

Extramarital Relationships, Masculinity, and Gender Relations in Vietnam

NGUYEN KHANH LINH
Syracuse University

JACK DASH HARRIS
Hobart & William Smith Colleges

In most of their forms, extramarital activities by Vietnamese men are not perceived as infidelity or adultery. Extramarital relationships often facilitate male bonding and are important signifiers of Vietnamese masculinity and male privilege. However, Vietnamese men face significant role strain as their wives become better educated, more independent, and contribute greater amounts to the family income. This article, based on both primary and secondary data—including 220 survey interviews conducted by Nguyen and three assistants in all three regions of Vietnam in 2006 and 22 in-depth follow-up interviews in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Vinh Long by Harris in 2007—presents a typology of extramarital relationships in Vietnam and considers their development and further evolution vis-à-vis issues of masculinity, femininity, and gender relations.

Framing Vietnamese Views toward Male Sexuality

In Vietnam, extramarital relationships are viewed differently than they are in most countries in the West. Unofficial health-research statistics (Elmer 2001; Tran and others 2006) have shown that approximately 70 percent of Vietnamese husbands have engaged in extramarital relationships. In Vietnam, the concept of extramarital relationship carries a wide range of meanings and implications—including a man going to a masseuse, seeking a sex worker or party girl, having a sweetheart (or sweethearts), and even having a second “wife.” In fact, Vietnamese men are not likely to view most of these forms of extramarital relationships as adulterous or as signs of infidelity. As this article shows, extramarital relationships in Vietnam are seen as a form of male privilege and a process of male identification and bonding; they are not seen as causes or consequences of a failed relationship between a husband and a wife.

Extramarital relationships are an important signifier of masculinity in Vietnam. Historically, having more than one wife indicated a man’s high

status and wealth; currently, for many men and their male friends and colleagues, having sexual relationships with women other than their wives indicates “maleness,” sexual potency, and prestige. Sociologically, extramarital affairs transcend—and transgress—the dyadic relationship of a husband and wife. They are a phenomenon of men in groups: They are about male friends, business relations, and colleagues; about what each of these male cohorts thinks and admires; about how men cover for each other and keep their affairs secret from their wives; and about how men reproduce the signifiers of masculine identity in one another. These male relationships, so tellingly reinforced in various reference groups, are an essential component of Vietnamese culture and its views of sexuality (see Harris 1998).

This article, based on survey field research and in-depth interviews carried out by the authors, demonstrates how the concept of extramarital relationships is revealed to be culturally framed and enacted in Vietnam in the broader context of the reproduction of masculinity and gender relations.

Marital & Extramarital Relationships in Language

Traditional Folk Stories

Ca dao are a special type of traditional folk literature in Vietnam. Falling into a genre used by peasants in the Vietnamese language, they can be contrasted with poems in classical Chinese that were the preferred form of expression for scholars and mandarins (and were inaccessible to the majority of Vietnamese). *Ca dao* are an orally transmitted genre with a history of over one thousand years. Because *ca dao* remained outside the purview of feudal governments, they can be viewed as revelatory of the concerns of ordinary Vietnamese—as truthful sources of everyday life. *Ca dao* were indeed candid about many topics that were highly regulated by Confucianism, such as arranged marriage, polygamy, concubines, wives complaining about husbands and mother-in-laws, and conjugal infidelity.

For example, take this traditional *Đông Hồ* woodblock print (fig. 1), over three hundred years old, which tells a *ca dao* story with this accompanying text:

The wife says to the husband’s sweetheart:

“Măng non nấu với gà đồng. Thử cho im một trận xem chồng về ai.”

You’re the bamboo shoot [young]; I’m a field hen [old and experienced]. Let’s fight and see who’ll win him.

The son says to his mother:

“Mẹ về támmátngheingoi. Ham thanhchuyệnlạmặtchây tôivoidì.”

Mom, let’s go home and take a rest. If Dad wants adventures, let him be.

The husband says to his wife:

“Thôi thôi nướgtiềnlamlành. Chi điềusinh sựnhụcminhnhựcta.”

My dear, let’s calm down. You make a fuss out of this, and we all will be embarrassed.

FIGURE 1 Đông Hồ woodblock prints are traditional paintings made in the small village of Đông Hồ (near Hanoi) according to a traditional method that dates back more than three hundred years. Đông Hồ paintings are made on a special kind of paper called “dzo,” and all the colors are produced from natural materials. Such prints were traditionally very popular at the end of the year, when Vietnamese farmers bought prints depicting luck and prosperity to hang on the wall to greet the new year. Đông Hồ prints also describe historical events, tell folktales, and illustrate scenes of everyday life. This woodblock print, “Jealousy” (*Đánh ghen*), exemplifies the everyday-life genre of life Đông Hồ prints. From the private collection of J. D. Harris, acquired in the village of Đông Hồ in 1997.



Note the emphasis on permitting the husband to have his extramarital relationship, affirmed by the young son as merely an adventure, and expressed by the husband who exhorts his wife that *her* jealousy—not his behavior—is an embarrassment and will dishonor the family. A story of a husband’s extramarital behavior is not anachronistic even today. Vietnamese wives must endure them. When a Vietnamese wife is confronted with her husband’s extramarital relationships, whether with a sex worker or sweetheart, she may look inward to understand her “failure” rather than demand that he terminate his extramarital relationships.

This *ca dao* example shows that a man having relationships with several women is not a new phenomenon but is rooted in Vietnamese tradition. Today, even though polygamy and prostitution are illegal, extramarital relationships are common. Although only 18 percent of the respondents we interviewed admitted to having had extramarital relationships, 92 percent said they knew people who have had extramarital relationships.¹ This discrepancy suggests that many respondents were probably not being honest about their own situations and that extramarital relationships are ordinary for Vietnamese men. In fact, contemporary language about sexuality and extramarital relationships is rich and can be divided into several categories based on the type of metaphors invoked: food, animals, and family.

Food Analogies & Metaphors

The Vietnamese refer to the wife as “rice” (*com*) the staple they eat everyday, and the sweetheart as “noodle” (*phở*). Vietnamese noodles are also made from rice, but they represent a fancier form—and one that the Vietnamese consume often but not necessarily on a daily basis. The concept is filled with imagery and can be expressed as follows, in contemporary parlance: *The husband takes his “rice” [wife] to have noodles for breakfast, then takes his “noodle” [sweetheart] to have rice for lunch. In the evening, “rice” returns to rice’s home, and “noodle” returns to noodle’s home; the husband eats rice but thinks of noodles.*

The wife is also sometimes called *com nguội*, the term for the rice left over from the previous meal that is old and is no longer delicious; and premarital sex is described as “eating the rice before the dinner gong is beaten” (*ăn com trước kêng*). Similar to “rice and noodle” (*com phở*), but used mainly in the South, is *nem* and *chả*. One male respondent explained that *nem* (roll) and *chả* (pancake) have different tastes but are both made from pork. Because *nem* refers to a woman other than one’s wife, a man’s relationship with her could be described as “meaty *nem*” (*nem mặn*) if sex is involved—and as “vegetarian *nem*” (*nem chay*) if it is not. In the context of Buddhism, vegetarianism is the diet of monks, men who do not eat meat and do not have sex. Stereotypically, vegetarian *nem* is portrayed as a relationship between a man and a woman who work at the same office and share emotional intimacy. These emotional liaisons are threatening to the marriage because vegetarian *nem* can evolve into meaty *nem*, and the woman could become a sweetheart. For most Vietnamese men, going to sex workers means only a kind of service will be rendered. Metaphorically, such relationships are described to emphasize the economics of a sustenance-based transaction: “if you eat the cake, you pay for the cake” (*ăn bánh trả tiền*). These relationships are absent of emotional intimacy. Finally, if one is engaged in an extramarital relationship, one is said to “eat on the sly” (*ăn vụng*).

As briefly described, then, the Vietnamese have an entire metaphorical vocabulary borrowed from the language of food for talking about relationships between a man and many women. As should be expected, the food analogies mentioned above go hand in hand with how women describe their relationships with men. Women often use slang terms that typically refer to the capturing of prey: to “catch a fish” (*bắt cágo*), to “go hunting” (*săn*), or to “trap” (*bẫy*). Because men like to eat, women provide “bait” to trap, hunt, or catch men. The Vietnamese language clearly indicates that the men are the eaters and the women, the feeders.

Animal Analogies & Metaphors

In addition to food, Vietnamese men and women describe themselves and their relationships with language about animals. Many Vietnamese men

assume that they have the “blood of the goat” (*máu dê*), an animal that is believed to be sexually hyperactive. It is no surprise that Vietnamese men drink wine mixed with goat blood and eat goat testicles with the hopes of increasing their sexual stamina. If a man is being cheated on by his wife, he is a cuckold and is “wearing the horn” (*cắm sừng*). After having children, a wife becomes “an old sow” (*lợn sê*) with unappealingly flabby breasts.

Extramarital relationships are expressed as “chasing the bird, catching the butterfly” (*đuổi chim bắt bướm*). The “bee and the butterfly” (*ong bướm*) is a phrase used to indicate the wife and the other women; and “the cat eats fat” (*mèo mỡ*) implies that one cannot say “no” to an attractive person, just as the cat never turns down fat. Vietnamese men also say they expect, after several years of marriage, that “the cat wants fresh fish with which to play” (*mèo nào chẳng muốn ăn cá mới*).

Forms & Hierarchies of Extramarital Relationships in Vietnam

The concept of *extramarital relationship* is divided into sexual and non-sexual relationships, each of which contains a wide range of meanings. Within sex relationships is the following hierarchy: at the bottom is engaging in manual or oral sex with a masseuse—acts that many Vietnamese men do not even consider to be extramarital sex—followed by the seeking of sexual liaisons. Sexual liaisons occur on three socio-economic levels: (1) with low-income sex workers who work on the street; (2) with middle-income sex workers in small restaurants, hair salons, clubs, or cafés; and (3) with high-income sex workers in discotheques, night clubs, and other expensive entertainment venues (Rekart 2001). Another way of classifying relationship levels is to refer to a party girl who is a young and attractive as a “girl-friend” who has no commitment and easily leaves one man for another man, depending on who spends more money on her. The next level involves emotional attachment: a sweetheart or a second “wife.”

In Vietnamese, a party girl is called an *em út*, the youngest sister in a family who often receives a lot of attention and money from older people; and a second “wife” is called “small wife” (*vợ nhỏ* or *vợ bé*), which indicates a strong relationship and commitment that is slightly less than that with a “big” wife.

Most Western cultures normally recognize four main categories of adult male–female relationships: wife, mistress, affair, and prostitute. Boundaries are significantly ruptured when a married man engages in an extramarital relationship with a mistress or prostitute or by having an affair. However, in Vietnam, because extramarital relationships have a hierarchal and categorical structure, moving from one category to another does not create such a great rupture. Consider table 1 as a summary of the relationship patterns just identified. Note that, as one moves toward the top of the table (within

TABLE 1 Hierarchies of Extramarital Relations in Vietnam and the West

Relationship Category	Culture	
	Western	Vietnamese
<i>Sexual</i>		Small wife (<i>vợ nhỏ</i>)
	Mistress	Sweetheart Party girl (<i>em út</i>)
	Affair	High-income sex worker Middle-income sex worker
	Prostitute	Low-income sex worker
		Masseuse
<i>Non-sexual</i>	—	“Vegetarian <i>nem</i> ”

either the Western or Vietnamese columns), increasing amounts of financial and emotional investment are made in the relationship. Not listed on the table are “normal” marital relationships between a husband and a wife.

The categories of extramarital relationships shown in table 1 could be considered consumption categories, and they mirror the processes of industrialization and globalization that create class-based societies. In a class-based system, the masseuse is at the bottom and the small wife is at the top. As rank in the hierarchy increases, so do monetary investment and emotional attachment on the part of the man involved. When a man has a sweetheart or a small wife, he also holds the reciprocal status of boyfriend or husband; with such status comes the role of a provider. That is why having a sweetheart or a small wife entails both financial and emotional responsibility. The class system and its connection with industrialization also mean that some of the categories of extramarital relationships did not exist in the past (such as masseuse, party girl, and small wife), or, in rural areas, they were not as clearly differentiated (for example, the three-way division among classes of sex worker).

The Construction of Vietnamese Femininity

Vietnamese women are constructed as the keepers of morality. The strongly held Vietnamese belief of *phúc đức* (merit and virtue) works against the interests of women. *Phúc đức* is similar to karma: the merits one gains can pass on to succeeding generations. Vietnamese believe that *phúc đức tại mẫu*: merit and virtue are caused by the mother. A good woman of proper conduct

and morals can bring happiness and good fortune to her family; and a bad woman brings tragedy and despair. Men, not restricted by this belief, are freer and are not judged if they engage in bad conduct, such as drinking, gambling, or cheating. When asked whether they were angry when finding out their spouses had had sweethearts, 48 percent of our male respondents said “yes,” because it meant their wives were unethical, while only 38 percent of our female respondents said the same thing of their husbands. If their spouses had sought sex workers, the gap between male and female responses was bigger: 55 percent for men versus 34 percent for women. As the morality keepers, women were also used as by men to excuse venturing outside of marriage: many male respondents said that, if the women with whom they hoped to have extramarital relationships refused, then they (the men) would not have engaged in extramarital relationships.

Second, a double standard exists regarding sexuality for men and women in Vietnam. Only women are expected to remain virgins until marriage. According to Go and others (2002), when questions on premarital sex were posed to participants in four focus groups of 24 adults (12 men, 12 women) in the city of Hai Phong in northern Vietnam in 1998, the focus immediately shifted to women, and only consequences to women were discussed. The omission of men in these discussions suggests two possibilities: First, the Vietnamese have an underlying assumption that men are inherently sexual, and, therefore, premarital sex for them is socially acceptable. Second, Vietnamese women are considered property that needs to be protected before being given to the owner—the husband. Most women and men in the 1998 focus groups believed that a woman should not have premarital sex in order to maintain the respect of her boyfriend or future husband and his family. The double standard, according to Phạm’s criticism (1999), means that women’s sexuality exists only for serving men. Respondents, male and female alike, believed that women, unlike men, have few sexual desires and are able to restrain their sexual passions; therefore, women should not have (or be interested in having) extramarital relationships. This belief masks the cultural construction of femininity and naturalizes a cultural construction: The Vietnamese do not want the women to have much sex, so they justify this position by claiming that Vietnamese women naturally have low sex drives.

Third, Vietnamese women are both oriented and bound toward their families. The Vietnamese believe that women cannot find happiness outside of marriage. Once in a marriage, the wife is the main caregiver and is responsible for family happiness and wellbeing. Because the role of the woman in the family is so important, she must make her family a priority and therefore is not allowed to have extramarital relationships. A male respondent in the research carried out by Go and others (2002) offered the following:

It is said that a man in the family is like the roof of a house and the woman is like the shoulder strap to raise the roof. A house has one roof but many shoulder straps. The woman has to take care of many tasks. If a woman has a love affair, she might not have time for her duty to look after the children so her sins would be considered more serious than a man's. (475)

In the national contest launched in 2006 (and again in 2007) by the National Television Network to exemplify the “model” of a modern Vietnamese woman, “Vietnamese Women of the 21st Century,” one of the criteria was “has a career but her family is still the base” or “is successful in work outside the home but still manages the family well.” This criterion reinforces the double burden Vietnamese women have been shouldering (domestic work—which is unpaid—versus paid work outside the home) and makes the family most important for Vietnamese women.

The construction of women as family keepers socially and psychologically prevents women from having extramarital relationships. In our survey interviews, 93 percent of male respondents believed that their spouses have been completely faithful to them; however, the corresponding number for female respondents is only 61 percent.

Contemporary literature reinforces Vietnamese women's attachment to the family. Numerous Vietnamese short stories have women's search for love ending in disillusionment because, even though men talk about love, their love extends only as far as the bedroom—and because happiness in extramarital affairs is an illusion, not the solution to marital problems. Vietnamese society generally still assumes that a woman can find happiness only within her marriage, not outside of it (Phan and Phạm 2003).

However, as more women become educated and independent, many choose not to follow the social rules imposed on them. Albert Hirschman (1970) presented these classic alternatives to loyalty: resisting through complaints and refusal to cooperate or exiting the system altogether. More and more Vietnamese women are leaving the system by getting married to foreigners, particularly Taiwanese and Koreans. They choose to exit because, as one 23-year-old Vietnamese woman in Ho Chi Minh City rhetorically asked: “Is it possible in this economic-driven time to still believe in ‘one cottage and two golden hearts’? If I stay home and marry a farmer who says he loves me but gambles and drinks all day—makes one but spends ten—would I be happy?” Some women who choose to exit the system are criticized for going after money. In fact, they are being attacked for their disloyalty and lack of nationalism and authenticity (since they are appearing to choose materialism over love) and for their insults to Vietnamese masculinity. (Vietnamese men feel ashamed and angry if not able to “protect” their women.)

Other women exit the system by choosing not to marry. Those who do not exit voice their discontent. Many female writers have begun to chal-

lence whether marriage really brings happiness to women by writing about the bitterness and disappointment in marriage and its consequences on women, both married and unmarried (Phan and Phạm 2003). Still, these authors do not know what the way out is for their female protagonists. Others, such as the famous screenwriter and film director Lê Hoàng (2003), criticize Vietnamese men's behaviors and publicly support women getting married to Taiwanese men:

It is true that before judging a woman, the men have to judge themselves first, and 1,000 times more seriously. I go to the countryside many times, and I am very frightened to see that at 5 or 6 PM, most of the men go drinking. I see them going along the streets and singing, as they are drunk. If I were a woman marrying such a man and had to tell myself that I was happy because I married a Vietnamese man, that would be impossible for me.

At the same time, the Women's Union, government institutions, and international organizations have been funding research on gender, particularly on marital relationships, family, and prostitution. These efforts to reshape masculinity and femininity may, in the long run, help create changes in gender relationships.

Male Sexuality & Extramarital Relationships

The dominant construction of women as keepers of the family and as sexually inferior to men is complementary of and necessary to the construction of men as familially disconnected and sexually superior breadwinners. The nature of this relation in Vietnam hinges on the binary view of yin and yang, two different parts that, together, create harmony.² In other words, men and women have to be different; they cannot be the same and equal in order to live harmoniously together. Neil Jamieson (1993) comments that:

Yang is defined by a tendency toward male dominance, high redundancy, low entropy, complex and rigid hierarchy, competition, and strict orthodoxy focused on rules for behavior based on social roles. Yin is defined by a tendency toward greater egalitarianism and flexibility, more female participation, mechanisms to dampen competition and conflict, high entropy, low redundancy, and more emphasis on feeling, empathy, and spontaneity. (12–13)

Vietnamese men believe that sexuality is one indicator of masculinity, and, since their wives cannot satisfy their sexual needs, they must engage in extramarital relationships. Sex workers are favored partners, because they are believed to be different from other women in terms of their sexual abilities. Although, regardless of gender, more of our respondents said the wife is not obligated to have sex with the husband than did those who said she is obligated, the response to the sexual obligation of the husband is different. More than half of our female respondents said the husband is not obligated

to have sex with the wife; but half of our male respondents said the husband is obligated (statistically significant at a 0.5 percent level). These data show that sexuality is an important component of masculinity.

Sexual drive is also one of the reasons respondents used to explain or rationalize men's extramarital relationships. Among our respondents, 21 percent agreed that a husband could have a sweetheart, and 31 percent agreed that a husband could seek sex workers to satiate his sexual needs.

The construction of masculinity based on sexuality is so strong in Vietnam that this construction becomes quite homogeneous: gender, economic condition, education level, and age are not contributing variables in the consistent ideology about extramarital relationships. The only significant variation is along the urban–rural divide. More men in rural areas said it is acceptable for men to have extramarital relationships than those in urban areas. In fact, 31 percent of the rural men we interviewed indicated it was acceptable to have a sweetheart if the wife did not provide satisfying sex, versus 19 percent of our urban respondents. Correspondingly, 49 percent of rural men approved of using prostitutes, versus 29 percent of urban respondents. These data are interesting in light of the fact that, when a man refuses to seek sex workers, his friends label him “countrified” or “rural” (*nhà quê*). If the reverse is true, then, rural men engage in extramarital sex in attempts to become “sophisticated” and “urban.”

Sexuality is one of the main components of a Vietnamese “real” man, and it is more important for unmarried men than for married men, whose sexuality is confirmed by their marriage and children. Therefore, seeking sex workers is considered a rite of passage: Married men will take unmarried men to houses of prostitution to initiate their transformation into “real” men (Trần and others 2006). Sexuality is also related to male group behavior: Men visit brothels in groups to bond in order to keep the places among their social networks, after doing business with colleagues, or as a “bribe” for their bosses. Ninety-five percent of our respondents said that they went to sex workers with other men and that their male friends know about their ventures but do not tell the others' wives. In Vietnam, then, visiting sex workers is typically a group activity.

The reasons for engaging in extramarital relationships include pursuing adventure, fulfilling sexual needs, sustaining jobs and social groups, proving one's masculinity, producing children, and escaping marital problems. Even when men are satisfied with their marriages, many of them still pursue extramarital relationships. The conflicting attitudes and reasons demonstrate a strong masculine ideology: Vietnamese men have strong sexual desires (the “blood of the goat”); they cannot avoid bonding with other men; and they may wish to distance themselves from their wives and families.

In addition to being labeled “countrified” or “rural” if a man refuses to go with other men to visit sex workers, he may be judged as cheap, scared of

his wife, sexually weak, or cowardly. The “real” Vietnamese man, therefore, is rich or generous, authoritarian over his wife, sexually strong, fearless, and modern. Note how these characteristics are reflective of the ideas of industrialization and urbanization.

Vietnamese culture clearly displays a binary view toward masculinity and femininity. For example, women’s names are typically names for types of flowers or fruit, the moon, kinds of jewelry, or terms akin to “charming.” Men’s names, on the other hand, are those for kings, dragons, strength, or large trees. Women are therefore expected to live up to their names and be beautiful, sweet, fragrant, and gentle, while men should be strong, aggressive, and powerful. If men are not masculine enough, they are said to have the mix of both a man and a woman. Such men are believed to have “eight lives” (*tám vía*), since normal men are thought to have seven lives and normal women, nine. These ambiguous men are also called “gasoline mixed with oil” (*xăng pha nhớt*); “hens” (as opposed to “cocks”); “hi-fi” (“hi” is pronounced similarly to the number two in Vietnamese, so “hi-fi” refers to a mixture of two different things); or even *pê đê*, a term meaning “homosexual” that comes from the French word *pède*, a short form for *pédérast* (“boy lover”). By calling unmanly men homosexuals, the Vietnamese also imply that gay men are not real men, as defined by a 29-year-old male we interviewed from Ho Chi Minh City: “A real man is one who feels desirous when looking at women, wants to see women who are scantily clad, and dreams of women’s bodies.” The double standard in the construction of masculinity and femininity regarding sexuality—a “real” man has a high sex drive and a “proper” woman has a low sex drive—suggests that a homosexual man is a feminine man and a sex worker is, conversely, a masculine woman.

In short, sexuality and extramarital relationships are strongly emphasized in Vietnamese culture as components of masculinity. However, some resistance to this value system has begun coming from both Vietnamese men and women. Some men have never had any extramarital relationships and refuse to go to sex workers when asked by friends. They come up with excuses: they may say they are exhausted, too drunk, simply not in the mood, or wish to return or remain at home to have sex with their wives (known as doing *tràbài*, or “homework”). The wives, in turn, have their own prevention strategies: they may have sex with their husbands before the men go out or may call them at pre-determined times (Tran and others 2006). Also notable, however, is that men who have never had extramarital relationships may not be sure how long they can maintain their behaviors.

Gender Relations, Gender Tensions

Heavily influenced by the ideology of yin and yang, Vietnamese masculinity and femininity are culturally constructed as inherently different but

complementary. The women are caregivers, creating stability and harmony through their female networks. They are traditionally confined to households and small business within their local environs. They are also constrained by the ideology of karma and merit (*phúc đức*), generating merit for generations to come. In other words, to borrow the concept of “integrity” from Elise Boulding (1980), Vietnamese women, working in their small female networks (space), are the glue among generations (time) for the creation of stable families, the essential foundation and support of Vietnamese life. Women in the past have often been restricted in their domains—primarily the household, the paddy, and the village market; and the public spaces dominated by men are not frequented by women.

Vietnamese men, on the other hand, do not serve as familial glue and do not need to create and save up merit; they merely need to provide economically for their families. They spend more time working outside of the home and engaging in social interaction at the *bia hơi* (beer hall), café, or karaoke bar with their male friends. And they may also engage in extramarital relationships. They have little responsibility for critical matters of the past and the future, which include taking care of both the young and the old. To apply yet another food-related metaphor, it is not a stretch to say that a “real” Vietnamese man spends his married life moving among places outside the home and frequently “eating out.” This present orientation of the Vietnamese man is distinct and contrary to the generational responsibilities of a Vietnamese woman. In short, Vietnamese women concern themselves with the past and the future in the home. Vietnamese men, in contrast, primarily concern themselves with the present in the public.

The family is the key social institution in Vietnamese culture. Immediate family and extended kinship ties are important for business and income-generating activities, which are often controlled by women, especially in rural areas. However, women’s household economies have often been rendered invisible or are undervalued. After 1945, the Vietnamese government directed women to leave their homes and work at companies and factories because the government assumed that Vietnamese women did not “work.” Now, instead of liberating the women, as claimed, the government has put a “second shift” on the women: they work outside the home in addition to carrying out their domestic work. At the same time, industrialization has increased social mobility, breaking up the traditional extended family. A Vietnamese woman goes through significant transformations of space and time throughout her life: an extension in space (work outside home) and a decrease in time (a move from a multi-generational family to a nuclear family). This transformation obviously creates a strain on traditional Vietnamese femininity, and therefore, an adapted Vietnamese femininity is being built: Vietnamese women of the twenty-first century must be able to manage work both within and outside the home.

To a certain extent, industrialization has contributed to the growth of the sex industry in Vietnam. Industrialization has increased the gap between the rich and the poor—and between the urban and the rural—thus creating a supply of poor young women from the countryside willing to work as prostitutes and increasing the demand of rich men who are looking for leisure activity and an outlet for their discretionary income. Yet the sex industry is not only limited to poor prostitutes, and its clients are not limited to rich men. It is the sexual identity of Vietnamese men that enables a market of sex where women are commoditized in different forms (table 1) and where men of all classes, ages, and education levels are involved as consumers. The relationship of sexuality to the construction of Vietnamese masculinity is rooted in tradition, expressed in the past as legal polygamy, and expressed in modernity as a menu of possible extramarital relationships. Masculinity as constructed by cultural forms, not industrialization, is the primary cause of the commonality of extramarital relationships. However, industrialization has played a role in having transformed the traditions of polygamy and prostitution into a highly structured sex market that mirrors industrialization and modernization.

The social and educational improvement of women is threatening Vietnamese men's identity and privileges as the "breadwinners" and household "heads." The double burden women bear is creating strain for women, and also for their husbands; and women are now suggesting that their husbands share more domestic work, including both housework and childcare, with them. Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết expresses this new harmonizing ideal as follows:

The new Vietnamese "good husband" shares in the responsibility for family happiness. He . . . provides economic and social care for his wife and children, and supports the social and economic life of his wife, demonstrated by showing confidence in her abilities and taking some of the domestic burden. The task is to nurture equality and equity in gender relations while embracing male-female difference. (Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết 1996, 1, 16)

Even though the new "good husband" is required to share domestic burdens, his identity as the main provider remains a priority. This model pairs well with the ideal Vietnamese woman of the twenty-first century: she might work outside the home, but her family is still her priority and primary responsibility. Lê (1996) still holds a binary view of gender roles that embraces an essentialist view of the differences between men and women. After all, the cultural roots of yin and yang continue to influence the construction of gender identity in Vietnam; and the "new" gender models have so far been just a small step forward from traditional gender roles. It may be unlikely that young women will find this harmonizing ideal, with its reification of gender roles, satisfactory. One young, financially successful mother indicated in our interview that she expected a say in all things inside and outside of her marriage, that sharing decision-making represented her hus-

band's respect for her, and that she is capable of leaving the relationship if he does not show this respect. To this woman, extramarital relationships would be a sign of disrespect and would be grounds for divorce.

Vietnamese men, too, are facing significant role strain. The status they have claimed based on being the main family provider is eroding as women begin to make increasing financial contributions. On one hand, there has been some pressure on husbands from their wives to be "good husbands." On the other hand, husbands continue to be embraced by their male networks and tied to the cultural demands of masculinity, including the pressures of loyally defending the traditional rights and privileges of Vietnamese men. According to Joseph Pleck (1981), men experience a "paradox of power" in that they have power over women but have little power over their own lives, especially in power relations with other men. In defense of their manhood, a key dynamic of masculinity is shame. Michael Kimmel (2007) explains that men are always afraid that

other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear. Fear makes us ashamed, because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof to ourselves that we are not as manly as we pretend. . . . Our fear is the fear of humiliation. (79)

The anxiety about masculinity and the fear of not measuring up suggest that men will continue to conform to male norms. In the Vietnamese context, this conformity means men will continue to assert their authoritarian rights at home and over their wives. They will continue to seek extramarital relationships that foster male bonding and demonstrate, sexually, that they are "normal" men. Indeed, two older men, interviewed together in Ho Chi Minh City, argued with certainty that industrialization was forcing Vietnamese women into commercial and industrial roles that made them unhappy—because, presumably, they were happier in their traditional role—and that modern ideas of gender equality would result in continued break-up of the extended family and higher divorce rates. In this reading, traditional gender roles should be affirmed, and women should be blamed for destabilizing the family.

The Communist political ideology of gender equality, the rapid processes of industrialization and globalization, the embedded traditional culture, and the pressures to conform to gender ideals are exerting different and conflicting forces on Vietnamese men and women. Within the limit of this research, it is very hard to tell if, how, and when gender roles in Vietnam may be restructured. Further research is needed to explore and detail how power is actually renegotiated within families by the husband and wife (and other extended family members)—and how this patriarchal system may be restructured both publicly and privately.

Appendix: Methodology & Case Demographics

The field research reported in this piece came from face-to-face survey interviews and in-depth follow-up interviews carried out in Vietnam. During three months in summer 2006, 220 individual face-to-face survey interviews were carried out by Nguyen and three (male) assistant interviewers. Respondents came from 28 out of a total of 63 cities and provinces in Vietnam. In early 2007, Harris went to Vietnam as an exchange scholar at the Vietnam National University (Ho Chi Minh City); in February, he and his wife conducted 22 in-depth follow-up interviews in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Vinh Long. Survey interviews and in-depth interviews were based on separate structured protocols drawn up by the two authors. Interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes in length.

Quota sampling was used for the survey interviews to ensure enough cases (approximately 50) in the sub-categories of *sex*, *region*, *urban/rural area*, *education level*, and *economic condition*. Because of the emphasis on extramarital relationships of Vietnamese men, the quota for men was greater than the quota for women, the quota for married people was greater than the quota for single people, and the quota for people old enough to be married was greater than the quota for those who are too young. Different quotas were established for the different regions of Vietnam: 100 from the north, 50 from the middle, and 70 from the south. Northern Vietnam has a history dating back more than four thousand years and represents the core of traditional Vietnam, while the other two regions are younger and less “Vietnamized.” More respondents came from southern Vietnam than from the middle of the country because the southern portion covers more area and is home to the economic heart of the nation.

In addition to quota sampling, we also used snowball sampling methods to recruit interviewees for both the survey interviews and the in-depth interviews. We began by interviewing people we know and asking them to introduce us to their friends or colleagues. This method allowed us to interview those who are state officials or members of the upper class, because approaching them without social connections would not have been fruitful. To approach individuals at or below the middle class, we traveled to the countryside or went to the markets, parks, pubs, cafés, stores, *bia hoi* (open areas on the street where men gather to drink), and individuals’ houses.

Of the 220 survey interviewees:

Sex: 170 (77 percent) were men; 50 (23 percent) were women.

Age: 69 (31 percent) were 36–45 years old; 67 (30 percent) were 26–35 years old; 54 (25 percent) were 46–60 years old; 28 (13 percent) were younger than 26 years old; and 2 (1 percent) were older than 60.

Marital status: 174 (79 percent) were married; 42 (19 percent) were single; 3 (1 percent) were divorced; and 1 (1 percent) was a widow.

Urban/rural area: 146 (66 percent) were urban; 74 (34 percent) were rural.

Religion: 167 (76 percent) reported following no religion; 38 (17 percent) were Buddhists; 13 (6 percent) were Catholics; and 2 (1 percent) were Muslims.

Ethnicity: 209 (95 percent) were Kinh; 5 (2 percent) were Chinese; 3 (1 percent) were Khmer; 2 (1 percent) were Cham; and 1 (1 percent) was Tay.

Education level: 80 (36 percent) had finished high school; 69 (31 percent) had undergraduate degrees; 64 (29 percent) had not finished high school; and 7 (3 percent) had postgraduate degrees.

Economic condition: 105 (48 percent) considered themselves economically “good”; 83 (38 percent) were economically “fair”; 22 (10 percent) were economically “excellent”; and 10 (4 percent) were economically “poor.”

Notes

¹See the appendix (p. 141) for methodological details behind the data presented in this piece.

²Masaki Mori's (2009) scholarly note in this volume of the *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* complicates the commonly held binary, dichotomous view of yin and yang.

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