal actions against them regardless of how badly children were treated. Furthermore, children were not allowed to leave their parents or divide the family's property among themselves while their parents were still alive. Children's marriages were to be arranged by their parents irrespective of their wish. Those who did not follow these ethics would be punished by the law. Together with strict regulations on the rights and obligations between the father and his children, Confucian ethics also emphasizes the different status of son(s) and daughter(s), which were compiled in text-books and translated in rhythmic process for popular circulation.

There is no doubt that before 1945, Confucian ethics play a dominant role in the family realm. The following questions now can be raised: 1. How were these Confucian ethics brought into daily practice before the socialist transformation? 2. Is this legacy of the past is still prevailing?; and 3. To which extent may the remnants of these ethics influence the socialization of children?

In order to gain more insight into these issues, I now proceed to examine closely the case of Gia o village.

The life stories of villagers suggest that children's socialization in the pre-revolution period differed considerably, depending on gender and class. Boys from well-to-do families usually started to go to school between eight and ten years of age. Their schooling lasted about 10 to 15 years, until they were capable to participate in village/state affairs. The main goal of their schooling was to join the village leadership. As far as villagers could remember, most of education activities in Gia o village before

---

80 At present, elderly people still prefer to use this old proverb “cha me dat dau con ngoi day), which literally means that children have to sit at the place arranged for them by their parents.

81 According to Dao Duy Anh (1938:123), Gia Long Codes (early 19th century) regulated that children who did not take care of their parents or abandoned their parents were to be punished by beating (80 lashes of wooden stick). Children who did not pay respect to their parents were to be prosecuted. Tu Duc Codes (operating from the late 19th century until 1945) even punished not only undutiful children but also the village mayor and the head of patrilineage for their neglect (Phan Dai Doan 1992:6).
1945 were provided by *thay do* (village teacher of classical Chinese) because access to French-styled education was limited for village children. Even in a traditional form of education, only a few well-off families could invite a teacher to give tutorials for their children at home. Boys usually started their first lessons with a popular text called *Tam Tu Kinh* (the Trimetrical Classic), was composed in Chinese in three characters style and used as the main text for primary pupils. After a few years of getting acquainted with Chinese characters and learning by rote the text of *Tam Tu Kinh*, (others said, however, that they started with *Tam Thien Tu* (Three Thousand Words), and works such as *Minh Tam Bao Giam* (collection of Chinese wisdom sayings) and *Minh Dao Gia Huan* (Family Instructions), which included Confucian teachings on relations among family members. Only a few elderly people from well-off families said they had studied some higher texts like *Tu Thu* (Four Books), *Ngu Kinh* (Five Classics) including *Kinh Le* (Book of Rites). As explained earlier, Confucian education under the late colonial period had all but vanished while the colonial state did not provide easy access for village children to modern education. For this reason, studying Chinese classics was primarily a way of training for future social behavior. Those who wished to become civil servants had to go to the district school to study French. The available information on education in Giao village points out the important fact that Confucian ethics still remained an important tenet of education at the village level under the colonial regime.

As a rule, boys from well-to-do families were not encouraged to do menial work. Reading books, for them, was the only thing worth pursuing. Mr. Phung (72 years of age) recalls:

I was born into a family that had been rather well-off for generations. My father was a village notable (tien chi). I was a son of my father's third wife. As the youngest son, I was pampered by parents and other family members. When I was about 8 years old, my father invited a teacher from Nam Dinh to stay in our house. We called him *thay do Nam* to distinguish from *thay do Nghe*—the other teacher from Nghe An, who was also teaching in the village at the time. Several boys from our relatives also joined the class. I had to do no house-chores except studying. I had studied with four different village teachers of Chinese and then went to the canton school for studying Vietnamese script (*quoc ngu*) and French. I married the first time at the age of 14 although I attended school until I was 21 years of age. That year, my father was already too old. He called me back to the village to take a job as a village land registrar (*chuong ba*).

While mental labor was regarded the only work worthy of well-to-do families' boys, the girls seemed to be at a low education level. No female respondents said they could read Chinese classics. This does not, however, mean that they did not receive a Confucian education. Girl's education was mostly conducted at home by their parents.

---

82 It is not clear since when this Confucian text-book was introduced into Vietnamese society. Vu Ngoc Khanh suggests that it was perhaps used as a primary text-book in Vietnam around the 17th century. According to Dardess (199:80), *San-tzu ching* (Trimetrical Classic) appeared in China as early as the 13th century, composed by someone unknown.
Most elder women of Giao village today still remembered very well the Three Follows (Tam Tong) and Four Virtues (Tu Duc)—Confucian ethics, which were emphasized on the role of women in the past. Some of them could even cite by a heart long rhythmic prose telling what a girl should do to show her filial piety. Girls from well-off families were asked to learn by rote commandments for women, which were transliterated into Vietnamese in the form of poems and songs. They were also taught the principles of filial piety. Particularly, the emphasizes of girl’s education was on domestic oriented roles and closeness between girls and boys in daily relationships is out of the question.

The Confucian proverb nam nu thu thu bat than (boy and girls are not allowed to be close) was still well remembered by village women. The Confucian virtues imposed on girls and women a dependence upon men throughout their whole life. And this dependent status was applied to girls born of poor as well as rich families. A story told by Mrs. Binh shed some light on this:

That year I was about 13 years old. My father was a former village mayor (ly cuu). In the house, we had servants, live-in workers and four draft buffaloes. Born to a notable family, my father usually joined gambling and opium smoking sessions with other influential men in the village. He wanted to get back his position as a village mayor. One day he came home looking very pale. He told my mother that he owed big money to mayor Khai. He had to marry me off to mayor Khai instead of paying his debt. My mother was silent, she then cried quietly. As a second wife to my father, she had no right to oppose his decision. And no one asked me if I wanted to get married with mayor Khai. A few days later, I was given a new set of clothes and was taken to mayor Khai’s. I became his concubine, no wedding and no normal rituals. My life was then burdened with all kinds of house-chores and farm work for his family. As the village mayor’s minor wife, my status was not so different from that of his house-servants.

Most boys and girls from poor families had little chance of a formal education. They were usually sent to work for their landlords. Boys were seasonally employed to tend buffaloes and girls worked as domestic servants. Some boys from middle peasants were sent to the village teacher to ‘scrape up a little knowledge’ to become ‘a real man’. However, it turned out that no one could remember more than a few words learnt by rote. Mr. Vu X.H. (74 years of age) told us:

My mother gave birth six times but only two of us survived, me and my younger sister. Besides a piece of residential land, my parents did not have rice land. My mother worked as a seasonal hired worker (nguoi o nua) for Truong Boi, a landlord in the village. Her daily wage was about two quarts of rice (dau gao, equivalent to a half of one kilogram), which was just enough for the three of us. In the days without work, we children had only rice soup. In the harvest period, my mother worked for the landlord while I went out to the farm to collect fallen grains and leftover

---

83 The contents of Three Follows are:
1. Tai gia tong phu (As a girl, she has to follow her father while still at home)
2. Xuat gia tong phu (As a wife, she has to follow her husband)
3. Phu tu tong tu (As a widow, she has to follow her sons).

The contents of Four Virtues including: Cong (housewifery), Dung (Tolerance), Ngon (nice
potatoes. Shellfish and crabs were an important supplement for us on hardship days between the two harvests. Apart from doing some house-chores and hanging out on the farm with other kids, I did not really know what to do until I was 13. My father then sent me to the village teacher who came from Bat Trang. Almost three years of learning Chinese with him, I remembered only a few words. Since then, my father took me to follow him in the wood trade.

After working away from home for almost a year, my father did not bring back any money. All the money he earned went into gambling. I still remembered the day when the village mayor came with his men and asked my mother to pay poll-tax (thue than) for my father. She had only some paddy, which was the whole for the season’s wage she just received from the landlord. So she asked me to accompany her to Sat market for selling that paddy for some cash. My father suddenly appeared. He said he would take money and pay tax for himself. That day he came home late and said he had lost all the money. My mother burst out crying. She knew that my father had spent the whole day gambling.

When I was about 19 years old, my father lost everything. He mortgaged our residential land for 140 piasters to pay his debt. He then married off my young sister to a stranger when she was just 15.

Despite these miseries I often heard, life histories often show that children formerly had plenty of time for playing. Their childhood was deeply involved in popular songs and folk games. These were perhaps their first lessons of life without a teacher: folk songs, lullabies and proverbs on the family, society, weather, behavior, love and so on. The abundant treasury of folk life was a source of inspiration from which they could learn the experience of life rather than from formal school.

The 1945 revolution brought about great changes in children’s life. Socialist transformation broke through the century long feudal-colonial hierarchy, took children out of their families and put them into school with a strong belief that they would be trained to become “new people” for socialism. The state rather took over the responsibility for the socialization of children from the family. Motto’s such as equality between men and women and the rights of children were regularly mentioned in rhetoric while the legacy of the old system was to be wiped out. The socialist education system was set up, replacing the village teachers of classical Chinese with their Confucian texts. The revolutionaries decided to get rid of all “feudal vestiges”, as enunciated by Ho chi Minh, the founder of the new state: The old regime of colonialists and feudalists have left bad influences in the children’s minds. We have therefore to use the new spirit and ethics to wash out such influences (Ho Chi Minh 1990:138).

The striking feature of new education was that it emphasized not only knowledge and morality but also physical training and productive labor, at least in theory. Departing from Confucian education, which emphasized children’s obligations to their parents, the socialist education particularly laid tress on teaching children to love
the socialist fatherland and to show loyalty to the communist party: The contents of education must emphasize revolutionary ethics and instill in children their love of the fatherland, socialism, sciences, labour and labourers (Ho Chi Minh. 1990:227).

The president Ho’s Five Commandments to Children (Nam Dieu Bac Ho Day Thieu Nhi), which are used as a guide-line for moral education at school, contained: 1. Love of the fatherland; 2. Love of the people; 3. Good learning; 4. Good labor; 5. Modesty, honesty and bravery. There was no single word on the family. The role of family in educating children became dim under the shadow of the state. The most profound achievement of the new education was that differentiation between males and females as to access to schooling was broken. The literacy rate of young people has been raised to a higher level than ever. At the national level, political discourse continuously expounded social welfare of children. By sanctioning the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the globalization of children’s rights has more or less been adopted by the state. In reality, children’s well-being has been undoubtedly improved. However, the gap between the rhetoric and reality on the rights of the child still remains to be looked at. Moreover, traditional values such as children’s obligations to their parents, the constraints of family and lineage are strongly preserved as influential factors up in the process of children’s socialization.

Previously I have pointed out that Confucian ethics and the continuity of lineage attribute to the son a special position in the family. My observations at Giao village today seem to indicate little change in this arena. Male orientation was seen as something “natural”. The custom of having a lavish party to welcome “the birth of a son” has become more popular among young spouses. Son(s) were destined for a higher occupations while daughters were often expected to leave school early to run “family chores”. Such a societal and family environment play an important role in shaping the children’s patterns of standards, values and gender differentiation. Girls might feel under great pressure and some times, they protested violently by leaving their family behind for good, such as the action taken by the case of Tuye mentioned earlier. But more often than not, they were fame enough to accept their “female status” (phan gai)—a status that had been imposed upon them since centuries.

During my stay in Giao village, I organized a number of discussions with elderly people to understand how they think about their children today. It was interesting that most participants agreed with the impression that children nowadays are less dutiful than before, as manifested by:

---

84 Vietnam was one of the first countries in the world sanctioning the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child. A system of state apparatus and laws has been set up to take care of legal benefits for children (Ngo B.T. 1992).
1. They dare to talk back to their parents and other elderly people.

2. They neglect to care for their parents.

3. They try to escape from their parents’ control and act according to their own wishes.

Villagers criticized the way girls were dressing and behaving, which showed, according to them, a loss of traditional femininity. Some elderly people even suggested that it was time now for legislation to prosecute the children’s undutifulness. However, while one can agree that the causes of children’s undutifulness were caused by the failure of moral education in the school system, the increasing corruption of the state apparatus and the negative impacts of the market economy, there has been little attention to the role of the family in teaching their children. Parents’ love to their children is still something stringent, as explained by a popular proverb often quoted by the villagers: “Thương con cho roi cho vot; Ghet con cho ngọt cho bui”, meaning that “if you love your child, give the rod and the stick; If you loathe your child, give sweets and tidbits”. As I have pointed out in chapter 4, such an attitude is however usually leading to parental abuse as well.

The discussions I had with the elderly and the young were useful to look at the generation conflicts in rural Vietnam today. It is obvious that the old generations, who were deeply influenced by Confucian virtues, tended to judge their children on the basis of the Confucian moral standards, which stress among other things obedience while the young generations—their offspring, wanted none of that. The elderly people’s reaction on “children’s undutifulness’ apparently reflects this contradiction. However, while one can agree that the causes of children’s undutifulness were caused by the failure of moral education in the school system, the increasing corruption of the state apparatus and the negative impacts of the market economy, there has been little attention to the role of the family in teaching their children. Parents’ love to their children is still something stringent, as explained by a popular proverb often quoted by the villagers: “Thương con cho roi cho vot; Ghet con cho ngọt cho bui”, meaning that “if you love your child, give the rod and the stick; If you loathe your child, give sweets and tidbits”. As I have pointed out in chapter 4, such an attitude is however usually leading to parental abuse as well.

The discussions I had with the elderly and the young were useful to look at the generation conflicts in rural Vietnam today. It is obvious that the old generations, who were deeply influenced by Confucian virtues, tended to judge their children on the basis of the Confucian moral standards, which stress among other things obedience while the young generations—their offspring, wanted none of that. The elderly people’s reaction on “children’s undutifulness’ apparently reflects this contradiction.

Conclusion

The world of children and the role of the family and society in the process of children’s socialization are among the subject that remain relatively unexplored in Vietnamese studies. In this chapter, I have considered the social structures within which children are confined and the social values attach to them. By looking further at fertility practices and the perceptions of childhood in relation to cultural constraints from a historical perspective, I hope this will help better to understand the causes and social significance of children’s economic activities in the past and at the present. From the

It is worth noting that during the 1990s, a number of old Confucian texts were reprinted, legally and illegally. These publications were in widespread circulation in rural areas. The public opinion at the national level seem to support the revival of some aspects of Confucian filial duty, which was regarded as good for social order. This debate lasted for about one year in Dai Doan Ket (Great Unity, a weekly newspaper published in Hanoi) and was actively responded to by many more papers.
empirical data presented in this chapter, some major questions can be raised for discussion.

First, admitting the complex social relationships of rural life, the family and lineage emerge as the most important institutions. The male oriented structure of family and patrilineage greatly determines the different status of children. The major tenets of a male-oriented family set seniors apart from juniors and males from females. Confucian ethics consolidate these principles by emphasizing the acceptance of status, high or low, and strict performance of duties that status requires. It is true that in a Confucian culture, “it did not matter so much that one was a child. What matter was that one was a son or a daughter, older or younger than the next child, and regular family member or a child of the servant class (Dardess 1991:88).

Secondly, although to some degree one may agree that there is a considerable flexibility in gender role and family obligations in the Vietnamese family as compared to those of Confucian Eastern Asian family (Hirschman & Vu 1994:28), the son continues to play a central role in the Vietnamese family. Ancestral worship and lineal continuity are among the most important motivations in pursuit of having a son. Confucian ethics, which regard childlessness as guiltiness and a manifestation of undutifulness still have a strong impact on fertility practices nowadays in rural areas. Although in Vietnam, the motivation of having a son was not so extreme as in China, where “girls have less chance of surviving than boys” because of infanticide or abandonment (Croll 1995:165), it is often the main reason for inducing peasant to break the birth control policy. Further analyses on the fertility practices of Giao villagers also suggest a revision of the social value of children. Demographic studies have raised a debate on the linkage between high fertility and economic value of children in Asian peasant societies. Empirical data from the case of Giao village tend to suggest that studies which relate the fertility practices to economic values while neglecting the social values of children are at best one-sided. The social value of children is one of the main causes of high fertility as well.

Thirdly, today's modern world tends to emphasize the globalization of children's rights. Childhood, from a Western point of views, is regarded as a long period of human immaturity and therefore children have their rights to be helped (Woodhead 1990:60-67). On the contrary, the Vietnamese culture traditionally puts obligations rather than rights on the children. Among these are obligations of the younger towards older brothers/sisters, of children towards parents, of wives towards husbands, and in general, of offspring towards their patrilineal members and ancestors. Born and raised in such a

---

86 Though rarely, I more than once found in public media (newspaper, television, radio, etc.) talks of infanticide or abandonment. It was, however, not the case in Giao village.
cultural environment, children are, right from an early age, taught to accept these traditions and obey them accordingly. Right or wrong, these cultural ties are a burden of the past working against globalisation of children's rights in Vietnam. While rhetoric is talking loud about the rights of the child, the roots of child abuses, which are embedded in the cultural background, are often overlooked. This is indeed a challenge for a transformation from obligations to rights of the child in societies where features of conservative ethics are still deeply entrenched.