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

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**CONCLUSION:
REFLECTIONS ON CHILDREN'S WORK
IN A TRANSITIONAL ECONOMY**

Going beyond the conventionally defined notion of child labour, this study has examined various types of children's work in an environment of rapid socio-economic change, in this case the village of Giao located in the heart of the Red River delta in northern Vietnam. The study has pointed out that while one cannot deny the intrinsic value of the work performed by children, serious contradictions exist between the day-to-day practice of work and education. It also attempts to analyze the changes which occur in the patterns of children's work and the social changes that accompany them. The three major areas in which children's work takes place have been scrutinized, namely domestic work, farm work, and non-farm work, in particular wood work. Considerable attention has been devoted to the impacts of cultural constraints, social institutions and formal education on the processes of childhood, socialization and work. In this concluding chapter, I shall first review some major findings presented in various chapters before a theoretical summing up can be made.

The concentration of the analysis on the three main types of work involving children, viewed from a comparative perspective between the periods before and after the economic reforms, should help illustrate the changing patterns of children's work in rural areas in the context of structural transformation. The research has pointed out three important changes in the patterns of children's work: 1) Children's involvement in market employment shows an upward trend; 2) Work away from home and for wage are desired and children's work is becoming more commercialised, diversified and mobile; 3) Perception of childhood is changing as traditional values are eroded as children enter into the labour market at an early age.

As far as the types of work are concerned, a close examination of children's work reveals that during the period prior to the economic reforms, children were mainly involved in domestic tasks which enabled adults to take part in production work organized by the agricultural co-operative. Because of the policy of controlling and limiting the private economy of the co-operative, work performed by children chiefly took place in the non-productive sector and household chores. In the field of farming, data collected indicates that children's involvement in the co-op's work was only haphazard, temporary or under the guise of retainers of their family "contract tasks". Children's activities in the non-farm sector was insignificant. Apart from a small number of village children engaged in petty trading, there was no available information indicating that children were involved in non-farm work at a large scale during that period.

Agricultural decollectivization implemented in the mid 1980s and the advent of wood carving industry changed all that. It brought about a labour market on a scale

never seen before in Giao village, involving a large number of boys and also girls. Research findings indicate that while age and gender were essential factors in the division of labour, there seemed to be a gender dichotomy in children's work: most girls were deeply involved in housework and farming under the supervision of their mothers, while boys moved into the wood work at an early age, sometimes as young as six or seven, in the hope of improving household incomes and their own. Learning the wood trade and becoming wood workers were desirable for both children and their parents. Earlier on I have indicated that children under 16 made up about 40 per cent of total labour force in the wood trade of Giao village, most of them working as apprentices. Traditional wood carving had almost disappeared in Giao village during the collective regime, but it has been revitalized and consolidated in recent years, offering an opportunity for village families to get away from rice monoculture. Although wood carving is basically a traditional craft, the production organization in this trade today has undergone drastic changes. The emergence of national and international markets for wooden furniture together with a new force known as *cai thau* (entrepreneurs) with their sub-contract system made this long traditional craft more commercialized and heavily dependent on capital-related factors.

While non-farm work appears as both the means and the end for most peasant households, children were flocking into this sector with the obvious intention of earning money. The nature of children's work in this type has also changed accordingly. As pointed out previously, it is essential for this study to consider not only the types and extent of work performed by children but more importantly, the nature of labour relations and the significance of children's economic activities. As I see it, under the centrally-planned economy, most children worked in the domestic context, on the family farm, under the supervision of parents or relatives and were basically unpaid. Nowadays, many children express their strong desire to engage in waged work and to become relatively independent by entering into the labour market. In the past, children's wish to earn money was not encouraged since the prevailing attitude presumed that money would demean human values and spoil the child. Involving children in exchange labour among kin families and neighbours was regarded as "normal", a major tenet of peasant morality, in contrast with the current attitude measuring work in terms of money. At the societal level, it is now generally accepted that to maintain personal and family well-being, one needs money, which should be earned from one's labour (Hong Phuc 1989, Mac Van Trang 1991, Hanh Nhu 1992). The widely accepted popular perception: "since you are poor, you are clean" has changed into something like: "since you are lazy, you are poor". The peasants, after the ups and downs of social change, suddenly found out that they had to work harder in order to survive. When rice land was redistributed to individual households after *Doi Moi*, all sources of production were mobilized to reach one target: raising family incomes. Under the collective system, those bent on making money for self improvement were condemned as pursuers of materialistic gains. Today they are praised as pioneers contributing to the construction of socialism. The reversal of both official and popular perceptions of ethics regarding the role of money in society has had a great impact on children's thinking. It is no surprise to see that most children express their desire to find paid jobs, motivated by a strong desire to have money of their own. This is certainly nothing wrong with such a desire but it is a turning point which has a far-reaching effect on the behaviour of chil-

dren and young people nowadays. This "materialistic pursuit" is a direct result of the changes of the socio-economic system accompanied by an increasing demand for higher living standards for most people and particularly at a time when prosperity is a social objective popularly accepted and officially recognized. In a sense, children's preference for wage employment can be partly attributed to the capitalist development, and at the same time, a reflection of the rapid technological evolution and of the strong impact made by the mass media (Hear 1982; White & Tjandraningsih 1992; White 1996).

Previously, I have explored the process of socio-economic transformation in Vietnam at the macro level. More than a decade of structural adjustment has led to substantial changes in which economic activities in rural areas are becoming more diversified, the income gap between the rich and poor is widening while the structure of labour market also becomes fragmented. It is precisely in such a situation that my study examines the position of children with regard to the division of labour inside the household as well as in the labour market.

In the domestic context, I have analyzed the multifold nature of children's housework. Unlike a number of researchers who contend that children's housework is "interesting, educational and socially useful" (Shah 1996:5), my study reveals that house tasks performance is not only a process of children's socialisation but also an expression of the labour division within peasant households in which children are expected to make their contribution in maintaining the household economy. Parents usually encourage and often order their children to take part in various house tasks so that adult household members could take part in productive work and wage earning activities. However, while adults regard housework as "socially useful", children in general dismiss the idea, considering house chores as monotonous, boring and time-consuming. Most children, both boys and girls, express their wish to work in "well-defined tasks" with direct earnings rather than "hanging around the house". Furthermore, I would argue that it is the intensification of seasonal migration of male labourers in search of work elsewhere, the orientation of boys towards non-farm work and the feminization of agriculture that give girls an extra burden with house tasks where lie, if I may use the expression, the deep roots of domestication of girls. Particularly, available information from Giao village also indicates a new development in children's domestic work: the revitalisation of hiring children as house servants-- a practice which was virtually abolished in northern Vietnam several decades ago. Most cases of child house servants are found to be girls from poor families or in specially difficult personal circumstances. The demand for child domestic workers not only reflects a deepening social polarization but also reveals the sad fact that a number of poor girls now have no alternatives but hiring out their labour to sustain their families' well-being.

Regarding the types of farm work, I have pointed out the major trends of children's employment in agriculture. Children's work on the farm becomes more intensive after agricultural decollectivisation. Their labour is now considered a kind of commodity while work on the farm today is no longer attractive and this type of work is largely carried out by women and girls. During the period of collectivization, child work on the farm was regarded as a "supplemental source". Since the individual peasant household has become a unit of production, children are regarded as a real component of the household labour force and are put to work at an age earlier than ever before.

Some older children, particularly girls, also look for opportunities to market their labour outside the parental home. But work for wages in the agricultural sector is not so attractive because of its low remuneration. In the eyes of children and young people, farming is regarded as a lowly occupation. As men and boys go out searching for waged work elsewhere, girls become their mother's subordinates and are kept behind on the farm. Generally speaking, girls regard this kind of task as something of an "unwelcome obligation" while most of them wish to escape from rural life.

As we have seen, the development of commercialized wood craft has increasingly drawn children into wage employment on a large scale. My research has described some of the forms of woodwork involving children, their motivation of entering into woodwork as well as different attitudes toward child woodworkers, viewed from both parents' and employers' perspectives. While the wood trade in the eyes of villagers was a source of envy, and work in this sector became desirable, a majority of child woodworkers were found to work as unpaid apprentices or with little pay. Traditionally, the wood trade was a male-dominated occupation. Recently, a small number of girls started to learn woodwork, wishing to earn money from this trade. My observation shows that sometimes the age-based division of labour in woodwork is well-defined for certain tasks, but the main trend division at the work place is still gendered. Most girls taking part in woodwork did simple tasks such as polishing and refining carved wooden objects, for which they received lower wages compared to other paid-tasks done by their male workmates. Although some tasks were carried out by adult men only, wage rates were, in principle, not based on workers' age but rather on their skills. I have indicated that in a number of household-based workshops, parents carried out tasks as assistants while the main carvers were their children and youth workers. In small enterprises owned by entrepreneurs, apart from assistant trainees working without pay, adults and child waged workers were found doing similar tasks. It is interesting to note that in some cases, adult workers doing simple tasks received lower wages as compared to child workers and youth working with their skills. Like the findings reported by White and Tjandraningsih (1992), I found it was quite common that wages were paid on the basis of work skills rather than determined by age and therefore, there was no evidence of a children's wage rate. It is however important to remember that there was a clear differentiation between children working for wage and those working as assistant trainees. While apprenticeship was widespread in the wood trade, there was evidence that both craft masters and employers often took advantage of the training period during which trainees worked for them for a duration of about two years or longer without pay. The position of apprentices was actually vulnerable to exploitation by their masters/employers. Because the trainees' monthly financial contribution added considerably to the earnings of their masters/employers, these often took advantage of their positions as relatives, acquaintances or sponsors to prolong the training period, which also helps save production costs. For children who worked as skilled workers, their wages were often held back by their masters/employers who used them as a financing source in running their workshop.

As pointed out in chapter 6, child labour in the wood trade is relatively mobile. Children from elsewhere come to the village of Giao for apprenticeship while others move from the village to work in other localities, mostly in wood workshops in urban areas where they could earn high wages, making furniture for export, for example. In

workplaces far away from home, child woodworkers were often in a vulnerable position as they had to depend heavily on their masters/ employers. Employers' abuse of child workers occurred often at the workplace, ranging from scolding, beating to cutting off wages, but children rarely reported these incidents to their parents.

Effects of woodwork on the mental and physical development of child workers were worth a close examination empirically. While research on child workers elsewhere reported that "children still working in garment factories had better nutrition and better health care than those who had been dismissed" (Boyden and Myers 1994, quoted from White 1996:6), my own study reveals that most working children in the wood trade had problems with their health. As reported by child woodworkers themselves and confirmed by the local medical staff, such illnesses as backache, curvature of the spine, astigmatic eye condition, skin diseases and respiratory disorders were common-place.

In brief, work for wage of child workers, in the home or in the labour market, on the farm or in the wood workshops, is fraught with uncertainties and the child's position is vulnerable. Child workers are often more liable to be exploited than adult workers because of their age, their work and daily life being controlled by others whose main concern was profit-making.

An important question this study wishes to explore is the relationship between work and education of working children. Based on official sources of education statistics, I have pointed out that school dropout occurred at a high rate immediately after the so-called "output contract system" was applied in the agricultural sector of northern Vietnam in the early 1980s. I found that the dropout rate was particularly high at the lower secondary level, among pupils between 12 and 16 years of age. My analysis reveals that while the poorest families could manage to send their children to the primary school, only a few children were able to make it to the secondary level and remarkably, none of them reached the tertiary level. Statistics also indicate a relative decrease of girls in school attendance as compared to boys.

High rates of dropout seem to be closely related to the increasing involvement of children in work. For a duration of 5 years, official sources of data indicate that the proportion of children at the 13-15 age group involved in economic activities increased from 30 per cent in 1989 to 73 per cent in 1994. At the grass-roots level, my investigation among the working children in Giao village shows that 70 per cent of those children who took part in the wood trade were no longer at school. There is little doubt about the fact that children left school before completing the required level to participate in the labour force. My study also reveals that most children were well aware of the fact that they might not expect a bright future when leaving school at an early age. In my opinion, the fact that only a small percentage of pupils did go on to higher levels of education is partly due to the depressing state of public education. I found that most dropouts did so reluctantly and felt regret afterwards, while alternative forms of education were virtually non-existent to provide them a chance for further education. Many parents and children themselves strongly felt that leaving school was a right thing to do, otherwise the children might miss opportunities to earn money. This was reinforced by the fact that after finishing the required level of education there was no guarantee of proper employment. Furthermore, as the rapid socio-economic changes force peasants to re-adjust their life strategies, the school system, in the eyes of the children themselves, is "dry and rigid", which means that it could not provide them with

practical skills to cope with the real world outside.

The shifting from the subsidized system to a more market-orientated one has deleterious effects on education in various ways. Firstly, it turns the school system, which is in principle under the care of the state, more and more into private hands, and the education costs previously borne by the state have now been passed on to the children and their parents. Though one may argue that tuition fees are cheap (Tran Hong Quan 1995), the fact shows that many parents have difficulty paying them. Moreover, the conservative pedagogical approach stressing children's obedience and passiveness and the constraints of "rites" within the school system, inherited from a patriarchal culture, have much to do with the current depressing state of formal education. My analysis of school dropout in relation to children at work suggests that it is necessary to provide these children an alternative form of education, enabling them to be better prepared for the highly competitive labour market.

In classical anthropological terms, it has been assumed that one way to understand human behaviour is to put it in a proper context. The argument expounded so far in this study is actually centred upon a "common-sense assumption that the various behaviors of a human population are interrelated, rather than separate and random, and that some degree of understanding may be reached by seeking linkages between behaviors" (Dyson-Hudson et al. 1998:42). The issue of working children has attracted a lot of attention from social researchers and is becoming a topical theme in global debates. However, despite numerous recent child labour studies, an essential aspect of child work has been virtually overlooked: the social context within which work occurs. Avoiding the shortcomings of previous works elsewhere, this study explores an integrated approach to the issues of child labour by emphasizing the dialectical relationship between social reality and social cognition in order to interpret changing patterns of children's work in the rapidly changing socio-economic environment of present-day Vietnam. Considering child labour as a social construction, this study looks at the practices of children's work as individual strategies which are directly related to the socio-economic system and the cultural environment in which the child is born and brought up. It is apparent that the rapid development of capitalist relations in economic activities is an important factor affecting people's way of thinking and changing their behavioural patterns. Without a doubt, the emergence of rural industries offers wage employment to children, but it is not the capitalist development alone that drives children into market employment. A clear-cut gender-based division of labour, differentiation in work performance between boys and girls, between older and younger children are reminders that cultural constraints play an important role in children's working lives. It is from this perspective that one may be able to perceive the meanings and values of children's work in relation to family, kinship as well as obligations and moral norms that are deeply attached to every specific task performed by them. I submit that the patterns of children's work as observed in their daily life, the interaction between parents and children, the interplay between employers and child workers are all symptomatic of the social realities, and the behavioural determinants at the decision-making level of the household are in fact adaptive responses to such a social reality. In this dialectical relationship, structural changes at the macro-level are translated into economic behaviours at the micro-level, and the patterns of child activities

are only reflections of certain choices among available alternatives. Individual choices are influenced by structural changes which, in turn, function as agents of change.

Such a theoretical assumption carries important implications when one looks at the changing concept of childhood in relation to children's work and education, which lies at the heart of the debates on child labour in the world today.

During the past decades, childhood has universally been considered as a realm of innocence, and the children's place is in the school, not at the workplace. The recent campaign against child labour leads to a rethinking of the concept of childhood, which tends to treat childhood as the interplay between work and school, particularly among poor children. In a sense, I concur with the view that regards childhood as a social construction and therefore, any approach to childhood without taking into account the cultural-social environment and the prevailing economic system is bound to be inadequate in understanding the issues involved.

An examination of the relationship between the child and the state in Vietnam may be helpful to understand the question of child labour in the light of recent social upheaval. For decades, the socialist revolution placed emphasis on the role of children, who were supposed to be trained to become the vanguard of socialism. Children's education was seen as a vehicle to achieve that goal. In this respect one recalls public utterances made by the country's leadership such as: "It is necessary to understand that children and teenagers are not to be put to work but on the contrary, they have to be prepared for future roles" (To Huu 1970:149, see also TVTUHH 1973). The task of "cultivating the people" aimed at creating new generations to serve socialism was given high priority, and children's education was regarded as a natural public commitment taken on by the state and the Party (Pham Van Dong 1995:2). However, since the centrally-planned economy collapsed, and children began to leave school in great numbers, such socialist ideals are no longer convincing. The state tries to cope with the vagaries of the market mechanism by promulgating a series of laws and regulations reiterating compulsory education and protection of children. Nevertheless, these bureaucratic measures do not seem to bring a halt to the ever-increasing flow of children into the labour market at the expense of further education.

In idealizing the roles of children, one tends to forget that "the issue and problem of child labour may change, but will not disappear; and indeed it has not disappeared, even in countries where access to education up to age 15 or so is obviously universal and where virtually no children can be described as 'absolutely' poor" (White 1996:3). Meanwhile, the mass media in Vietnam has begun to call on the public authorities to embark on a practical programme to solve the problem of child labour because "a total abolition of child labour without taking into account the individual circumstances of the children and the nature of their work may make it worse for them and their families" (Le Kim Dung 1998:9). As a consequence, the contradictions arising from the problems of combating child labour would require a fresh, more pragmatic approach. And as long as there still exists a gap between the ideal solution and the actual reality, the issue of child labour remains a formidable challenge for all concerned.