

# ***VIETNAMESE WOMEN AND CONFUCIANISM: creating spaces from patriarchy \****

by  
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## **The Problem**

It appears that in the personal lives of Vietnamese men, one of the most persistent areas of discontent is the contradiction between what men believe their relationships to the women in their families ought to be and what those relationships really are, between what the rightful place of the male should be in their eyes and what it is. This, in turn, plays itself out against the background of how Vietnamese women think their men are going to behave. Thus, it would be helpful to start out by asking how do Vietnamese men believe women should act? What is the history of that belief? In what way is that ideal different from how Vietnamese women really behave? And what do Vietnamese women think Vietnamese men are up to?

To begin, the Vietnamese uphold an eclectic moral theory which is a combination of three early traditions:

1. Confucian moral paradigms (with, for the Communists, a thin Marxist veneer in modern times);
2. Buddhist-Taoist metaphysical reflections; &
3. practical folkways, including animism, since it involves practical interaction with the world of local Vietnamese spirits, for the benefit of daily life.

For centuries, the Confucian and Buddhist-Taoist patriarchal ideal has infused Vietnamese practical life. While the Buddhist-Taoist ideology relates more to definitions of public and ritual power, it is Confucianism which permeates family, intersexual and intergenerational relationships in the most profound way. Generally, the Confucian conception of society is based on a series of idealised relationships:

- a. those relationships linked to the 'macro society',<sup>2</sup> *i.e.*,

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- between Heaven (whose will must be fathomed by the Emperor) and the Emperor
- between the Emperor (setter of example to the idealised gentleman) and his mandarins
- between the mandarin (for idealised gentleman) and the people (those whom he administers)

b. relationships on the 'micro' level, *i.e.*,

- between husband (idealised gentleman) and wife
- between father (idealised gentleman) and children
- between elder brother (idealised gentleman) and younger sibling
- between teacher (idealised gentleman) and student
- between friend (idealised gentleman) and friend.

Marxist ideology has underplayed the importance of Confucianism on the level of macro society, finding greater usefulness in Buddhism, which through its institution of priesthood and ritualmaking, maintains a clearly defined separate ideology from Marxism. Its strength is in ritual rather than politics, and the afterlife rather than current affairs. Confucianism, without a priesthood or public ritual, fails to complement State ideology the way Buddhism can, and remains a stronghold of the family. The metaphor of the 'male' in macro society, however, permeates family intersexual relationships, engendering the family system further.

This enables the husband to formalise his position as 'superior' by assuming the features of mandarin and teacher. He is responsible for commanding, guiding, teaching, nurturing, and protecting the 'inferior', who is here the wife. On another level she becomes the student and commoner, and is responsible for obeying and venerating the 'superior'.

Regarding this paradigm, one will immediately note that:

- it is holistic in both content and style (it is all-encompassing, treats society as an organic whole, subject to a single mode of meaningful analysis);
- it is normative (it tells us what we ought to be doing);
- it focuses on the idealised gentleman and is expressly patriarchal (except for the roles in italics, there is little or no emphasis on roles that women can play, and those which might involve women are all subordinated to men). Women in this *Weltanschauung* are almost incidental, furniture on the stage rather than actors. Their function is to obey and to show proper

(i.e., obedient) behaviour in word and deed, through chastity and submissiveness.<sup>3</sup>

In point of fact, while chastity (*trinh tiết*) was supposedly required of both men and women, in practice, male chastity was almost never emphasised from a moral point of view, but rather from a metaphysical or pseudo-medical standpoint: it was believed that in giving himself to a woman, a man's sexual energies (*duong tinh*) were drained, while a woman gained power (by increasing *âm*). In other words, women got their hold over men in bed.<sup>4</sup> In any event, since society permitted men multiple wives, they could theoretically be chaste within marriage and still enjoy variety, something quite forbidden to women. Widows were permitted to remarry, but it was considered more virtuous for them to remain faithful to their late husbands.<sup>5</sup> We shall return to this point about moral chastity for women versus metaphysical chastity for men a little later.

Submissiveness (commonly called the 'three submissions', *tam tông*) was usually thought of in terms of specific periods in a woman's life. In childhood, she was supposed to obey her father; as soon as she was married (coïncidental with the transition point from childhood), she was to obey her husband; and when her husband died (the almost universal pattern was for older men to marry young women), she was to obey her eldest son. There was a series of sub-actors in this paradigm. Female children were theoretically submissive to all older males in the family (elder brothers, uncles, grandfathers), as well as to their mothers and grandmothers. Once married, the role of enforcer of submission fell as often to the husband's mother as to the husband himself.

## Social and Economic Realities

Now if a Vietnamese male were to believe in this system, which obviously seems to bring with it significant advantages for him *vis-à-vis* his womenfolk, what hopes would he have of seeing it carried out in practice, bearing in mind that Confucianism is essentially Chinese, imported into a family system which is Vietnamese, that is to say, part of a wider Southeast Asian social system where women's power is founded in the family? In other Southeast Asian cultures it is also through the family that women gain economic and political venues of decision-making, blurring boundaries of the 'domestic' and 'public'.

Do males, in fact, control the most important features of daily life? Are they in control of their wives? Are Vietnamese women chaste and submissive? Do men uphold economic decision-making within their family? For answers, we must look to economics, history and folklore (the secret and not-so-secret sayings of the

common people, which often have the force of customary law), and personal observation. Much of what is subsequently recorded here refers to my own personal relationships with Vietnamese men and women, which span several decades of my life.

It is worthwhile remembering that, in the fateful winter of 1945, two million peasants in northern Viet Nam starved to death, an event incomprehensible anywhere else in Southeast Asia.<sup>6</sup> Even today, for all intents and purposes, Viet Nam has no meaningful macro-economy - the largest significant transactions in the lives of the average Vietnamese are microtransactions. This is not only due to the fact that heavy industry and large-scale operations are not yet widely enough distributed to make important inroads into the economic lives of the peasantry, but also because, with a few exceptions, the state-run economy (centrally planned by a largely male bureaucracy) is nearly bankrupt.\* Furthermore (in addition to government-encouraged liberalisation), the coöperative farming system is falling apart, even in the North, where it has been the preferred structure for over three decades. The Southern farmers were never successfully collectivised in the first place, so that peasants now as always look to the local market for the margin that sustains life.\*

What this means in practice is that small businesses are the heart of the distributive economy of Viet Nam. What goes on in the village or city market determines to a large extent how well the average family lives. It is here that most farm surplus is sold and it is here that the most significant prices are negotiated: how much for some onions, for a pair of slippers, a piece of cloth, a bicycle chain, or a package of cigarettes.

At this most important crossroad of the Vietnamese national economy, Vietnamese women act as the arbiters quasi-exclusively. Nearly all market stalls are run by women. In the towns, there are few Vietnamese-run shops that are not openly or discreetly controlled by women.<sup>7</sup> Not only do women form the overwhelming majority of all active merchants in the country, they constitute the mass of the customers as well.<sup>8</sup>

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\* These observations may have been more accurate up to the late 1980s (when this article was first written) than after the dissolution most of the farming coöps and the opening of Viet Nam to foreign investment starting in the 1990s, but most small retailers are still women.

I would not hesitate to assert that more than half (and probably a great deal more than half) of all commercial transactions at the point of sale in Viet Nam involve no men on either side.

And it seems that this has been the case historically as well. In the eighteenth century, the Reverend Father Koffler noted (quoted in Poirier, Marie: 'La Conquête de la femme indigène en pays d'Annam', *La Grande Revue*, 10 December 1913: 717-36 [translated from the French by this author])

In this kingdom, it can be said in praise of both the men and women that, born to work, they flee from idleness as they would from pestilence. But the latter (*i.e.*, the women) take the prize, due to their truly inborn skills at augmenting the family's patrimony. The men take care of public offices, they are soldiers, hunters, artisans, fishermen. The women, and not without considerable revenue, engage in commerce in the market, as well as in the markets of foreign merchants of all countries ...

Understanding the economic life of women in Viet Nam is crucial to a general understanding of their position in society. In spite of the male role of provider which is implicit in the Confucian paradigm, Vietnamese mothers raise their daughters to understand, if not explicitly, then by example, that they should always have their own money, and cannot depend on men. That Vietnamese men are, in fact, as imbued with the work ethic as are the women, can be attested to by any observer of the economic activity of the Vietnamese refugee communities in the West, where vietnamese men commonly hold two and sometimes three jobs at a time to support their families. But the popular notion persists, commonly abetted by male authors such as the nineteenth-century libertine Trần Tế Xương (1890) that the height of *machismo* is not some Mediterranean predilection to physical abuse of women, but rather a gentlemanly idleness at their expense:<sup>9</sup> 'Drinking and gambling till you're on over your head, but even if you out of money, your kid's mother is still out there selling her wares.'

Whether or not most of the money is brought in by the father, it is commonly the mother in Vietnamese households who handles the family finances, collecting her husband's wages and putting him on a sort of allowance. A kind of institutionalised cheating usually arises where the husband tries to hide to some extent the true amount of his earnings, lest he should not have enough money for cigarettes, tea and going out with his friends. The wife, similarly, dissimulates or secretly invests the earnings from her embroidery and selling cakes, so her husband will not think her rich and take advantage of her to spend his money on *les petites amies*.

The most commonly acquired commodity for this kind of female protective investment has always been jewellery, preferably in unalloyed gold or, in modern times, with recognisable gems. Young girls quietly watch their mothers' elaborate systems of boxes, jars, purses, hidden floor boards, furtive containers of every kind and dimension, never opened in the father's presence – they observe and they learn. The precious contents are considered the mother's property and will stay with her should she leave. The extraordinary interest which Vietnamese women appear to take in jewellery is commonly misunderstood by outsiders to be simple vanity – and, of course, no one is immune from human foible – but one must comprehend the Vietnamese folk tradition of female economic self-defence in order to put this fascination into its proper perspective.<sup>10</sup>

## Home and the 'In-Law' Question

In addition to finances, another major question in everyday Vietnamese life is: Where is the family going to live? The answer to this question is arrived at by a balance between idealised Confucian custom mentioned above, folk practice, and economic exigency. The last of these considerations, especially when the economy is not going well (before the 1990s economic boom in Southeast Asia, for example), is probably the one which would carry the most weight. For this reason, the accepted practice of the wife's going to live with her husband's family is breached in many ways. In urban settings, among office and factory workers, where accommodations are scarce and individual lodgings impossible to find, one lives where one can; in these cases, live-in sons-in-law are not rare. In the countryside, there is not only a stronger tradition, but also more space in which to carry it out, so typically young wives still dutifully go off to live in or next to their husband's relatives, though families with no sons may wish that at least one daughter stay in their home with her husband.

The husband's family is chiefly concerned with male issue. If the wife's firstborn is a boy and the baby lives past the first month of infancy, the wife's place in her husband's family is greatly strengthened. If it happens that her husband is the eldest son, she can in fact come to exercise great power (as queens throughout world history have discovered), effectively fending off the aggressions of his female relatives. In the event she is childless or insists on bearing daughters (folk belief ignores the medical fact that the sex of offspring is genetically determined by the father), her fate can be less enviable.<sup>11</sup> If her husband has no sisters of his own at home, her presence may be still very welcome, for certain kinds of work, such as

keeping a kitchen garden, are thought to be impossible for men to do well.<sup>12</sup> But at best, like most women in the Third World, she can still expect a very demanding work schedule, even if she is relatively well treated.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that a young wife goes back to her own mother's house for an extended visit after the birth of a child (other than a firstborn male). Another, though frequently unmentioned, reason for this behaviour is the fact that (especially in the case of rather young wives) these women do not really know how to take care of infants. Grandmothers, and particularly maternal grandmothers, are the fount of this kind of knowledge (Fishman 1985).<sup>13</sup> Once a woman's eldest daughter is over the age of about seven or eight, she has a tendency to confer as many of the child-care duties for younger siblings as possible to this eldest daughter, who then becomes a little substitute mother.<sup>14</sup> Some knowledge is passed on in this way; but younger daughters are less likely to be well instructed, and, in any event, do not care for the suckling infants.

Once back at home with her mother, the young wife is among her own. The maternal grandmother is thought of as a warm-hearted spoiler of the young. The Vietnamese often say, 'Your mother's sister loves you as her own child. If misfortune takes your mother, she can still be counted on.' A sense of sisterhood also prevails. To be among one's own sisters may be a welcoming thought since 'one can cut the strings from gourds and melons, but not the bond between blood sisters'. However, life with one's female in-laws is traditionally seen as the worst burden life has to offer a woman. As the saying goes, even 'Chinese bandits cannot equal one's husband's mother and sister'.

The problem for the husband is one of divided loyalties, for the notion of filial piety (*hiếu*) places him under his parents, and it obliges his wife by the same token. Saving his wife from the exactions of his mother is obviously an excellent place for arguments to begin. As the saying goes, 'I'm hungry and I eat a starfruit or a fig, then I take one look at your mother and I can't swallow a thing.' How long can these two women stand each other? The following folksong lyric explains the relationship:

Your mother is so fierce, my darling!  
 And who knows whether we'll make it through life together?  
 Or, just as I have come, shall I also leave,  
 Causing me great suffering, causing you much pain.

For a young wife, the added jealousy of her husband's sisters is almost taken for granted. A common Vietnamese saying goes:

Bitter and piquant, but still blood kin,  
 Sweet and smooth, and yet strangers;  
 When the husband's younger sister lives with the sister-in-law,  
 You'd better watch out or come one day they'll kill each other.

Indeed probably nowhere in the world's folk literature is there a richer mine of sayings than the one found in Viet Nam about mothers-in-law, and specifically regarding the hatred that arises between the husband's mother and the young wife. Tensions between the husband and the wife's mother receive scant attention. For every mention of how good mothers-in-law should act, cherishing their daughters-in-law as their own flesh and blood, there are fifty evocations of the evils of the system. The end seems predictable:

Girl in the straw hat, where are you going?  
 I am a daughter-in-law going away;  
 I am fed up with my husband's vicious mother,  
 I can bare to stay no longer – I go back to my home.<sup>16</sup>

One is forced to conclude that what we have here is a system which is highly dysfunctional, but which is nonetheless maintained. If this is the case, there must exist certain powerful forces, psychological or social, which require the persistence of a massive hypocrisy – what can these possibly be?

## History

It is fairly clear, for one thing, that theoretical male domination was not always the case among the Vietnamese: the archæological evidence (with female figures playing prominent totemic roles in the decoration of bronze artefacts from the first millennium BC) leads us to believe that two thousand years ago, in the Vietnamese *urheimat*,<sup>17</sup> before the arrival *en masse* of the Chinese and the importation of patriarchal Confucianism and written documents, women played prominent roles in public life.

This interpretation is reinforced by legends of female warriors, which are not only part of Vietnamese folklore, but are also noted as part of the historical record that the Chinese kept of their first incursions into Vietnamese territory. Two well-



known cases are today part of Vietnamese popular iconography, the story of the Trưng Sisters, whose rebellion against the Chinese colonial administration in AD 41 is noted in the Hou Han Shu (a third-century text *digne de foi*), and the tale of Lady Triệu Ẩu in AD 248, who is said to have headed her troops seated in shining armour on the back of a giant elephant (O'Harrow 1979). Once the Chinese were firmly in control of this southern border territory, if not earlier, Viet Nam was witness to a continued influx of ethnic Chinese immigrants. We know, not only from well-documented recent immigration patterns, but also from citations in contemporary Chinese annals, that the vast majority of these migrants were peasant-class males. They took local wives in Viet Nam and, once installed, seldom returned to China. Their progeny eventually formed the bulk of the lowland farming population. This Vietnamese-speaking progeny, reared by Vietnamese mothers, was at once the inheritor of the indigenous Southeast Asian social ethic which placed a high value on the role of women, as well as heir to the male-centred Chinese tradition.<sup>18</sup>

The stage was thus set very early in their national history for a peculiarly Vietnamese social dichotomy, in which the two layers of social ethic co-existed: the sinicised male ethic *chez les hommes* and the SoutheastAsian female *ethic chez les femmes*. Hence, the seeds of social dysfunction were present from a very early period. I have argued elsewhere that a primary cause for the female-led revolt of AD 41 was a conflict between the traditional indigenous land-tenure system, which seems to have allowed for female land inheritance, and Chinese law, which favoured male succession (O'Harrow 1979).

## Theory

Obviously a *modus vivendi* had to be arrived at, one involving a sort of two-tiered layering of external male domination and internal female primacy. The process of layering is a metaphor for many aspects of Vietnamese life. In temples devoted to the worship of heroes and heroines of the State (not a Stalinist 'cult of personality' invention in Viet Nam, but a very ancient practice) there is frequently an inner altar or even a series of inner altars, behind the one usually seen by the public (O'Harrow 1986). Here the priesthood venerates the heroes who preceded (and therefore watched over) the one worshipped at the outer altar. The notion that there is always a deeper meaning beneath the surface or events (or behind one's gestures and the words one utters) pervades Vietnamese psychic life.

To begin to understand the processes of male-female accommodation that take place in Vietnamese daily life one must look into the psychic life of Vietnamese women. If I could sum up the psychic structural concerns which haunt the traditional Vietnamese woman in a single word, it would be 'containment'; and I would prefer to work with three words, each of which are a facet of containment: privacy, control, and reintegration.

## Privacy

I believe this is a quasi-universal phenomenon, and not limited to Viet Nam. Since I am not a woman myself, I do not think I can do more than give a sympathetic reading of the situation, but it is necessary, for the purposes of this paper, that I do so and try to place it in a Vietnamese context.

The need for privacy when certain physical needs arise is an obvious concern, but the degree of this need is to a considerable extent culturally-dependent. In some cultures, particularly traditional Muslim communities for example, the woman may feel uncomfortable in the physical presence of any adult male outside her immediate family, even if she is swathed from head to foot. The problem in Viet Nam is less a matter of cultural or social inclination than it is of poverty and enforced contact. The simple fact is that the average Vietnamese woman gets very little of the physical privacy she very much desires. But she can frequently develop strategies to cope with the physical world: she bathes at night, goes to a faraway field or a hidden bush to tend to some urgencies; and she spends hours mending her clothes to keep herself modest.<sup>19</sup>

Always surrounded by people, her real problem, one of the most irksome of her life, is not physical but psychological privacy - freedom from prying eyes. Here she is often less successful. If it is not her mother-in-law and her husband's sisters, then it is the village neighbours, if not the neighbours then her fellow workers or the busybody Communist party cadre spying on her. It is incessant gossip, ceaseless criticism. 'Her hair's too short, her hair's too long, she takes too long when she eats, she takes too much fish and not enough rice, she lets her husband go around in unironed clothes, she talks too much, she's too quiet . . .'. The average Vietnamese woman is surrounded by judges who measure her every step and note down her every gesture.

The great secret yearning of the Vietnamese woman is for a private space of her own to which she can admit only those whom she pleases and when she pleases; but this personal psychological space can only exist in her mind. From a very young age, therefore, she develops a very rich imaginative life, one into which she withdraws more and more often when under pressure. She may wish to admit her husband or lover into this space, but because it is her unsullied last refuge, she often does not dare.

The only men who can come into that secret space are dream men who possess all the pleasing boyish qualities, sometimes playful, sometimes sorrowful, but always turning to her for love and consolation, never turning to the outside world, out of the reach of mothers, sisters-in-law or girlfriends. Inside this space she knows she is pure - those other women, as their criticism and spying proves, are not. In the end, the only male who can even come close to this ideal is the one male over whom she can possibly have dominion, the one male who can look upon no other woman in the same way he looks upon her: her son. But if her son grows up and marries, he will leave her private space, betray this most intimate connection for another woman, his wife, who must now become her arch-rival. And so the wheel turns.

But there is much more to be said about this private world than simply describing its enemies.<sup>20</sup> Women sometimes ask: 'If our mothers have favoured their male offspring, our brothers, who is there to suckle us?' And the answer is 'We can only turn to ourselves and to the spirit world'. This question of Vietnamese women psychologically nursing themselves from within is occasionally connected with their taking on lovers.

What I believe is misunderstood, especially by the man who happens to play the role of actual physical lover, is that (as far as the woman is concerned) the lover is not there as an outside entity brought in whole to be loved and understood for his own sake – he is merely a stand-in for the real lover, the dream lover, who is pure and can only exist within the woman herself.<sup>31</sup> Truly, as she nurses her secret yearnings for love, the physically real lover ultimately fails in comparison to the dream lover.

Can her husband be the lover? Generally, no. The reason is fairly simple: Vietnamese women marry quite young and learn to relate to their private psychological space very early on in their marriage. By the time that space is fully defined, the husband has already shown himself to be imperfect and his

imperfections have materially contributed to the design of the young wife's private space. Barriers are set up in that space specifically against the kinds of faults he possesses, and he is automatically excluded. If he is timid and afraid of his mother he will never ever be her dream lover. If her husband is boastful, her dream lover will be a quiet man. Only if a Vietnamese woman has reached maturity without having suffered significant male subjugation can her dream space admit the presence of a real lover; but for her own sake, and in the Confucian system, this is almost never the case.

There are, however, other entities that can intrude into this private space – the spirits. This has nothing to do with formal or organised religious ideology as we usually think of it. With few exceptions, formal religious organizations in Viet Nam, in much the same manner as formal political organisations, are under the clear and quasi-total domination of men.<sup>22</sup> The spirits I refer to can be the spirits of the dead or they can be other powers related to the Taoist pantheon (or, more specifically, *Đạo Mẫu* [道母], “the Way of the Mother Goddess). They are accessed via professional female mediums, who go into trances to commune with spirits who can penetrate the depths of a woman's life (a ceremony known as *lên đồng*). (See also Ngaosyvathn in this volume on Laotian spirit-mediums.) These spirits are themselves almost always feminine.

Another closely related phenomenon is the consultation of the *thầy bói* or fortune-teller. The *thầy bói* can be male or female but, though men do come to learn the future from the fortune teller, the bulk of the clients are women, with whom the fortune teller maintains a semi-psychiatric relationship, especially if the *thầy bói* herself happens to be a woman. No matter when or why the woman goes to the *thầy bói*, she always discovers something: 'Go to soothsayer, she'll surely find a ghost; Sweep your house and you'll surely find dust.'

The trump card which a female *thầy bói* always has up her sleeve is her combined knowledge of and sensitivity to the predictable psychological concerns of her women clients (faithless husbands, vicious mother-in-laws, prying sisters-in-laws, and rebellious children) and her control over the commonly accepted cultural signs and symbols needed to interpret these phenomena in a manner acceptable to her clients. The female soothsayer becomes the only credible yet disinterested female confidante available to the Vietnamese woman suffering psychological pain. The latter comes seeking reassurance, and usually receives it.

## Control

What do Vietnamese women do to gain control of their lives? As I have noted, there is a distinct tendency for Vietnamese women to control, or try to control, the family finances. This is seen from the woman's viewpoint as a defensive strategy (from the man's viewpoint this is at best an 'aggressive defence'), and the female desire for complete control within the home is thought of as something natural in Vietnamese culture. While the polite term for a wife is *nội trợ* or 'interior helper', the common, not so polite epithet is *nội tướng* or 'general of the interior'. Some regions of Viet Nam, such as Hà Đông, are reputed to produce particularly fierce 'generals of the interior' who are often called *Sư tử Hà Đông* (Hà Đông Lionesses'). These Lionesses supposedly exercise dominion over their husbands who, in turn, are said to belong to a very ancient club, the *Hội Sư Vợ* or 'Society of Men who Fear Their Wives'.<sup>23</sup> The *Hội Sư Vợ* is the subject of hundreds of Vietnamese jokes, some of which are very hoary. One of the oldest and best-known goes as follows:

A peasant was being scolded loudly by his wife for not having the presence of mind to bring in the laundry, drying on the clothes-line, before it rained. His neighbour heard this, came out and said, 'Why do you let yourself be treated like that by a woman – I would never let this happen to me.' Then the neighbour's wife came out and said, 'Oh, yes? And what would you do?' 'Why, my dear', replied the neighbour, 'I would surely remember to take in the laundry before it got wet.'

Lame humour aside, it is martyrdom on the part of women that is more often the unseemly counterpart to perceived male domination, and this, of course, is not limited to Vietnamese culture or even to Southeast Asia in general. This martyrdom reflects an effort to seek control by directing the attention of others to one's misery, to arouse shame. This is usually directed over those people to whom one cannot simply give explicit orders. In a Western context this would be closely related to the 'Jewish mother' or Swedish Protestant mother syndrome, except that these European cultures are more heavily reliant on guilt rather than shame as a mechanism of control over children's behaviour.

In Viet Nam and other societies in Southeast Asia, however, the mother plays on the sympathy of the child, making the child feel culpable for the sadness of the mother, eternally responsible for her suffering. For example, instead of telling the child directly that he must eat his bowl of beans (which the child detests) because

they are good for his health (which the child might refuse), the mother (in the Western version) says that she worked many hours to acquire the money to buy beans, that she sacrificed buying something for herself with the bean money instead, that she slaved over a hot stove to cook the beans, and if the child does not eat them, his ingratitude will (as usual) kill her. While this tactic is not unknown among the Vietnamese, it usually undergoes a subtle but important variation, as follows: 'Everybody, your father, your grandparents, your brothers and sisters, see how hard I work to feed you, and if you don't eat these beans, they will know that you mistreat your mother and are ungrateful to the person who gave you life.'

In the case of the Jewish child, he will eat his beans, even if his mother leaves the room, because he knows that God can still see him and it would be a terrible thing to hurt her so. In the case of the Vietnamese child, he will definitely eat all his beans if anyone is looking, but if everyone leaves the room, he will throw the beans out of the window, and feel none the worse. In a culture which operates on shame rather than guilt, one knows when one is being manipulated.

By extension, a Vietnamese woman's acting out her sense of martyrdom, when applied to daily life, can only be effective if the game is played out on a commonly accepted playing-field where everybody understands the rules and signals. This field is the system of moral debts and balances, where public shame is the umpire for the game. The system of moral debts and balances would appear to be Buddhist in origin; but it fits in so neatly with traditional Confucian moralising that the one reinforces the one other rather well. In Buddhist metaphysics, life is in constant flux, all is change, there is no permanence, only ebb and flow (see Karim, Introduction, on the 'village community'). The only way to get ahead in the game<sup>24</sup> is to build up merit, which is done by acquiring the moral debts of other people, in the same way a banker buys up mortgage notes or a loan shark buys up gamblers' IOUs: it is enforced in folk-law by the saying 'If you drink the water, you should remember the source.'

There is constant social gift-giving and doing of unsolicited favours in Vietnamese society.<sup>25</sup> The object of these gifts conforms to the classic Maussian theory of the 'gift' which is to bind somebody morally or to balance off some previous benefit received from the person to whom the gift is given. The giver of gifts or renderer of services gains *on* or a moral IOU from the receiver, and is therefore in a position to demand something from the receiver;<sup>26</sup> the receiver knows this, is rendered uncomfortable, and quickly acts to pay back the gift or service, often symbolically. One must thank someone with the statement, *cảm ơn*, the meaning of which is to feel the moral debt arising from the acceptance of a gift or service. However, the

Vietnamese believe that 'talk is cheap', and only actions count. The worst position to be in is *có nợ ai*, or to owe a moral debt to somebody. Of course the people to whom one owes a continuing sense of on are one's parents. Parents go to great lengths to impress that fact upon their children. They also expect gratitude to follow them into the next life, through the constant veneration of their spirits after their deaths.

Because this system of debts and reciprocities is clearly understood by everybody, and because actions should be understood not at surface level but for their deeper implications, many Vietnamese women are continuously engaged in a game of manipulation and control through the acquisition of moral obligations. If a woman is wealthier than her friends, and can afford to buy them gifts which they are unable to reciprocate in kind (though they may ruin themselves trying), she may be able to gain power. But she must be careful, because that power is felt very clearly and keenly, and easily turns to resentment. The artful woman is subtle about the favours and gifts she bestows, always giving just enough more than she receives to keep the balance of *on* ever so slightly in her favour.

Traditional Vietnamese women seldom have male friends *per se* because they have very few social mechanisms for dealing with men on an equal footing. Men are always patrons or clients, cousins or brothers, fathers or sons, husbands or lovers. The psychological control of men and the off-setting of their formal powers still follows the basic Vietnamese principles of debts and balances, but involves special rules: unless there is a pronounced age-difference, a husband is controlled with the same strategies that a mother uses to control her son, while, age notwithstanding, a lover is usually controlled as a daughter controls her father.

Here I should like to refer to what I said above about moral versus metaphysical chastity. As was shown earlier, moral questions in Vietnamese society are enforced by constraints of shame rather than guilt. A Vietnamese woman can 'cheat' (in the Western sense) on her husband without regret as long as it is not known.<sup>27</sup> The following saying illustrates the point: 'Flirtatious with desire, I wore a wedding ring for protection; I lost my wedding ring, but my desire remains.'

Contrary to Western notions (enforced by guilt) of freedom before marriage but faithfulness afterwards, in societies where shame and the notion of virgin marriage<sup>28</sup> is operative, extramarital affairs outnumber premarital ones. If a Vietnamese woman takes a lover and can keep the fact secret (avoiding shame), she can maintain an upper hand. The Vietnamese man, while much less bound by problems of public shame for having a girlfriend, is more likely to be worried

about surrendering self-control. Loss of self-control, inability to control one's anger for example, for the Vietnamese male results in a major loss of 'face'. Hence Vietnamese men in positions of power tend to be very quiet, and anger is effectively shown by a lowering of the voice, not by raising it. A surrender to the act of love, though desired by the man, is to experience the moment of supreme loss of self-control. Vietnamese men thus tend to think of love-making in almost medical terms, concerned about the maintenance of their potency, psychological as well as physical. In this context it is easy to see why tales of female sexual insatiability also attach themselves to the Hà Đông lioness myth. Because it is important for a Vietnamese man to maintain control of himself, the Vietnamese woman's immediate control over her lover is therefore not moral but existential.

## **Reintegration and Reflections on Gender in Southeast Asia**

It is difficult to come up with more than a just few theoretical proposals about what is happening between men and women in Vietnamese society. Many of these notions may be so generally applicable to women everywhere as to be of no analytic value for the understanding of Southeast Asian women in particular, but I do have one idea that might be productive. Confucianism was a holistic system that tended to work to the benefit of male power. However, Vietnamese women, in the deep recesses of their nation's history, played an openly powerful role and countered this Confucian male power with strategies of their own which appear to be very old. One could go on to say that Vietnamese women are the main inheritors of indigenous traditions in Viet Nam, and that they employ this equally holistic tradition in gender struggles. My question is: Are we looking at a more generalised Southeast Asian pattern? In Malay society, for instance, Karim (1992) states that women are the guardians of an older indigenous tradition (*adat*), which expresses itself in the gender arena where they face Malay males armed with the patriarchy of Islam. And is not the *machismo* of Filipino males reinforced by the very Spanish traditions out of which the word *machismo* comes? In Thailand and Laos, where the Sangha is tightly controlled by men, does Indic Buddhism confer a power on males which is countered by women using strategies common to Shan and Chuang, Lowland Thai and Upland Lao, and other Tai peoples? What about the Burmese or the Khmer? In each case is the male tradition a classical, literate, imported tradition, buttressed by patriarchal terminology expressed in languages whose mysterious power partly derives from their exotic origins in India, China, Arabia or Iberia?



What we are talking about here is the layering of various cultural and ideological traditions upon one another to form a composite 'society' which operationalises these traditions in disparate ways, allowing women to find their own level of accommodation which is personally and socially satisfactory. The greatest threat to these gender accommodations is possibly the development of atomistic forces of Western science and technology in the region. The same can be said for the introduction of technological Western capitalism, as opposed to Marxist socialism which, owing to its very inefficiency (inefficiency due, in turn, to a misrepresentation of Marxism as 'holistic') has had little significant impact on traditional gender relations, other than to re-enforce them.

Southeast Asian women intellectuals, writers, artists, educators, and political activists who are working on the relationship between technological capitalism and gender relations cannot prepare themselves better against the onslaught of rapid social and economic change than by recognising the subtle complexities of male-female relationships in Southeast Asia. Obviously they cannot know where they will go unless they have some clearer idea where they have been.

## Notes

1. [as of 1989] Although I was trained as a philologist, most of the observations made in this chapter have been a result of my life experiences in Hanoi and my relationships with the Vietnamese for the last two decades.

*NOTA BENE* [2009] The foregoing article, a chapter, revised in format and very slightly with regard to certain wording, first appeared as Chapter 7 in *'Male' and 'Female' in Developing Southeast Asia*. [Oxford: Berg, 1995], as edited by Dr. Wazir Jahan Karim, then Director of the KANITA Women's Development Research Centre at the Universiti Sains Malaysia. It reflects the author's understanding as of the time when it was originally written [winter 1989] for presentation at a UNESCO workshop held in Penang in December of that year. It contains a great many speculations and generalizations. Some of those observations are ones the author would still maintain as essentially accurate twenty years later, but others may have become outdated [especially since the much broader opening of Viet Nam to the outside world in the last decade and a half and the resulting demise of "hard line" political control by the Communist Party of Viet Nam], overtaken by fact as well as the progress made in theory and analysis in the field of Women's Studies. Terms are used which may no longer be current in the literature. However, the hope is that the article may still be able to contribute to our understanding of Vietnamese society in general and to the challenges which faced and may still face many Vietnamese women, in particular those [the majority, however dwindling] who continue to live in a traditional village setting.

2. To the extent that Marxist ideology has intervened in daily life in Viet Nam, it has largely left family relationships intact and has primarily been concerned with the 'macro' society, though it is interesting to see that what is considered to be moral behaviour on the part of party cadres has many parallels with the proper behaviour of the Confucian gentleman.

3. While nuns are not uncommon in Viet Nam, and the tradition of elderly widows' shaving their heads and entering Buddhist orders is widespread, their influence on priesthood is difficult to detect. Somehow, perhaps by losing their legitimate sexual function, they have been effectively neutered and thus neutralised. Public ideology, frequently indistinguishable from religion in any case, includes political ideology, especially where there is a prescribed State system of thought, as in Viet Nam. Here again, men dominate. Female members of the National Assembly and of the Communist Central Committee do exist, but they represent an infinitesimal portion of the whole and exercise almost no real decision-making power. To my knowledge, the Politburo has never had a female member.

4. In one of the earliest extant Chinese paintings on silk, K'u K'ai-ohih's 'Admonitions to the Court Ladies' (British Museum, fourth century), the inscription on the scene in the bedchamber emphasises that this is the best place for the concubine to ask for what she wants.

5. There are even occasional reports of young women being married to already defunct husbands, probably for ceremonial purposes. Excesses of this order were most probably confined to the

more sinicised upper reaches of society. In general we can say that Confucian principles tended to be honoured as a direct function of the social rank of the family in question.

6. The Vietnamese have gained the reputation among their Southeast Asian neighbours of being a very tough group of people. In addition to a half-century of war, one reason for this may be that, especially in central and northern Viet Nam, life itself has often been much tougher than elsewhere in Southeast Asia. In looking back over French colonial statistics for the recent history of the country, I was particularly struck by a medical survey done in 1912 of the population of Hue, the imperial capital, which showed that 69.63 per cent of the population over forty years of age had tuberculosis. In addition, a pre-Second World War economic survey of the Tonkinese peasantry showed that the average fanner had a wage equivalent to only one-quarter of the income of the average Moroccan farmer (and French statisticians thought of Morocco as a typical example of colonial poverty).

In point of fact, a simple division of farm revenues by the known population yielded a figure below what was considered to be subsistence level, and the only conclusion one could draw was that the average peasant was literally dying of hunger.

7. As opposed to Chinese-run shops (many Chinese merchants have fled the country).

8. Though they are more often small merchants, it is interesting that supposedly the richest private capitalist in Viet Nam today is a woman, the owner of a food-processing combine in the south, Mrs. Nguyễn thị Thi.

9. Whether this verse originated as a folksong or is from the pen of Tú Xương (circa 1890) I am not clear, but it admirably illustrates the point. Songs and sayings cited hereinafter are to be found in Vũ Ngọc Phan, Hanoi, 1978.

10. To give a woman a piece of fine jewellery in Vietnamese tradition is to help confirm her independence as a human being, and for a mother to hand over a piece of her jewellery to her daughter is a universally understood gesture, for which the sub-text is 'may this protect you from misery'.

11. Though Confucian tradition permits the husband to take lesser wives (theoretically to be chosen for him by the first wife), economic realities (and relatively innocuous modern laws) usually force him to content himself with one at a time.

12. In most areas of Viet Nam, women are also employed in heavy field labour. This tendency increased during the war, when men were at the front, and continued in view of the number of working-aged males who were killed or injured. According to a colleague, Christine Pelzer-White, up to 80 per cent of the field work in an area studied by her was carried out by women (personal communication).

13. Fishman shows that young Vietnamese mothers are often ignorant of proper feeding patterns when isolated from their own mothers, as often occurs during periods of forced migration.

14. Because the eldest daughter has usually been given the responsibility for much child-rearing, she is often one of the last to marry, particularly if her mother is unwell and there are still siblings to tend. Another reason for her to worry is that, while marrying the eldest son may lead to fortune for the young bride (this is not a foregone conclusion, since Vietnamese eldest sons also tend to be terribly spoiled), young Vietnamese men may be afraid to marry an eldest daughter. Throughout his life, the husband of an eldest daughter can expect to be pestered, directly or indirectly; but his younger in-laws consider his wife to be a substitute mother and therefore obliged to be helpful to them; in Southern Chinese families, where the same pattern occurs, this is known as the 'jie-fu' syndrome.

15. In this connection, I find it interesting that, because the vocative system of the Vietnamese language is largely devoid of pronouns (instead, it uses static kinship terms) husband and wife enjoy a fictive incest: the husband speaking to his wife uses the same terms he has always used towards his real younger sisters, referring to himself as 'older brother' (*anh*) and calling his wife 'little sister' (*em*).

16. One is especially struck by the use of the phrase *nhà tôi* (my home) in this folk song, as if to say that her real home is where her mother is and not where her husband is.

17. Basically the Red River area of today's northern Vietnam, sometimes called Ton(g)kin(g), and the coastal littoral down to the region of modern Huế.

18. Not all aspects of traditional Chinese civilisation are male-centred, but those which emphasise the importance of female roles, outside the Confucian ethic, were probably not implanted in Viet Nam by the primarily male immigrant Chinese population. I should add that I believe the patriarchal aspects of Confucianism were not new to Confucius, but were incorporated into Confucianism on the basis of the pre-existing traditions. Confucianism in many ways represents a codification of some of these pre-existing ideas, much as Islam contains the codification of certain pre-sixth century Arabic tribal traditions. The mass of Chinese immigrant males in Viet Nam were obviously not well-read Confucian scholars.

19. Young couples in Hanoi, even married couples, face great difficulty in finding a place for private encounters. The evening stroller through the city's lakeside public parks must step carefully to avoid interrupting lovers hard at work.

20. Its enemies risk becoming legion. The most common exaggeration of this state of mind is a tendency towards paranoia, a condition frequently attributed to the behaviour of a Vietnamese woman by Westerner interlocutors, who can only explain the woman's actions by supposing that she is mentally deranged. The problem is that what is normal in one culture is abnormal in another. The model constructed in the woman's inner world, her only solace, becomes the explanation of the real world she must deal with, and since Vietnamese culture has always filled the language of interpersonal relations with layers upon layers of innuendo, indirect criticism, and dissimulation, it is only prudent for her to think that any word or deed whose aim is not perfectly clear to her is probably a threat.

21. While I have not been able to look at the question closely in the case of Vietnamese women, because the mass media industry of manufacturing public idols is not yet developed in the country, I suspect that the dream lover has many feminine qualities, and 'he' may even be of indeterminate sex in previously heavily Confucianised cultures. I find it interesting to contemplate the androgynous images that are projected by Tokyo pop singers (or Michael Jackson, for that matter) and the fascination that many young Japanese girls have with Takarazuka male impersonators and female television wrestlers.

22. There is little overt female power in public ideological institutions in Viet Nam. The Catholic priest is male, celibate, and arbiter of the public life of his co-religionists. Catholic priests led the mass exodus from northern Viet Nam after the Geneva Accords of 1954 - whole villages, men, women, and children, pulled up stakes and left for the South on the word of their village priest. The Buddhist priest, far more numerous, is equally male and celibate, though his political influence has varied.

23. The Vietnamese claim this club now has branches in most countries of the world.

24. The very idea of being able to get ahead by striving is anathema to sophisticated Buddhist thinkers; but popular Buddhism, abetted by ignorant and (metaphysically) corrupt monks relies heavily on strategies for gaining merit in this world to be cashed in the next world (or sooner, if at all possible).

25. The common Asian notion that it is shameful to come empty-handed is one which is often misinterpreted in the West, especially in North European Protestant societies, where material gifts are usually reserved for special occasions. In Western societies this emphasis on a multitude of small gifts is felt somehow to be materialistic and it is seldom reciprocated. The Asian ends up feeling scomed and unappreciated by the Westerner (who he suspects 'is all talk and no action'), while the Westerner feels that the Asian is trying to 'buy' his affections.

26. The greatest *ơn* is gained from self-sacrifice. Thus in military graveyards across the nation there are markers inscribed *Tổ Quốc Ghi Ơn* (the Fatherland Inscribe its Moral Debt). The Japanese, who have a similar concept of *恩*, acknowledge the origin of the word as Chinese. However Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang (personal communication, 1995), a specialist in Vietnamese folklore and literature, states “*ơn* is an authentic colloquial Vietnamese word. It is not of Chinese origin and cannot be transcribed in Chinese script. Formerly it was transcribed in *chữ nôm* (a demotic script created around the 13th century wherein two Chinese characters are combined to represent a Vietnamese word as it was spoken); from the 19th century it has been represented as *ơn* in *quốc ngữ* (or national script which makes use of the alphabet with added diacritics to mark the tones). The same notion was referred to by the Confucian scholar gentry as *ân*, a Sino-Vietnamese word, or a Chinese word/character pronounced the Vietnamese way. Thus *ân*, is of Chinese origin, but *ơn* is not.”

This author would beg to differ: a number lexical items of Chinese origin were imported into the Vietnamese vocabulary on more than one occasion (e.g., 外 was imported first as *ngoài* [now considered to be colloquial Vietnamese] and later on again as *ngoại* [now found in compounds or considered to be classical usage when employed alone]). The case of *ơn* / *ân* is precisely the

same, where *on* is the earlier (probably pre-tenth century and now considered to be authentic colloquial Vietnamese) and *ân* is the later (probably post-tenth century and now considered to be Sino-Vietnamese classical) borrowing. As is the case with *ngoài* and *ngoại* and other such multiple lexical imports, *on* and *ân* are usually represented by the same character in both colloquial and classical texts.

27. Vietnamese men, on the whole, though every bit as amorous as their Western counterparts, know the rule of the game and have less of a tendency to brag publicly about their conquests.

28. Premarital intercourse is quite common in Vietnamese villages; but there is an obligation on the man's part to marry the girl he has deflowered, and she reminds him of the fact in the strongest possible terms.

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