

The Consequences of the Revolutionary Reform of Marriage and the Wedding Ceremony in Northern Vietnamese Village Life

Shaun Kingsley Malarney

The Vietnamese revolution represented an unprecedented intrusion of state power into the realm of family and kin in the Vietnamese countryside. This article examines one element in this process, the revolutionary reforms of marriage and weddings. Drawing on documents issued by the government and Communist Party, as well as data gathered during eighteen months of field research in Think Liet commune on the southern outskirts of Hanoi, the reform process will be examined in terms of three main components: legal initiatives; the bureaucratization of marriage; and the reform of the ritual cycle. As will be argued, the reforms had a number of explicit aims, such as the creation of equality between men and women in conjugal relations, the establishment of a free and voluntary marital regime, and the elimination of status competition between co-villagers; however, implicit in the reforms was also an attempt to neutralize the role of the family in the formation and legitimation of a conjugal bond. As will be shown, this latter aim encountered the most resistance of any element in the reform campaign. The enduring reluctance of families to allow the state to usurp their role in weddings and marriages has profoundly influenced which elements of the campaign succeeded and which did not.

Familial Control of Marriage in the Pre-revolutionary Village

Vietnamese often describe marriage and weddings as “works of the family” (*việc gia đình*) as they are almost always planned and performed with the desires of parents and senior relatives in mind.¹ Historically, this took many forms. Prior to the revolution, parents arranged their childrens’ marriages, usually without their consent. The parent’s role was captured in the adage, “Parents say where and children sit there” (*Bố mẹ đặt đâu, con ngồi đấy*). The arrangement process usually took several years and involved the scrutiny of not only the prospective bride and groom but also their families. Preferred spouses came from families from the same village with whom they were acquainted if not familiar, and from families considered “orderly” (*co ne nep*), “cultured” (*co van hoa*), and “virtuous” (*co dao duc*). These would provide the best possibilities for a positive married life.² Families with a history of congenital diseases, mental illness, internal conflict, or sexual scandal among women were undesirable. Age was also a consideration. Parents sought someone of roughly equivalent age although some attempted to realize the adage, “The best is a bride two years older,

next is a groom one year older” (*Nhat la gai hon hai, nhi la trai hon mot*). In most cases, couples married when still in their early to mid-teens. Another vital consideration was the compatibility of the pair’s horoscopes. Prospective affines had an astrologer examine their horoscopes and if the union was astrologically auspicious, the marriage could go forward. If it was inauspicious, negotiations ended and a different partner found.

After marriage, brides settled virilocally and became members of the groom’s household. They would thenceforth maintain important ritual links with their natal household, such as returning for all death anniversary ceremonies (*gio*), but the natal household relinquished authority over their daughter. The almost complete absorption of the bride into the groom’s family was summed up in the saying, “Daughters are the children of others” (*con gai la con cua nguoi ta*).

The emphasis on village endogamy was complemented by a preference for status endogamy (*mon dang ho doi*). The ideology behind status endogamy was that it eased interactions between in-laws, who ideally interacted as equals. Inequality between in-laws was uncomfortable because the asymmetrical forms of address and interaction violated the desired egalitarian tone. Families thus sought to marry their children into families of the same generation and socio-economic standing.

Despite the emphasis on status endogamy, there was nevertheless an asymmetry present in that wife-takers were slightly superior to wife-givers. This asymmetry manifest itself in the allowance for the practice of hypergamy (women marrying up) and the prohibition of hypogamy (women marrying down). The problems of hypogamous marriages were best illustrated by the use of the term *ha gia*, literally “to marry down,” for the emperor’s daughters’ marriages (Sogny 1934: 151). At the local level in pre-revolutionary Viet Nam, women of high-status families, such as mandarin families, were barred from marrying low status men. Such was the case of one mandarin family in colonial Thinh Liet who had three daughters never marry despite the willingness of several lower status males to marry them.

Marriage arrangements usually took three years to complete. The search for a spouse, always initiated by the groom’s side, often began when the bride and groom were in their teens, and might involve the use of a matchmaker (*ong moi, ba moi*). Once a suitable candidate was found, a set of ceremonial meetings and exchanges between the prospective in-laws began to reaffirm their intentions to form the conjugal relation. The first two ceremonies were the pre-engagement ceremony (*dam ngo* or *cham ngo*) and the engagement ceremony (*an hoi*). Families organized these ceremonies to publicly register their intention to marry their children. The pre-engagement ceremony, also known as the “seeing the face” (*xem mat*) ceremony, in some instances afforded the first glimpse which the bride and groom had of each other (Toan Anh 1965: 159), while the engagement ceremony formalized the prospective union. The organization of the two ceremonies was similar. Each was conducted in the house of the bride’s parents, and in them the bride and her parents formally received the groom and his parents before their ancestral altar. The groom’s family

brought with them a set of prestations, part of which they placed on the altar. Then, in sequential order, the groom's mother and father, the groom, and finally the mother and father of the bride, lit incense sticks and propitiated the bride's family's ancestors. These invocations both informed and asked permission of the ancestors for the bride to leave the home. In the pre-engagement ceremony, the family brought only simple offerings, such as areca nuts and betel leaves, while in the engagement ceremony, more elaborate gifts were brought such as quantities of alcohol, tea, tobacco, fruit, and cakes, in addition to the areca and betel. At the conclusion of each ceremony, the acceptance of the prestations by the bride's kin indicated their agreement to the marriage as well as a change in status for the pair.

After the first ceremony, the couple was not yet engaged but their mutual intentions were established and the families would no longer consider marriage offers with others. After the second, the couple was officially engaged (*dinh hon*) and many of the items given, particularly the areca nuts and betel leaves, were then distributed by the bride's family to neighbors and kin to announce the engagement. During the engagement period, which often filled most of the three years, the couple had limited contact with each other, even though they were "husband and wife yet to be married" (*vo chong chua cuoi*). The commitment between the two families to marry the couple was regularly reaffirmed by the groom presenting a series of calendrical prestations to the bride's family during the third, fifth, eighth, and tenth months of every lunar year throughout the engagement period. Known as *seu*, these included areca nuts, betel leaves, fruit, boiled chicken, and cooked glutinous rice. The groom was also required to present the bride's family with a set of prestations at the lunar new year (*Tet*) and on the death anniversaries (*gio*) of the bride's family's close kin. The reception of prestations during the pre-wedding ceremonies had the potential to create unequal relations between affines. In order to minimize imbalances, the bride's family never accepted all of the prestations. They usually accepted only half and then requested that the other half be returned to the groom's family (Toan Anh 1965: 163). The return and later consumption of the prestations by both sides reasserted the equality and solidarity between them.

Near the end of the engagement period, the two families would select an auspicious date for the wedding. Before the wedding ceremony (*le cuoi*), the families of the bride and groom negotiated the size of the largest prestation given by the groom to the family of the bride, the brideprice (*thach cuoi*).³ Brideprice usually took the form of pork, tea, bottles of alcohol, quantities of rice cakes (*banh com*), cigarettes or tobacco, money or gold, and particularly areca nuts and betel leaves. The logic behind brideprice was that the bride's family was being compensated for the loss of their daughter and her labor. It was therefore the responsibility of the groom's side to cover all costs in the ceremony that would result in her leaving her family.

Several days prior to the conduct of the wedding, the groom's family delivered the brideprice in the "leading to the wedding ceremony" (*le dan cuoi*). The bride's family put the bride price to three main uses. One portion of the pork, tea, and alcohol was

used for a feast at the bride's house for kin and close relations on the morning of the wedding. Another portion was assembled onto trays and given to the parents and grandparents of the bride, and one was placed upon the family's ancestral altar. This practice informed all parties of the bride's departure from her natal home and sought their permission. At a minimum, the brideprice had to be adequate to prepare these trays. The bride's family divided up the final portion of the brideprice, such as the areca nuts and betel leaves, and perhaps tea and rice cakes, and distributed them as invitations to announce the date and time of the wedding. The item given depended upon the quality of the social relation with the bride's family. Intimate friends and close relations received, for example, an areca nut, betel leaf, and a rice cake. This was an invitation to "eat salty" (*an man*), which entailed an invitation to the morning wedding feast. Less intimate families received only an areca nut and a betel leaf. This was an invitation to "eat sweet" (*an ngot*), which entailed participation in the wedding procession and partaking of the snack foods offered after the procession (see below).⁴⁾ A man marrying a woman from a large family with expansive social relations was obliged to provide large quantities of these items for distribution as invitations. The amount of brideprice varied sociologically, but in some situations where the bride's family was unhappy with the groom or his family, they might request an outrageously high brideprice in order to force an end to the arrangements.

Weddings transpired over three days, with assorted meetings and ceremonies occurring on the day before, day of, and day after the actual wedding. On the evening before the wedding ceremony, friends, relatives, and neighbors attended small parties at the bride's and groom's homes.⁵⁾ These festive convocations began after sunset and continued late into the night. A portion of the people assembled, composed largely of close kin and good friends, were there to assist the host family prepare for the feast held the following morning. Others came to wish the family and either the bride or groom a happy and healthy married life. If one had received an invitation to the wedding feast, and planned on attending, one was also required to go to the house that evening and reconfirm one's invitation. The act of reconfirming the invitation, however, differed at the houses of the bride and groom. Guests who arrived at the bride's home on the evening before the wedding generally brought nothing with them. Conversely, guests who went to the house of the groom were required to give the groom's family a small prestation, called a *mung* prestation. Upon receiving the prestation, the groom's family discretely recorded the size and donor of the prestation in a booklet.

The *mung* prestation usually took the form of a cash gift although other items, such as rice or household goods for the bride and groom, might also be given.⁶⁾ The size of the prestation varied though two general rules applied. First, one gave a prestation for every person in one's family who would attend the feast. Second, the size of the prestation ideally accorded with the village's general negotiated standard of appropriate size. In colonial Thinh Liet, for example, people gave a minimum of between one half and one piaster. The only cases where one gave more were if one were a close relative of the groom, in which case larger gifts were expected; if one was a high

status individual such as a wealthy villager or mandarin; or if one had received a generous prestation from the groom's family in the past. Families kept strict records of the *mung* prestations they had previously received.⁷ When attending the feast of one who had formerly been generous, one was expected to be equally as generous, and if one was to make the prestation truly aesthetically pleasing, one would give just a bit more than one had formerly received.

The groom's subsidizing the bride's feast, and the collection of *mung* prestations by the groom's family, delineated important differences between the two parties' feasts. To begin with, the bride's feast was generally quite a bit smaller than the groom's, was largely restricted to close family and kin, and exhibited a more familial character. In a subtle assertion of inequality between the two parties, the size of the bride's feast depended upon what her family could extract from the groom's. Conversely, the groom's feast was always larger and mobilized a broader network of social relations. In addition to inviting kin, the groom's family was responsible for reciprocating prior wedding invitations, an obligation that could greatly enlarge the number of guests. Moreover, many families used the occasion of a feast to make status assertions by organizing feasts with many guests and large quantities of food. When comparing the two feasts and the social relations they involved, the wedding of a woman was largely a family affair while a young man taking a bride was an affair celebrated by both kin, friends, and co-villagers.

On the wedding day, the "eat salty" feasts were held in the morning at the bride's and groom's homes. "Eat salty" was a metaphor for serving meat, always prepared with salty fish sauce. The main feast items were pork, rice, and a variety of vegetable dishes. Around midday, a group of older women from the groom's house conducted the "asking for the bride rite" (*le xin cuoi*) by walking to the bride's home to confirm the time for the groom's family to get the bride. In the late afternoon, a large congregation of kin, friends, and neighbors gathered at the groom's home. This group included people invited to both "eat salty" and "eat sweet." They formed a large procession and led the groom to the bride's home in the "pick up the bride" (*don dau*) ceremony. Before leaving, the groom propitiated his ancestors on his family's ancestral altar and also paid respects to his parents. A senior male patrilineal kinsman, ideally a virtuous man with many children whose wife was still living, led the procession, carrying a stick of incense in his hands. His presence brought good fortune to the newlyweds while the incense warded off malevolent spirits lingering around the procession.

On arriving at the bride's house, the members of the entourage were invited in to drink tea and eat snack foods such as sunflower or lotus seeds. The first responsibility of the bride and groom was to propitiate the ancestors of the bride's home and ask their permission for the bride to go live with her husband. After this, senior representatives of the bride's and groom's families gave speeches announcing the union and wishing them happiness. At the conclusion of these speeches, the procession returned to the groom's home, where the bride and groom propitiated the groom's family ancestors to ask their permission for the bride to join their family and live in their home.

When this was completed, senior representatives of both sides, beginning with the groom's family, again gave congratulatory speeches. Vietnamese weddings have no specific ritual officiant who pronounces the couple man and wife. The conferral of social legitimacy on the new union came through the propitiation of the ancestors and the congratulatory speeches delivered by senior kin on both sides. After that, couples were considered husband and wife and the marriage could be consummated. On the following day, they would revisit the bride's family in the "seeing the face again ceremony" (*tuc lai mat*), and a small number of people who could not attend on the wedding day went to the family's homes for a meal, but all ceremonies concluded that night. Marriages in the pre-revolutionary period were indeed a "work of the family" in that the role of parents and senior kin was in many respects greater than the actual bride and groom. Their limited role frequently produced a degree of anxiety as many had only a vague knowledge of what the character of their "friend of one hundred years" (*ban mot tram nam*) would be like.

Revolutionary Reforms of Marriage and the Wedding Ceremony

The Vietnamese revolution attempted to create an egalitarian, socialist society. Although the land reform, the toppling of the colonial elite, and the enfranchisement of Viet Nam's dispossessed were the most obvious elements in this campaign, revolutionary practice also attempted to eliminate those aspects of social life that had publicly registered social difference and inequality. The reforms of marriage and the wedding ceremony fell within the purview of this latter agenda. Party ideologues regarded the pre-revolutionary institution of marriage as oppressive for both women and children while the wedding ceremony, with its rounds of feasting and exchange, produced divisive status competition and wasted the time and resources of the people. In order to reform marriage and weddings, the party employed two major strategies. For the former, a marriage law was passed that created and protected egalitarian relations in marriage. These rights were then linked to a set of bureaucratic preconditions for marriage registration that, if properly fulfilled, would guarantee equality in marriage. For the latter, the party created a new wedding ceremony controlled by local officials that eliminated the socially divisive elements of weddings and replaced them with relations of equality between individuals and families. Despite their differences, both strategies involved an attempt by the state to expropriate roles formerly filled by the family in the organization and arrangement of marriages and weddings.

Legal and Bureaucratic Initiatives to Reform the Institution of Marriage

The legal reform of marriage aimed to eliminate the obligatory and coercive character of the pre-revolutionary system. The characteristics of new marital regime were described and codified in the Marriage Law of 29 December 1959 (Viet Nam, Government 1960). This new regime had a number of important characteristics. First, the law sought to establish "a free and progressive marital regime" (Viet Nam, Government 1960:) in which marriage was to "originate from worthy love and be entirely

voluntary” (Ha Tay, Cultural Service 1970: 14). To this end, it stipulated that a marriage could only be contracted with the public consent of the bride and groom, and declared arranged or forced marriage (*cuong ep*) illegal. It established a minimum age for marriage. Party ideologues vigorously objected to the pre-revolutionary practice of underage marriage thus they set a minimum age of eighteen years for the bride and twenty years for the groom. It challenged the pre-revolutionary prohibition of marriage within the patriline. The new law permitted such marriages so long as the closest common ancestor was at least five generations removed. Perhaps most importantly, it established a range of new conjugal rights for women. In the pre-revolutionary period, women suffered under the ideology of “respect men, despise women” (*trong nam, khinh nu*). The new law enshrined the principle of equality between men and women (*nam nu binh dang*) and was dedicated to “protecting the rights of women.” It therefore abolished polygamy through the introduction of the “one wife, one husband” (*mot vo, mot chong*) principle;⁸ prohibited violence against women; granted women for the first time the right to divorce and remarry; and made divorced men and women responsible for child-support or alimony if needed. Outside of the marriage law, it also responded to other obstacles to marriage, such as the “many cases of unrequited love only because ‘the diviner says their fates don’t match’” (Phi Ha and Thanh Binh 1960: 7), by banning the consultation of horoscopes before marriage. Through the aggregation of these conditions, the party essayed to establish a new set of legal conditions that would make men and women equally empowered to enter into or leave a marriage, and give children the right to choose their own spouse.

The creation of legal rights is meaningless unless there is some enforcement mechanism behind it. In order to realize their new vision of marriage, the party attempted to make the revolutionary state apparatus the only body legally entitled to recognize and validate a new marriage. As noted above, ancestral rites and speeches by senior kin during pre-revolutionary wedding ceremonies conferred social recognition on a new conjugal relation. The party endeavored to negate this exercise of familial authority by creating a system of marital registration (*dang ky ket hon*) that required couples to publicly verify that their marriage fulfilled the legal criteria established by the state for the new marital union to be socially and legally valid. The marriage law explicitly stated, “All marriages must receive official approval from the relevant administrative authorities from either the groom’s or bride’s place of residence and be recorded in the marital register. All forms of marital rites uniformly have no validity from a legal perspective” (Viet Nam, Government 1960: 54). This bureaucratization of marriage was realized at the village level through the requirement that all couples register their marriage at their commune’s People’s Committee. Prior to the date set for the wedding, a couple was to inform the local administration of their intention to marry. The members of the administrative unit then verified that the couple fulfilled the regulations regarding monogamy, age, volition, and health. If the requirements were met, a date would be arranged when the couple, in the presence of a designated member of the People’s Committee, would sign their registration

forms. The officer would then approve the union and issue the registration papers which officially declared the couple husband and wife. Unlike pre-revolutionary society where a marriage was validated by the agreement of the parents and kin of the bride and groom in a wedding ceremony, marriages in revolutionary Viet Nam received official sanction only through the fulfillment of bureaucratic requirements.

Reform of the Ritual Process

The Vietnamese government hoped that a brief ceremony conducted along with the registration would prove adequate for meeting the people's wedding ritual needs, but they also recognized that the complete abandonment of any wedding ceremonial was unrealistic. To address this problem, they attempted to radically reform the wedding ceremony so that the family's role was minimized, and the most important tasks performed by state officials. Through these reforms, the government could not only enforce and propagandize its new marital regime, it could also eliminate the status competition, divisiveness, and waste it believed characterized former practices.

Implementation of wedding ceremony reforms began during the land reform period (1953–56). The reformed ceremony was to be both “simple” (*don gian*) and “economical” (*tiet kiem*).⁹ Economy involved conducting the ceremony at night, so as to not interfere with the day's labor activities, as well as limiting the food items exchanged and consumed (see below). Simplification had many aspects. The reformed ceremony was to last only one or two hours. It involved the elimination of the entire set of meetings and exchanges that had preceded the wedding ceremony, including the pre-engagement and engagement ceremonies, the delivery of *seu* prestations, and the wedding procession. The negotiation and payment of brideprice was also banned. Brideprice was regarded as equivalent to families selling their children. Its elimination ended a practice that had “treated women as a commodity to be bought and sold at the right price” (Ha Tay, Cultural Service 1970: 13). The simplification of these practices, especially the exchange relations, eliminated the purported wastefulness of wedding ceremonies. Officials felt that the resources put into weddings could be put to better uses, notably building the socialist nation. The simplification of ceremonies also eliminated potential venues for ostentatious (*khoe danh, pho truong*) display. Wedding ceremonies and feasts had been important arenas for the assertion of status and difference in the colonial village. Officials therefore banned feasts. In their place, a reception was held following the wedding which served only tea and cigarettes, provided by the bride and groom. This party was to be a festive affair with young villagers, at the behest of local officials, singing songs and giving performances that extolled the virtues of the revolution and the new marital regime. As one later set of regulations noted, the party should “absolutely . . . not be organized with the strict discipline and formalism of an official meeting” (Viet Nam, Ministry of Culture 1975: 75).

The state also took control over the conduct of the wedding ceremonies. First, the ceremony was removed from the homes of the bride and groom and performed in a

public building such as a local recreational building (*cau lac bo*), a building belonging to the cooperative, or as was the case in revolutionary Thinh Liet, the village communal house (*dinh*).¹⁰ Local officials furnished tables and chairs for the guests. They made sure that the venue was tidy and appealing in order to lend the proper decorum to the ceremony. Officials also assumed ceremonial roles. In some communes, members of the People's Committee such as the President, the Deputy President, or another executive committee member (Viet Nam, Ministry of Culture 1975: 34 and 66) had important roles, but in Thinh Liet commune, the organization of the wedding ceremony was the responsibility of the party's Youth Association (*Doan Thanh Nien*). This group was the unit of the local party apparatus responsible for mobilizing teens and young adults. Its leadership consisted of young men and women in their late teens and twenties who were of good class background as well as enthusiastic revolutionaries. Many of the male members were former soldiers who had returned to their villages after the French defeat. These individuals not only organized the reformed ceremonies, many also married according to the new practices.

The ceremonies organized by the Youth Association emphasized solidarity among co-villagers. First, the association was the singular authority empowered to issue invitations. Guest lists in the colonial village, with their distinctions of "eating salty" or "eating sweet," as well as their exclusions, restated the social cleavages of village life. The Youth Association sought to neutralize such disunity by inviting all villagers to village weddings. The universal issuance of invitations not only masked social conflicts, it served to create a generic, solidary social relation between host and guest. The Youth Association's treatment of wedding guests also emphasized solidarity. Once the guests were assembled, a member of the Youth Association began the ceremony by introducing the bride and groom, their parents, and their close kin. The introduction of the latter group focused on their relations with the bride and groom and not their political or administrative titles (Viet Nam, Ministry of Culture 1975: 55 and 96). One list of wedding regulations from Hanoi noted, "The guests who come to the wedding want to know the face of the bride, the groom, their parents, and their close kin. They definitely do not need to know who the "big mandarins" (*quan to*) are among the assembled guests" (Viet Nam, Ministry of Culture 1975: 55). The ceremony was to be a solidary family ceremony which minimized public displays of hierarchy and social differentiation.

State control over weddings was most clearly evident in designation of Secretary of the Youth Association as master of ceremonies. As noted above, the propitiation of ancestors and speeches given by senior kin publicly legitimated a new marriage in pre-revolutionary Viet Nam, but the reformed ceremony negated this exercise and replaced it with a speech by the Secretary of the Youth Association. Following the introduction of the guests, the secretary delivered the first wedding speech and officially pronounced the couple husband and wife. Once his speech was completed, the parents of the groom, and then the parents of the bride, made their speeches. The secretary's job was to "say a few solemn words which explicitly stated the meaning of

the wedding ceremony, declare that the man and woman had officially become husband and wife, and wish them happiness” (Viet Nam, Government 1979: 24). In some regions of Viet Nam the secretary or another official presided over the signing of the marriage registration cards, but this was not the case in revolutionary Think Liet.

The secretary’s officiating role marginalized the parents’ role in their childrens’ weddings. The most extreme example of this occurred in a unique wedding ceremony, the “collective wedding” (*cuoi tap the*), organized in Think Liet and other communes in the 1955–56 period. The distinctive feature of this ceremony was the simultaneous marriage of two or three couples in one ceremony organized by the local party apparatus. Policy dictated that collective weddings be held in a public building. In revolutionary Think Liet’s case this was the village communal houses. The Youth Association arranged for the couples, their families, and guests to meet at the communal house. Once assembled, the Secretary of the Youth Association assumed the role of master of ceremonies and, similar to the above reformed ceremony, gave his speech and declared all the couples present to be husband and wife. The collective wedding made the parents of the bride and groom virtual spectators among the many other guests assembled, and often made them wait for the conclusion of the other speeches before they could publicly acknowledge their child’s marriage.

Party regulations intended that the new wedding ceremony have a “deep educational effect” (Thai Binh, Committee for the Propagation of the New Ways 1974: 27). The ceremony, through the presence of the Youth Association and other local officials, was meant to propagate revolutionary policies and the new marital regime. The wedding speeches delivered by local officials hit on these themes, as did the previously mentioned performances at the receptions. In many regions, the bride and groom simply returned to the groom’s home after the wedding ceremony, but in some areas regulations encouraged the bride and groom to show their gratitude to those who had given their lives for the nation and revolution by placing flowers on the local war memorial (Viet Nam, Government 1979: 24). This simplification of weddings into a one or two hour ceremony represented a dramatic break with pre-revolutionary wedding practice. Whereas previously a wedding ceremony was preceded by literally years of preparation and then the ceremonies themselves generally lasted for three days, revolutionary ceremonial required only one day. And whereas families had formerly exercised control over marriage and weddings, through the legal, bureaucratic, and ritual reforms, bureaucratic standards were to supercede familial considerations, and the wedding would become a proxy of the state.

The Reform of the Ritual Process: Historical Realities

Many villagers initially greeted the reform campaign with great enthusiasm. Young men returned from fighting the French lead the campaign, which capitalized on the prestige these men enjoyed. As many older villagers are fond of stating in a paraphrase of Lenin, “revolution is a holiday for the masses,” and the enthusiasm for creating a new Vietnamese society carried over into the reforms. Despite some initial

successes, the party's ideal for a progressive wedding ceremony ultimately encountered a great deal of resistance. Public sentiment ran against the expropriation of the wedding ceremony from the realm of family and kin, and many concessions were made for the organization of the wedding ceremony.¹¹⁾ By tracing the history of the reform campaign from its beginnings up to the present, one can understand the tensions involved, and ultimately the concessions made, in the wedding reform campaign.

The earliest points of resistance focused on the collective wedding. In Thinh Liet commune, the Youth Association successfully organized only a small number of these ceremonies before villagers began to insist on one couple weddings. The simultaneous marriage of several couples was considered unbecoming and inappropriate. Villagers also objected to the absolute removal of wedding ceremonies from the homes of the bride and particularly the groom. By 1958, after only a small number of communal house weddings, the bride's and the groom's homes returned as the two key loci for ceremonies. The wedding procession was also reinstated and grooms brought their brides back to their homes for the conclusion of the wedding ceremony and the post-wedding celebration. It is very important to note, however, that despite the use of the groom's home for the ceremonies, the Secretary of the Youth Association still maintained the role of chief ritual officiant and delivered the first wedding speech during this period.

The return of wedding ceremonies to the homes by the late 1950s weakened the role of local officials in controlling wedding practices. This was most evident in the efforts to limit feasting. Party rhetoric consistently criticized the waste involved in feasts. Families had initially accepted the consumption of tea and cigarettes during the wedding celebration, but as the Youth Association's ability to impose its designs on wedding ceremonies weakened, more and more families returned to organizing feasts as large as they socially, economically, and politically could. The reasons for the return to feasting were complex. One important factor was that in the years immediately following the land reform, farmers enjoyed high yields and many felt that devoting their resources to feasts was appropriate. Status assertions were another important reason. The post-land reform village witnessed the initial intimations of a new set of revolutionary haves and have-nots, a transformation that found expression in feasting.

A deeper reason for the feasting resurgence, and the exchange of *mung* prestations that accompanied feasts, was that the giving and receiving of such prestations was part of a village-wide system of exchange relations in which people reaffirmed and reproduced their social relations. One measure of the quality of a villager's social relations and general esteem was the expansiveness of their exchange relations with other villagers. Villagers who were conscientious in fulfilling their exchange relations were considered to live with much "sentiment" (*tin h cam*) in village life. The attribution of "sentiment" was a positive moral valuation. It indicated that one respected and prized other villagers, and that regardless of one's social position, one actively and

conscientiously participated in the lives of other villagers. A person with much “sentiment” was very attentive to his or her social relations. This system of gift and debt was described as “exchanging debts through eating and drinking” (*an uong tra no mieng nhau*). Its main consequence was that through these exchange relations, individuals and families reproduced and reinvigorated their *tin h cam* relations.

Party ideologues recognized a different aspect of this system. The demands to fulfill exchange relations frequently weakened villagers’ finances and many villagers, in order to display their status, gave unnecessarily large prestations. Such people were said to “buy sentiment” (*mua tin h cam*) and created potentially humiliating situations for those unable to match their gifts. Wealthy villagers might also invite large numbers of guests to show their wealth and collect *mung* money. Party ideologues objected to this system of reproducing *tin h cam* and exchange relations. In revolutionary Viet Nam, party ideologues wanted the act of sociality to be enough to reproduce socialist *tin h cam*. Socialist *tin h cam* was not to be cemented through the exchange of material goods. As one set of regulations noted with regard to prestations in wedding ceremonies, “if they don’t give anything then that’s fine” (*khong tang gi thi thoi*) (Viet Nam, Ministry of Culture 1975: 34). For villagers in the new socialist society, “that which is most prized,” noted one official source, “is the presence of one’s face” (Son La Cultural Service 1975: 24). The party aimed to “erase the evil of inviting people to feasts in order to collect *mung* money” (Son La Cultural Service 1975: 24). A small range of gifts could be presented to the bride and groom, but these were only to be small gifts from close relations with a strictly commemorative value (Viet Nam, Ministry of Culture 1975: 48). Villagers were to maintain *tin h cam* relations between themselves, but their previous mechanism of reproduction, which had also served as a venue for emphasizing social difference, was to be eliminated.¹² Much to their chagrin, local officials never eliminated feasting and *mung* prestations.

The advent of cooperativization in the early 1960s again limited the size of feasts in the Red River delta. Cooperatives had effective control over the staples needed to arrange a feast, thus families were limited in what they could organize. Nevertheless, many still organized small feasts and exchanged *mung* prestations. During the years of the American war (1963–1973), local weddings experienced a period of intense simplification due to the prospect of bombing raids and the general poverty of the nation. Weddings during this period were often simple, one-day affairs restricted to close kin and family. Many marriages were in fact hastily orchestrated with the groom leaving for the front a few days after the wedding. Overall, party-sponsored reforms of the wedding ceremony remained salient during this period.

After the unification of the country in 1975, families became increasingly adamant about arranging their weddings as they saw fit. As a result, feasts became larger and many of the previously abandoned ceremonies, such as the engagement ceremony and the presentation of the *seu* prestations, became standard practice once again. Families also no longer allowed local officials to officiate in their ceremonies and the propitiation of the ancestors was again foregrounded. The resurgence of wedding cer-

emonial, however, did not entail a complete return to prior practices. Brideprice only rarely reappeared. Couples usually become engaged of their own accord, with engagements lasting only a few months, not three years as before. The practice of the two families meeting to formalize the wedding plans was retained, but in the form of a one time meeting when representatives from the groom's family delivered gifts to the bride's family for the wedding invitations several days prior to the wedding. The pre-engagement ceremony was dropped, and this new ceremony, though different from its predecessor, was called the engagement ceremony (*an hoi*).

The most important changes regarding wedding ceremonies began after the introduction of the Renovation (*Doi Moi*) policy in 1986. Originally intended to reform Viet Nam's moribund economy, this policy has had important socio-cultural consequences as it ushered in an era of relaxed control over social and cultural activities. Since 1986, communes and villages throughout the Red River delta have experienced a marked resurgence of ritual activity (see Luong 1993; Malarney 1993). With regard to weddings, this has entailed a number of important transformations. To begin with, wedding ceremonies are again carried out over several days and are accompanied by large feasts. In Tinh Liet commune, for example, average feast size rose from 60 to 120 guests in the 1960s to an average over three hundred guests in the mid-1990s. Wedding ceremonies and feasts are also more socially inclusive now than they were in the past. Village families invite more expansively, a change made possible by the requirement that all guests basically pay for themselves with *mung* prestations. In a startling rejection of former asymmetries, brides' families now also organize large feasts, though they never exceed those of the groom. And unlike previously, all guests are responsible for providing *mung* prestations to her family. The wedding of a daughter is now given almost the same recognition as that of a son. It should be well noted, however, that despite the fact that the resurgence of prolonged wedding ceremonies and large feasts has been marked by greater social inclusiveness, it has also involved the emergence of competitive feasting and the status-marking aspects of wedding ritual. Over the past several years, families have put on increasingly grand displays in order to mark the marriages of their children. This has been visible in the inclusion of more high status food items, such as chicken instead of pork, or beer instead of rice spirits. As one Tinh Liet resident commented, "it is not a large feast unless it has chicken." Feasting still maintains a *tin h cam* aspect, but competition and inequality have reemerged.

Conclusions

The reform of marriage and weddings represented two critical arenas for the extension of party ideology into the lives of villagers. As is obvious in the above discussions, it was also a strategy used by the party to try to limit and weaken the role of the family in village life. Many of the reforms introduced by the party were well received. The abolition of arranged marriage was considered a definite step forward as was the general simplification of the ceremonies. Yet the successes and failures of the reforms

reveal a great deal about broader changes in contemporary Vietnamese society. As has been noted throughout this paper, many of the party's reforms were intended to create new structures of equality in Vietnamese society. On many of these points, the party has succeeded. Arranged marriage, for example, has virtually disappeared. People are free to choose their partners and the determinative role of parents is no longer present, though they are usually consulted. Women are free to divorce and remarry if they desire, although social openness on this point has yet to match the legal standard. Brideprice has been substantially reduced. Families are extremely sensitive to the charge of "selling their children," hence most will only accept the items needed to invite other families to their wedding ceremonies or a symbolic amount of pork and money to put toward their feast. And in an important assertion of equality between affines, the families of brides now also collect *mung* money to help cover the expenses of their feasts, making them almost equal partners in the village-wide network of "exchanging debts through eating and drinking." Revolutionary reforms have attenuated or eliminated many of the inegalitarian structures of pre-revolutionary social practice.

Not all of the reforms, however, succeeded. Families were extremely reluctant to have higher authorities dictate how to conduct their weddings, and resented the role of state officials in conferring legitimacy on new marriages. Weddings are still "works of the family," thus ceremonies that include ancestral propitiation and speeches by kin remain the exclusive ceremony for conferring conjugal status on a couple. People can register their marriage, but even after doing so, others will say they are "yet to be married" and most importantly, parents will not let them cohabit until the wedding has been performed. Some couples never bother to register. Nevertheless, just as this assertion of family independence and control has brought the organization of the wedding back into the realm of the family, it has also brought back the competitive feasting and status displays the party attempted to eliminate. The size of feasts is a common topic of conversation, people are constantly comparing and criticizing other's feasts, and social difference is again powerfully marked. True, feasts are still extremely important for the reproduction of *tin h cam* relations, but weddings, exchange relations and feasts are important arenas for the display of social difference and inequality in the Vietnamese village.

Notes

- 1) The details of wedding ceremonies vary tremendously across Viet Nam. The descriptions below are drawn from Thinh Liet commune, although I have attempted to focus on those practices shared between Thinh Liet and other communities.
- 2) Village endogamy was most prevalent among commoner families. The children of elite mandarin families tended to marry into other mandarin families, often from other villages.
- 3) Similar to southern China (Ebrey 1991: 4), brides in the Red River delta received little in the way of dowry.
- 4) The groom's family also invited people to the wedding ceremony, with the same distinctions of "eating salty" and "eating sweet," though they issued their invitations simply by word of mouth.
- 5) Hy Van Luong reports that this was an recent innovation in the village of Hoai Thi in Ha Bac

- province (Luong 1993: 277). It has existed for decades in Thinh Liet.
- 6) *Mung* prestations vary from village to village. Hy Van Luong reports that in Son Duong village in Vinh Phu province, villagers generally refused cash gifts (Luong 1993: 279).
 - 7) Thinh Liet was a relatively well-educated commune. Thus, there are some questions whether villages in other communes also used recorded prestations.
 - 8) Those in rural areas who had several wives at the time of the passage of the marriage law were tacitly allowed to keep their wives.
 - 9) An exemplary description of the ideal wedding organization can be found in Viet Nam, Government (1979: 21–25). The discussion which follows, unless otherwise noted, is based upon my field research in Thinh Liet commune. It is important to note, however, that there was extensive variation in revolutionary wedding organization (see Malarney 1993).
 - 10) All villages had a communal house in the pre-revolutionary period. It housed the altar of the village guardian spirit (*thanh hoang lang*) and was the exclusive domain of men. With the establishment of the revolutionary government, women were allowed to enter communal houses.
 - 11) At the provincial level, the extent of the concessions was evident in the different regulations propagated by individual provinces (see Malarney 1993).
 - 12) Families were also to avoid collecting items for brideprice or feasts because such activities were outside the official channels of the planned economy and therefore put families into contact with the black market (Ha Noi, Culture and Information Service 1975: 32).

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