



Southeast Asian Modernities

Angelica Wehrli

Vanishing Rice Fields

The Quest for Wealth and Belief in (Post-)Socialist Vietnam



LIT

Angelica Laura Lucia Wehrli

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*To my beloved grandmother,
who died while I was conducting exploratory field research
(1913-2004)*

Contents

List of Illustrations	vi
Acknowledgements	1
Chapter One: Introduction	6
A preliminary remark with respect to the household, the <i>hộ</i> and the <i>hộ khẩu</i>	8
Research interest and goal of the habilitation	8
The limitations of this habilitation	10
Chapter Two: Understanding the “Rising Dragon”	12
Reviewing past and recent social anthropological research conducted in the Red River Delta	12
<i>Đổi mới</i> – The process of renovation: “Modernizing” and industrializing Vietnam	14
The current state of literature	17
A prevalent research gap	18
Contribution and significance of my research	20
Chapter Three: Major Locations of Field Research	22
The “Manchester of Indochina”: Nam Định City’s famous past . . .	23
Nam Định City – the future center of the South Red River Delta . .	24
Some of the first research conducted in the urban Red River Delta after <i>Đổi mới</i>	29
Challenges: The “CIA” and living in a Vietnamese <i>hộ</i>	32
Hà Nội: My second field research locale	34

Contents

Chapter Four: The Research Design	36
Methods of data collection	36
The sample of longitudinal and multi-sited research	38
The follow-up study of 2010	42
Methods of data analysis	44
On bits and bytes	44
A personal note	46
Chapter Five: On the Household, the <i>Hộ</i> and the <i>Hộ Khẩu</i>.	
The Central Research Concepts	48
On the use of the household in social anthropology	48
A turning point in <i>household studies</i>	51
Family or household?	55
The <i>hộ khẩu</i> : The Vietnamese registration system of the household	56
Challenging aspects of the <i>hộ</i> and the household concept	58
The theoretical and methodological contribution of the conceptual use of the household, in relation to the <i>hộ</i> , for social anthropology	60
Further relevant research concepts for this study: “gender” and “sex”, “norms” and “values”, “modernity” and “tradition”	64
Chapter Six: The Quest for Wealth in (Post-)Socialist Northern Vietnam	68
On the form and the economic activities of the <i>hộ</i> : Empirical results for the first research question	69
State promotion of self-employment and the “new heroes of the nation”	70
Unemployment, retirement and the category of “independent work” (“ <i>làm nghề tự do</i> ”)	71
Jobs in the formal and informal sectors	73

Contents

Case example of Thảo N.: The growth of an import-oriented <i>hộ</i> business.	77
Case example of Lán N.: Surviving thanks to the selling of vegetables	78
Case example of Quang N.: A worker in a beer factory and his small “zoo”	79
Case example of Tuấn N.: Combining rural and urban lifestyles . .	81
On the gap between salary and income: “incentives”, “stimulations” and “envelopes”	83
The most powerful position with respect to decision-making processes in the <i>hộ</i>	86
Case examples.	88
Conclusion	89
A personal note	92
The quest for wealth and the quest for belief	92
Chapter Seven: The Quest for Belief in (Post-)Socialist Northern Vietnam	95
Gender and state power in the pre- and post- <i>Đổi mới</i> eras	96
Confucianism and ancestor worship: emic beliefs that influence “norms” and “values”	99
Marriage and children as an integral part of “natural desires”	104
Chapter Eight: Controversial Gender Practices in (Post-)Socialist Vietnam: The Case of Female Feticide	106
“Lucky numbers” (“ <i>Số may mắn</i> ”)	108
Female feticide in global and local contexts	110
The current academic debate on female feticide	113
Data from field research: “tradition”, kinship, social networks and social pressure	114
Is female feticide a post- <i>Đổi mới</i> phenomenon?	119

Contents

The taboo of abortion and female feticide	121
“The ideal and happy family” between obligations and sanctions .	123
“Lucky numbers” (“ <i>Số may mắn</i> ”): Games and jokes that reinforce the rules	125
Mechanisms that reproduce inequalities	127
Conclusion	131
Chapter Nine: The Relevance of the Entrepreneurs	136
The refusal of female feticide: the entrepreneurs	139
Being Catholic and practicing ancestor worship	141
Why do some entrepreneurs refuse female feticide?	143
Results and analysis	147
Conclusion	149
Chapter Ten: Conclusion	154
The relevance of the position of actors within a given social field .	155
Data, methods and theories	156
The <i>hộ</i> as the ethnographic unit	157
The quest for wealth	157
The quest for belief	159
Female feticide as a mirror of the socio-political relationships between genders	160
The relevance of entrepreneurs: the link between wealth and belief	161
Outlook	164
Appendix One	168
Abbreviations for religious affiliation(s)	168
Semi-structured interviews with primary interviewees of each participating <i>hộ</i> in Nam Định City in 2006 (1-48)	168

Contents

Appendix Two	184
Semi-structured interviews conducted in 2010 in Nam Định City with primary interviewees of twelve <i>hộ</i> from the above sample . . .	184
Appendix Three	190
Table from the “Municipal Statistical Office of Nam Định City” . .	190
References	193
Internet-Sources	208

List of Illustrations

Map 1: Vietnam and its neighboring countries.	22
Map 2: Nam Định City in the Red River Delta.	24
Map 3: Administrative division of Nam Định City in 2006.	31
Table 1: Selection criteria for identifying the <i>hộ</i>	40
Table 2: Year, interview style and place of the recorded interviews. . . .	43
Table 3: Sex ratio at birth by socioeconomic region.	111
Table 4: Sex ratio at birth by region and year.	111
Diagram 1: Income-generating activities of the <i>hộ</i> researched in Nam Định City between 2005 and 2006.	75
Diagram 2: Income strata and wards of the <i>hộ</i> researched in Nam Định City between 2005 and 2006.	85
Diagram 3: Population pyramid of Vietnam.	108
Decision Tree 1: Analysis of the <i>hộ</i> demography of the 48 <i>hộ</i> researched in Nam Định City between 2005 and 2010.	144
Photograph 1: Rice fields (Nam Định City, October 2010).	27
Photograph 2: Billboard with drawing of a master plan for urbanizing Nam Định City (Nam Định City, October 2010)	27
Photograph 3: Construction work in progress (Trần Quang Khải, Nam Định City, October 2010)	28
Photograph 4: “Urbanity” in the Trần Quang Khải ward (Nam Định City, July 2006).	28
Photographs 5 and 6: The Thống Nhất ward: a new urban area (Nam Định City, October 2010)	29
Photograph 7: Photo composition in the <i>hộ</i> of Dũng N. (Nam Định City, October 2010).	45
Photograph 8: A multi-generational <i>hộ</i> (case example 46).	137

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After having completed this year of research, I resumed my teaching and research position at the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Berne. Fascinated by the experience of undertaking field research, I conducted a follow-up study in Havana for my PhD on Cuba. In the next two years, I wrote up my PhD, which I successfully defended in 2009 at the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Berne.

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After this productive and inspiring time at UCLA, I published some book chapters and resumed teaching and researching at the Institute of Social Anthropology at the University of Lucerne. Thanks to a “SpeedUp” sabbatical for researchers, which was financed by the University of Lucerne, I was freed from teaching and had time to analyze my vast sets of data material and to focus on writing during a five-month period in 2014. Between 2014 and 2016, the “Holcim Foundation for the Advancement of Scientific Research” generously financed the writing of this habilitation. These two years were decisive for the successful implementation and submission of the habilitation to my main reviewer and the two external reviewers.

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Chapter One: Introduction

After having left behind the turmoil of Hà Nội, the landscape starts to widen as one continues to drive on the highway and the deep green color of rice fields appears. Almost always a skein of fog and humidity seems to rest beyond the rice fields. The landscape resembles the “classic impression” of Vietnam often portrayed on tourist advertisements. As one approaches Nam Định City, the scattered small houses and the few peasants working in the fields of the Red River Delta make way for the small but up to three-storey houses that are built side by side facing the road (*Field note, May 2004*).

By 2005, more than a year later after this entry in my field notebook, the landscape was starting to change and the first rice fields were being transformed into construction sites. The pace of change accelerated and whenever I moved back and forth between Nam Định City and Hà Nội in the following months, one by one, the parcels of paddy disappeared, leaving behind neglected acres thereafter covered with plastic and other waste materials before they took on a distinct “urban form”. Newly erected houses and businesses would appear in large construction sites or behind carefully arranged walls hidden from the gaze of curious observers. The gradual transformation of the landscape adjacent to the approximately ninety-kilometer road could be well observed thanks to two government buildings of more than eight floors. They looked like milestones along the seemingly endless stretches of rice fields. Despite these partial changes, the landscape between Hà Nội and Nam Định City echoed itself in an almost meditative manner.

Apart from some shops located along the road and the regular appearance of Catholic church spires surrounded by scattered houses, the rice fields seemed to form a green ocean whose horizon could be seen for tens of kilometers, free of the seasonal humidity or smog. Here and there, conical hats popped up in the midst of the rice fields before they were swallowed again by the narrowly planted green crops. The deep green was only occasionally interrupted by peasants working in the field, unloading material or following their oxen.

During my last visit in 2010, apart from the two high-rise government buildings, the landscape did not correspond to my memories. The traffic on the densely crowded and in the meantime enlarged street was quicker. Unlike in the past, cars were competing for space with motorbikes, and most strikingly, almost all the rice fields were gone.

The title of this study *Vanishing Rice Fields: The Quest for Wealth and Belief in (Post-)Socialist Vietnam* stands as a symbol for the ongoing processes of “modernization” and transformation occurring in this former agrarian country. These changes are taking place on multiple levels. The all-important first level is the rapid urbanization of this formerly rural and agrarian country. The second level is Vietnam’s political transformation towards a (post-)socialist system – namely a “market economy with socialist direction” (*Đổi mới*). The third level of change is economic, as the former centrally planned economy gives way to “market-driven, household-based production” (Pettus 2003). Last but not least, the fourth level is that of beliefs: norms and values are re-evaluated, altered, subverted and in some cases restored. This last level of changes can be understood within the broad domain of ideological and religious questions, including the question of “religious freedom” and changes within the household configurations, including gender- and age-related rights and duties (see Chapters Eight and Nine). In this research I examine the third and fourth levels by focusing my questions on wealth and beliefs.

The overall goal of this study will be to demonstrate how the quest for wealth and belief manifests itself at the beginning of the twenty-first century in northern Vietnam. Thereby, I will investigate how wealth is pursued by household members and highlight, among others, the emergence of entrepreneurs within the rapidly growing economic sector. The quest for belief, in contrast, will become evident from the various decision-making processes that lay the ground for household building.

Having visited Vietnam for the first time in 1997, I was impressed by the pace of development and the apparent changes when I visited again in 2004; the changes seemed even more drastic in 2010. The contrast between the former way of life and the actual hustle and bustle in urban Vietnam drew my attention. Despite the ongoing changes in every corner, continuity remains equally observable. The sometimes apparent contradictions, the

merging of “two worlds”, fascinated me and led to my in-depth inquiry into these processes. One key factor in these changes is access to roads, which is highly prized as the ground floor of most of the houses contains a shop or restaurant that needs to attract customers. Traditionally, the household members live, eat and sleep on the upper floors. The way houses are used as both business and living space has not changed much in the past decades, but I wondered about the effects of all the ongoing changes on household composition.

A preliminary remark with respect to the household, the *hộ* and the *hộ khẩu*

In Vietnamese, the household corresponds to the *hộ* or *hộ gia đình*. As in other socialist countries, a household registration system was and/or remains common. This system is called *hộ khẩu* in Vietnam. Whenever I speak specifically about the Vietnamese household in this study, I will apply the Vietnamese term *hộ*. If the English term “household” is used, it refers to the general concept of the household as used in academia (see Chapter Five for a detailed analysis). The reason for using both the Vietnamese and the English terms consists in highlighting the specificities and differences between the Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese perception of the household (e.g. the inclusion of ancestors as “*hộ* members” or the specific socio-economic and moral rights and duties held by *hộ* members).

I will refrain from adding the English plural “s” to this Vietnamese noun, although I will occasionally indicate the possessive by using “s” preceded by an apostrophe. Thereby, I will follow the practice of other Asianists.

Research interest and goal of the habilitation

The overall goal of this habilitation project consists in analyzing *hộ* (household) biographies in order to track social changes that occur in the process of “transition” from socialism to (post)socialism. To reach this goal, I will address two specific research questions that together make possible a multifaceted analysis of the embeddedness (Granovetter 1985) of the Vietnamese

hộ in its social, economic and ideological contexts.¹ It will become clear how the quest for wealth and belief are interdependent in today's Vietnam. My two main research questions include, *first*, my analysis of the form of the *hộ* (household) in Vietnam and its economic activities. *Second*, I will investigate the reasons for female feticide, or the abortion of female fetuses. My first research question entails the following sub-questions: How did the form of the *hộ* change before and after the onset of the *Đổi mới* processes that were officially launched in 1986 by the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Vietnamese state? Do members of the *hộ* pool their incomes? Is it common to work one job or to have multiple kinds of employment to increase the standard of living for oneself and those of the other members of the *hộ*? I will also investigate who has the most powerful position with respect to decision-making processes in the *hộ*. My second research question on female feticide inquires into whether female feticide is a post-*Đổi mới* phenomenon, and on what factors the choice to undertake female feticide depends. The first set of research questions will be addressed in the first part of this research, which focuses on the quest for wealth, and the second set of research questions will be scrutinized in the second part of this study, which focuses on the quest for belief.

The *hộ* links the individual and society and is a promising research concept for understanding complex, contemporary societies. My analysis of my first set of research questions will foster an understanding of why the household remains of central importance in Vietnamese society despite the ongoing changes both in society and to the *hộ*. My second research question theoretically contributes to the ongoing debate about gender-related “norms” and “values” (e.g. Pettus 2003; Tran Thi Que 1995: 11-129) by suggesting that these “norms” and “values” are defined according to the position of an actor within the “social field” as conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu. In order to understand how “norms” and “values” are being challenged, one has to consider that Confucianism still structures society to this

¹ Whenever I asked questions about economic aspects of the *hộ*, I became aware of the interconnectedness of the economic with the other dimensions. A *hộ* member's decision about whether to accept a job is not grounded in “rational choice theory” alone. These decisions are almost never finalized based on individual preference but take into consideration the views of influential members of the *hộ* (see Chapter Five).

day because it places virtually every member of society into a web of mutual rights and duties (see e.g. Pham Van Bich 1999; Wehrli 2011).

My findings about what I call the “position of actors within a given social field” will be of special relevance for social anthropology in particular and for the social sciences in general. This serves as a valuable concept that explains differences, ambiguities and similarities in contemporary Vietnamese society. I would like to stress that the categories that I discuss – such as society, the household and beliefs – are not to be taken for granted but are to be understood as being in dynamic interaction with one another. My research questions reference a vast sample of empirical data that I collected over a period of fifteen months between 2004 and 2010 in the Red River Delta in northern Vietnam.² My aim is to compare my findings in two cities, namely Nam Định and Hà Nội, and in wards within these cities that have varying socioeconomic characteristics such as different income levels and job opportunities (see Chapter Four). In Nam Định City and Hà Nội, interviews gave me detailed insights into the complex interplay of “norms” along economic, social, cultural and religious dimensions. Some of the interviewees wished that anonymity be guaranteed. For this reason, all names mentioned hereafter are pseudonyms.

The limitations of this habilitation

Present-day Vietnam did not exist until the end of the Trịnh Nguyễn War (1627-1673). Under French colonialism (1885-1953), Vietnam was administratively divided into three provinces: the protectorates of Tonkin (present-day northern Vietnam) and Annam (present-day central Vietnam), and the directly ruled colony of Cochinchina (present-day southern Vietnam). Beginning in 1954 with the assignment of the peace agreement in Geneva and lasting until 1975, Vietnam was divided into North and South Vietnam; the South was anti-communist and the North followed the communist path of Hồ Chí Minh. After the North won the war, the regions were

² In 2006 I also conducted field research for my PhD in Cuba. During the following three years, I focused on the completion of various articles (Wehrli 2010, 2008, 2007) and my successful PhD defense in 2009 in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Berne (Wehrli 2009). Afterwards, I resumed my research on Vietnam.

reunited and have ever since jointly represented the state of Vietnam. These historic occurrences explain why cultural, linguistic and economic differences persist to this day.

For this reason the data mentioned in this research refer to northern Vietnam and not to Vietnam in general. In addition the data focus exclusively on the ethnic *Kinh* (*người Việt* or *người Kinh*) who are the majority ethnic group that has become synonymous with being Vietnamese. Local minorities such as the Hmong are not included in the research. As such, the field data presented here do not claim to be representative of the whole country, nor even of northern Vietnam, but rather provide comparisons and highlight remarkable differences between social fields. In this sense, and by including macro-economic data, this research contributes to current academic debates prevailing in social anthropology, (post)socialist studies and Vietnamese and Southeast Asian studies.

Chapter Two: Understanding the “Rising Dragon”³

In order to understand the current socio-economic and political situation in Vietnam, this chapter will provide an overview of contemporary Vietnamese society. I will discuss past and recent social anthropological research on Vietnam, especially in the Red River Delta in northern Vietnam where I carried out my field research. Then, I will discuss the most relevant socio-economic and political milestones that affected Vietnam in the past four decades. To conclude, I will analyze the latest academic literature and outline this habilitation’s contribution and significance.

In order to acquire a thorough understanding of the situation in today’s northern Vietnam and especially in the researched cities of Hà Nội and Nam Định, a chronological approach is useful and will serve as the principle for the following chapter. As the literature on history or on effects of *Đổi mới* is considerable,⁴ I will predominantly focus on social anthropological research and make corresponding references.

Reviewing past and recent social anthropological research conducted in the Red River Delta

The period prior to the arrival of the French, who began their conquest of Vietnam in 1858, “was characterized by class-structured, kinship-centred, and male-oriented hierarchy” (Le Thi Van Hue 2004: 38). Regarding gender relationships it is interesting to note that the general situation of women did not change during the French occupation. Concerning labor, women had, for example, access to wage labor as they were hired by the French to construct dykes. But as a matter of principle. they were paid less than men

³ The metaphor of the “rising dragon” is well known through the publication of investigative journalist Hayton’s *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* (Hayton 2010).

⁴ General introductions to Vietnam’s history can be found in Hoang Van Chi (1964), Honey (1963; 1962), Nguyen Khac Kham (1960). Recent studies by historians often combine an analysis of historic-economic developments and the state-owned production (e.g. Norlund et al. 1995). Various studies investigate agricultural aspects (e.g. Le Cao Doan 1995).

(Le Thi Van Hue 2004: 47). Due to the colonial influence and the presence of the French, numerous studies have been conducted by French social anthropologists and Vietnamese scientists who have been trained in France. Taking into consideration the earliest studies⁵ and the literature on kinship, patrilocal residence emerges as the main structural element of social relations [e.g. Cadière (1930; 1915); Gourou (1936); Phan Ke Binh (1980), Phan Ti Dac (1966: 18-24)]. This fits into the Confucian belief system according to which daughters have to obey their fathers, wives their husbands, and widows their oldest sons. Le Thi Van Hue points out that along with these persuasions, women and girls did not have rights to participate in any discussion of village affairs or to vote in village affairs. As a result, they were dependent on the registered male members of the family despite their significant labor contribution (2004: 38-39). During the Land Reform⁶ and the collectivisation period, family and kinship ties came under severe strains, partly as a result of Party policies to introduce “new family values” (Kleinen 1999: 150, Nguyen Khac Vien 1970).⁷ Gendered roles and duties started to change with the statement of the Indochinese Communist Party that recognized women as the “slaves of slaves”. Women were identified as the most exploited members of an oppressed society, and their emancipation was explicitly linked to the Vietnamese people’s freedom from feudal and capitalist rule (Marr 1981: 1920-1945).⁸ The Vietnam–U. S. war – that involved the absence of most men in order to fight – led to a fundamental change in the roles and status of women. Traditional social relationships were replaced by new “values”, and even after the war had ended, “women

⁵ The most prominent Vietnamese who lived in France is Hồ Chí Minh, formerly known under the alias Nguyen Ai Quoc.

⁶ The Vietnamese author Hoang Van Chi pays particular attention to “the technique Land Reform”; this was the way used by the Vietnamese Communist leaders to transform an anti-colonialist struggle into one, directed towards the establishment of a communist regime (Hoang Van Chi 1964).

⁷ Kerkvliet (1995: 68-69) as well as Dang Phong and Beresford (1998) are critically analysing the cooperative agriculture.

⁸ A detailed discussion, including land rights, tax system and political control in the Red River Delta, is elaborated by Cadière (1915); Gourou (1936); Pham Thi Dac (1966: 24-54); Papin (1996).

did not return to their subordinate pattern as in the past” (Le Thi Van Hue 2004: 103, see also Chapter Eight).

The social anthropologist Kleinen states that before the onset of *Đổi mới* only a handful of social scientists conducted field studies of a more anthropological type during the First and Second Indochina Wars (1946-1975), while virtually nothing was written in the decade that followed (Kleinen 1999: 8). Vietnamese scholars seem to have had other priorities as available publications in this period remain scant. The first – and in the opinion of some authors (e.g. Kleinen 1999: 4) the best – example of modern ethnographic fieldwork in Vietnam is Hickey’s study, which focuses exclusively on the Mekong Delta (1964). Another at least equally famous study was conducted by the French social anthropologist Condominas (1957), who researched the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Traditionally, one of the main topics of social anthropological research was on ethnic minorities and on people living in remote communities. Inspiring articles from Vietnamese scholars who are doing research about ethnic minorities in Vietnam can be found in the Vietnamese ‘*Anthropology Review*’ or in ‘*Vietnam Social Sciences*’.

***Đổi mới* – The process of renovation: “Modernizing” and industrializing Vietnam**

The Vietnamese society is currently undergoing a radical change. From a rural society in which before *Đổi mới* about eighty percent of the population was living in the countryside, the country is now transforming into an urban society (see Chapter Two). The launching of *Đổi mới*, the process of renovation by the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Vietnamese government in 1986, has not only been a turning point in the history of Vietnam but equally in the amount of scientific publications or research concerning Vietnam (see below).

The shift from the former centrally planned economy to a “market economy with socialist direction” implies many outstanding socio-economic changes. The reforms of *Đổi mới* shaped the face of Vietnam as a whole and led to scepticism on the one hand and enthusiasm on the other hand.⁹

⁹ During my research I repeatedly heard the statement from people from diverse

Consequences due to the onset of *Đổi mới* are numerous and the subject of different studies. Traditionally, Vietnam was an agrarian country. However, as the reforms of *Đổi mới* showed important results by 1990, the country became one of the largest rice exporters after years of reliance (Le Cao Doan 1995: 109-125). Some changes due to *Đổi mới* are still being debated¹⁰ while others directly influence the life of the Vietnamese people, such as the resulting foreign direct investment (e.g. Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa 2004), the joining of Vietnam to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995, and the country’s incorporation into the global economy. Nevertheless, one has to bear in mind that the impact of the transitory phase and the related renewing do not have the same consequences on all individual lives. Of major importance are differences between urban and rural areas and between northern and southern Vietnam. The latter can be explained due to diverse socio-historic developments.

As a market-driven, household-based production became the norm, the importance of the family to the “wealth of the nation” significantly increased.¹¹ This led to granting legal status to private and family enterprises, to a commercializing of the state sector as well as to a liberating of agricultural cooperatives from state control. Vylder (1995) as well as Vu Tuấn Anh (1995) examine the main trends of renovation in Vietnam and emphasize the inefficiency of Vietnam’s economy before the initiation of reform in 1979. In the decades prior to *Đổi mới*, a correlation between the dimension of a cooperative and its productivity existed: the larger the cooperative, the less productive it was and the less income cooperative members earned (Le Thi Van Hue 2004: 103).

The “processes of renovation” (*Đổi mới*), which since 1986 are moving the former agrarian state towards “modernity”¹², have led to a rapid

backgrounds, political convictions, age, and gender “in the end the American won the war because capitalism is now everywhere” (Personal communication 2004-10).

¹⁰ Pettus (2003), for example, analyses effects of *Đổi mới* in relation to new role models and gender relationships.

¹¹ Tran Thi Van and Anh Manh Huan Nguyen point to the contract ten “that recognizes the household as an independent economic unit” and led to economic differentiation amongst households (1995: 204).

¹² I am well aware of the problematic dichotomy between “modern” versus “traditional” and resulting implications thereof [see e.g. Latour 1993 (1991); Miller 1994; Rabi-

urbanization and industrialization. The predicted numbers of increase do vary from study to study, but no one doubts that there will be a significant increase in the urban population within the next few decades. Thus, reality is characterized on the one hand by a process of transition towards urbanity, and on the other hand by an increase in the population. The Vietnamese government is positive about the value of urbanization as it is considered to be in close connection with industrializing and “modernizing” the country, which is perceived as a means to prevent poverty. In contrast to states which try to prevent urbanization, the Vietnamese government actively encourages it, which becomes manifest with respect to labor, migration and a variety of “urban” projects that aim at upgrading former middle or small sized cities, like Nam Định, one of my field research locales. Thus, these ongoing processes of urbanization considerably are transforming the former agrarian country into an “urban” one and predominantly targeting the inhabitants of medium-sized cities.

The transforming of the landscape is clearly motivated by the quest for wealth, which in turn is linked with new emerging “values”, “norms” and beliefs. How this quest is being pursued, attempted or achieved will be explored in the subsequent chapters. In accordance with the goal of the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese Communist Party to “modernize” the country, industrialization and urbanization are being favored. This also becomes apparent in the economic structure of the country because the agricultural sector that also comprises forestry and fishery has steadily shrunk and represented only twenty-one percent in 2005, compared to twenty-five percent in 2000 (Cục Thống Ke Tỉnh Nam Định, Nam Định Statistical Office 2006: 202). In contrast to this development, the industrial sector that also encompasses construction increased, whereas the tertiary sector of services remained relatively stable and amounted to about thirty-eight percent over the course of these years. Despite this GDP composition by sector, about half of the labor force still works in agriculture (fifty-four percent in

now 1989] – for example, between “classic” sociological positions such as Weber’s [2002 (1921)] or Eisenstadt’s in his earlier work (e.g. 1973, 1966), and culturalistic approaches and understandings of “modernity” as discussed by Appadurai [2008 (1997)] or in Eisenstadt’s later work (e.g. 2003, 2000). At the end of Chapter Five, I will discuss the use of “modern” and “traditional” within this research.

2009), followed by about twenty-six percent in services and 20 percent in industries and construction (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2010b). A consensus prevails that since the mid-1980s, Vietnam’s growth rate has been among the highest worldwide. Since then, the GDP growth rate has been “around 7.5 percent *per year* and foreign trade has expanded at the rate of nearly 20 percent *per year*” (Chapponière and Cling 2009: 109).

The current state of literature

Sanjek (1990) points out that the “Cold War” interrupted fieldwork by Western anthropologists in socialist cities in several parts of the world. Due to the “Cold War”, foreigners could hardly enter the country and much less conduct research. In addition the local disastrous situation and the priority of rebuilding the nation after decades of war hindered local scientists to undertake research. In Vietnam the general opening of the state towards its neighbors and the world as well as the resumption of diplomatic relationships simplified visits to the country in the last decades. This went hand in hand with a revival of scientific research about Vietnam.

Several studies try to find answers in order to achieve a better understanding of the formerly centrally planned system and the one that is now emerging in Vietnam. This has opened the field for political scientists and economists who question former socialist societies that by means of reforms open themselves to a market economy and divergent ideas of capitalism and privatization [see e.g. Dang Phong and Beresford (1998), Fforde and de Vylder (1996), Thayer (1995), Vasavakul (1996)]. Fforde and de Vylder (1996) state that in Vietnam, many reforms are rather the process of grassroots-level decisions and the result of a slow, “step-by-step” implementation, thereby representing an advantage compared to other (post)socialist countries – such as the East-European Socialist countries – where reforms were implemented by means of a “shock therapy” to achieve an immediate transition to market economy. In general the research interest these days is considerable and manifests itself in various conferences and publications which aim to understand political, economic, historic, social, and cultural aspects of today’s Vietnamese society. In addition the UN, the World Bank, international- and nongovernmental organizations working in

Vietnam as well as the Vietnamese government provide a bulk of statistic material.¹³

With respect to social anthropologists who research (post)socialist countries in general, and Vietnam in particular, it is evident that close attention was paid to property rights and privatization (e.g. Dunn 2004), former land allocation processes (e.g. Verdery and Humphrey 2004) or the situation of women within rural areas (e.g. Gammeltoft 1999), to name but a few. Gammeltoft (1999) investigates the everyday life of women¹⁴ by paying close attention to their concept of body, health, and family planning, all of which are equally shaped by Confucian ideals. The Confucian influence also becomes evident in the study of Pham Van Bich (1999), which provides insights into changes from the “traditional” Vietnamese family up to today.

A prevalent research gap

Considering studies conducted in both the Red River Delta and in northern Vietnam, it becomes evident that research on communities or in rural areas continues to remain of major interest [e.g. Gironde (2004), Kerkvliet (1995), Kleinen (1999), Liljeström et al. (eds.) (1995), Hy Van Luong (1992), Popkin (1979), Rambo (1973), Woodside (1989)]. Investigation in urban areas is still the exception and focuses mainly on the two largest Vietnamese cities, Hồ Chí Minh City and Hà Nội [e.g. Drummond (2003:170–88), Harms (2009), Nguyen Laurence (2004: 257–67) or Wust (2004: 229–56)]. Research on and in Nam Định City is scant. To my knowledge only three researchers were allowed to conduct research in Nam Định City: the historian and social anthropologist Irene Norlund (1991), Vu Can, who interviewed workers of the textile factories (Vu Can 1966: 203-253), and myself. The reasons for this lack of access to the city of Nam Định will be elaborated in the subsequent two chapters. In-depth, longitudinal, multi-sited research on everyday life “norms” and “values” prevailing in urban

¹³ For example, the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSO) 2018. <<http://www.gso.gov.vn>>, last accessed 6 August 2018.

¹⁴ In recent years studies about domestic violence – and consequences for health – are increasing (e.g. Le Thi Phuong Mai 1998).

areas, and in particular in urban areas of the Red River Delta, is, to my knowledge, nonexistent.

This research gap needs to be addressed (e.g. Bélanger 2006, Werner 2009) because the ongoing processes of socio-economic change and urbanization will doubtlessly influence the next decades by challenging current and future livelihood experiences (e.g. Epsling 1999, Jong 2005, Nootboom 2003). If we compare the changes that occurred in the last two decades in Vietnam with the processes of industrialization that took place during three centuries in Europe, it becomes obvious that dynamics and intensity differ considerably. Despite these processes and characteristics of urbanization, such as high population density, an “urban lifestyle” remains a comparably recent phenomenon. Technological advances and processes of urbanization have had a huge impact and have changed the country drastically. In contrast, and as the empirical and theoretical data highlight, beliefs represented by “norms” and “values” tend to be adapted less quickly, are debated controversially, and differ considerably between “social fields” (Wehrli 2011). For this reason, and despite prevailing “modern ways of living”, numerous “traditional values” still exist and coincide with conflicting ones.

Taking into account the anticipated increase in urbanization that is considerably transforming the former agrarian country into an “urban” one and is set out to predominantly target medium-sized cities, it is difficult to understand why social anthropologists and sociologists who do research in Vietnam continue to concentrate on rural areas. This fact can predominantly be explained due to numerous challenges such as time, economic resources, patience, and probably most important, access to the field. In (post)socialist Vietnam, research permits are still officially required and often refused for places that “do not need research”. This mode of justification by official governors on whether or not research is “needed” has to be understood in the delicate socio-political context where a fear of losing control (Hayton 2010) is still prominent. Officially, mass protests do not exist. However, critical observers notice that they do exist and are always quickly suppressed. The reasons for those protests are discontent based on high unemployment rates, land grabbing or religious tensions between different believers. All these elements are characteristic for Nam Định City

and suggest that it, too, from an official point of view, “doesn’t need research”. From an academic point of view, however, these circumstances make clear why research in this medium-sized city is all the more relevant. Consequently, Sanjek’s argument (1990) is certainly true for the case of Vietnam and even more so for social anthropological research in Nam Định City. This study will provide the missing knowledge and hopefully encourage further research, despite the challenges that still await field researchers in medium-sized cities such as Nam Định (see Chapter Four).

Given these research gaps, my starting point consists in contributing a multi-sited, longitudinal ethnographic research that conceptually and theoretically enriches current academic debates in social anthropology and (post)socialist studies (see e.g. Thelen 2010) by further developing key concepts such as household, “modernity” and “tradition” as well as “norms” and “values”.

Contribution and significance of my research

This research builds on and aims to further develop the ongoing academic debate in social anthropology on how “norms” and “values” are being shaped by the opening-up of one of the last socialist countries (see. g. Nguyen-vo 2008, Pettus 2003, Pham Van Bich 1999, Wehrli 2011). The reason for these vivid debates is to be found in the societal changes, which impact Vietnam and in the different ways they are dealt with. It starts with the observation that empirical data on socio-economic change occurring in urban Vietnam is scant, and that studies interested in the phenomenon of socio-economic change in general have not yet paid sufficient attention to the changes which take place in everyday life.

The goal of this study consists in closing a crucial research gap in academia by addressing three main weaknesses in current studies. *First*, the research interest remains predominantly focused on rural areas and, with respect to the comparably few studies in urban areas, concentrates mainly on the economic (Hồ Chí Minh) or the political capital (Hà Nội) of Vietnam. As discussed above, average medium-sized cities are almost never studied. *Second*, multi-local ethnographic research that “follows” individuals or *hộ* members over a period of time is rare. *Third*, studies are scant that investi-

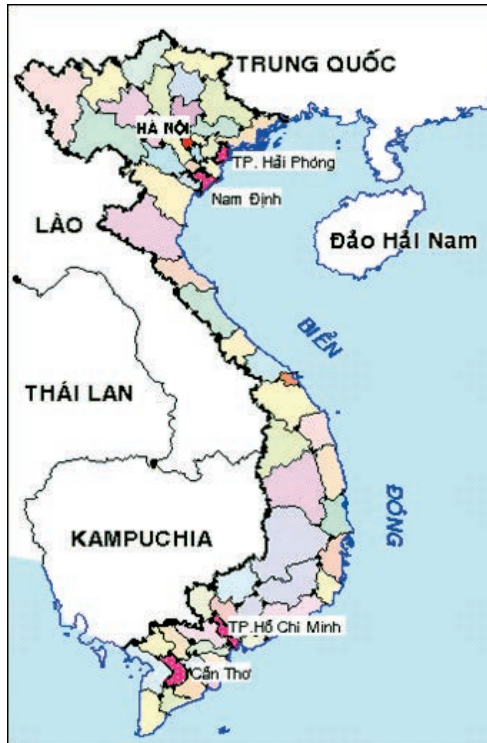
gate a qualitative variety of *hộ* (see selection criteria of the households in Chapter Four).

Hence, this research aims to overcome these three research shortcomings by *first* analyzing longitudinal, ethnographic data that I conducted in two cities, namely in the medium-sized city Nam Định and in Hà Nội. In this multi-sited research, the economic, social, cultural and religious embedding of household members and their corresponding economic, social or cultural “capitals” will be analyzed; it will not only become clear how “norms” and “values” are defined in different “social fields”, but also for what reasons. This approach will make clear how the quest for wealth and beliefs manifests itself in one of the last socialist countries. *Second*, this research will close a prevalent research gap because the variety of the qualitative interviews allows to overcome the limitations of smaller interview amounts and to avoid the danger of superficiality common in quantitative surveys. Methodologically, this research is grounded in a vast sample of micro-level data which allows for detailed, in-depth insights. The qualitative sample consists of 253 recorded and 185 unrecorded qualitative interviews and focus group discussions (see Chapter Four, Table 1). *Third*, it fosters a conceptual and theoretical contribution to the current academic debate in social anthropology, southeast asia-, vietnam- and (post)socialist studies on central concepts like “household”, “modernity”, “tradition”, “norms” and “values”. Theoretically, this research builds on Bourdieu’s “theory of practice” and on concepts like “capital” and “social field”. The results of this project will contribute to the debate in social anthropology and (post)socialist studies on how everyday life changes in the course of the opening up of one of the last socialist countries.

This study is also of specific relevance for Southeast Asian studies and social anthropology because it allows for the closing of a prevailing research gap. Longitudinal data into changes of “norms” and “values” on the micro-level are relevant in order to understand changes that occur in a socialist society that transforms into a postsocialist one. Ideally, this research fosters the understanding on the outcomes of rapid urbanization. Since such complex processes take place worldwide and will increase in the near future, this study also serves interdisciplinary Southeast Asian studies, development studies and debates in current urban anthropology.

Chapter Three: Major Locations of Field Research

By comparing the local contexts of Hà Nội and Nam Định City with national socio-economic developments in Vietnam, I will link the local to the national and thereby enhance the contextualization of field research and illuminate possible inter-dependences between the local and the nationa. In order to understand the local situations in Nam Định City and Hà Nội, the two locations of my field researc, it is important to bear in mind the political goals of the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese Communist Party that directly influence the situation at the local level (see below).

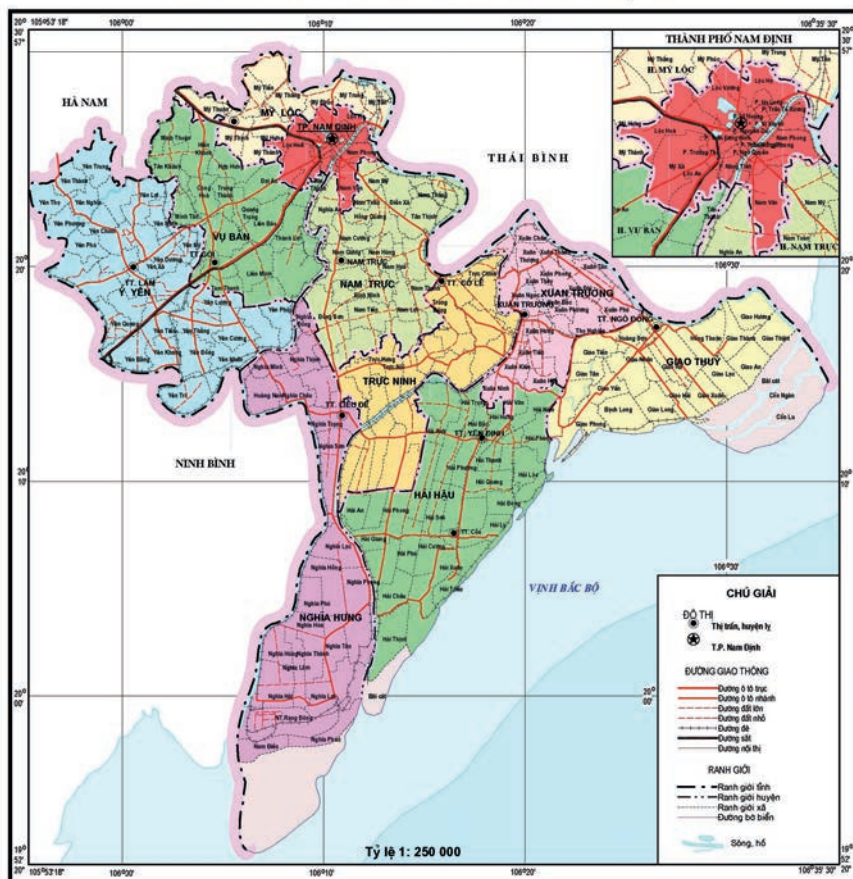


Map 1: Vietnam and its neighboring countries.

The “Manchester of Indochina”: Nam Định City’s famous past

Nam Định City is situated in the Red River Delta in northern Vietnam, about 90 km southeast of Hà Nội. Nam Định City was well known throughout Southeast Asia for its textile industry that was built under French colonial rule. The French occupied Hà Nội for the first time in 1873 and finally conquered it in 1888. In 1900 the first textile factory opened in Nam Định City, marking the start of Nam Định City as the center of Vietnam’s textile industry. Sixty years later the city counted about 95,000 inhabitants and was commonly referred to as the “Manchester de l’ancienne Indochine” (Vu Can 1966: 204). Numerous *hộ* had a tradition of working for decades for this textile industry but others only received contracts as temporary workers and faced unemployment as soon as the demand for workers declined. These employment patterns were common during the French colonial period. Afterwards, they persisted under the socialist regime although not so much in the form of unemployment but rather in the widespread form of underemployment (Information collected by the author between 2004 and 2010). Traditionally, a portion of the temporary workers in the textile factories returned to their places of origin, which were often rural, and considered their industrial work as a supplementary source of income for their *hộ*. Today as well it is common for Nam Định City residents to maximize income-generating activities by working in two or more professions, and to a lesser extent by working in both urban and rural areas (see Chapter Six). Nam Định City thus has a long tradition of migration both into and out of the city. However, the almost total collapse of the textile industry at the beginning of the 1990s meant new challenges. Some of these challenges, such as the high unemployment rate and a high emigration rate of qualified people to other medium-sized cities, especially to Hà Nội, still await a solution. Apart from its textile industry, Nam Định has always been well regarded within Vietnam for its “qualitatively outstanding education” (personal communication 2004-10). In addition to its educational fame, the city is acclaimed as the site where numerous revolutions, especially those with a religious origin, began. This can be attributed to the high percentage of Catholics who live there.

BẢN ĐỒ HÀNH CHÍNH TỈNH NAM ĐỊNH



Map 2: Nam Định City in the Red River Delta.

Nam Định City – the future center of the South Red River Delta

Nam Định City is of interest for social anthropological research, due both to its past and its governmentally planned future. As such, Nam Định City is designated to become the center of the South Red River Delta and for this reason may well prefigure some of the changes that lie ahead for the country as a whole.

Nam Định City's many urban characteristics include a high population growth rate and a high population density. In fact, already in 2004 Nam Định City had one of the highest population densities in the world. The total population of the city in 2005 was 242,680 citizens, with 198,002 people living in twenty urban wards (*phường*) and 44,678 in five rural (*xã*) wards.¹⁵ Despite being classified as “rural”, these wards equally belong to the city (Municipal Statistical Department of Nam Định City. 27 January 2006). Yet it would make no sense to draw a sharp line between the urban and rural areas because some supposedly urban areas still look rural, and are still only in the planning stages to be urbanized in the upcoming years. This may change in the near future however because Nam Định City has been designated to become the center of the South Red River Delta according to a decree¹⁶ approved by former Prime Minister Phan Van Khai. Thus, in accordance with the expectation stated in the aforementioned decree, the development of the city has gained importance and moves in parallel with national development in at least two ways: First, the population was expected to rise from 242,680 citizens, which is representative of the population of an average, mid-sized Vietnamese city, to 511,000 by 2010 and to 955,000 inhabitants by 2020 (Decree 109/2006/QĐ-TTg, Nam Định Provincial People's Committee of 22 May 2006). Second, along with these population increases the process of urbanization was expected not only to continue but in fact to expand outward into rural areas. The area of Nam Định City was expected nearly to triple with an increase of 16,771 ha in 2010 to a total of 21,406 ha; and it is expected to reach 45,127 ha by 2020 (*ibid.*). If this ambitious project is realized, it is obvious that the cityscape will undergo profound changes. I should note however that during my most recent visit in 2010, it became clear that the dual goal of expanding both the population and the area has not yet been reached. According to the latest statistics, the population of Nam Định City was no more than 244,689

¹⁵ The population increased from 1530 persons/km² in 1965 to 3789 persons/km² in 1985. In 2005 the population density was estimated to be 5298 persons/km², and according to the Municipal Statistical Department of Nam Định City, it was expected by 2010 to be 5723 persons/km², (Municipal Statistical Department of Nam Định City 2006).

¹⁶ The decision was approved by Prime Minister Phan Van Khai on 19 May 2006. (Decree 109/2006/QĐ-TTg, Nam Định Provincial People's Committee on 22 May 2006).

persons in 2009 (Municipal Statistical Department of Nam Định City. 1 January 2010).

One has to bear in mind that Vietnamese society is currently undergoing a radical change from a rural to an urban country. According to the latest “Population and Housing Census (2009b)”, the total population of Vietnam in 2009 was almost 86 million persons.¹⁷ Thirty percent of the population lived in urban areas in 2009 while 70 percent lived in rural areas.¹⁸ The Vietnamese government forecasts that the population will grow from its present 85 million to 103 million by the year 2020. The government anticipates that the percentage of the population living in urban areas will significantly increase. Although predictions vary according to the source, no one doubts that this demographic shift will be a historic one.

The rural-urban shift implicates a double transformation: on the one hand, rural land is transformed into urban land, and on the other, so-called rural employment opportunities such as agriculture and aquaculture are being replaced or at least supplemented by “urban” work. Consequently, the boundaries between rural and urban sometimes become blurred. Instead of using a predefined set of characteristics to distinguish urban from rural, or semi-urban from semi-rural, I have chosen throughout this study to adopt official Vietnamese designations for various zones.

Today only 32 percent of the people in Nam Định City work in industry. The largest percentage works in services (46 percent), followed by agriculture (16 percent), construction (6 percent) and aquatic industries (1

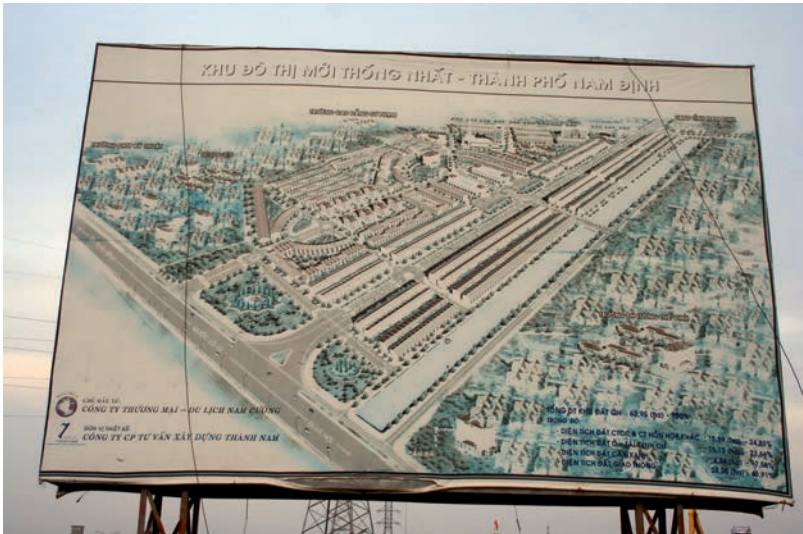
¹⁷ According to the Census of 2009, Vietnam had 85,789,573 inhabitants. Of this total, 25,374,262 people were living in urban areas and 60,415,311 in rural areas. (Population as of 1 April 2009 by region, sex and residence. In: GSO (ed.) 2009b: Population and Employment. Population and Housing Census Vietnam 2009). <http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=476&idmid=4&ItemID=1841>, last accessed 6 January 2012.

¹⁸ The census data of 1999 stated that 76 percent of the population lived in rural areas and 24 percent in urban areas. According to the Census of 1999, Vietnam had 76,323,173 inhabitants, of which 18,076,823 were living in urban areas and 58,246,350 in rural areas. (Population as of 1 April 1999 by Region, Sex and Residence. In: GSO (ed.) 1999a: Population and Employment. Population and Housing Census Vietnam 1999). <http://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=476&idmid=4&ItemID=1841>, last accessed 6 January 2016.

Chapter Three: Major Locations of Field Research



Photograph 1: Rice fields (Nam Định City, October 2010), photographed by the author.



Photograph 2: Billboard with drawing of a master plan for urbanizing Nam Định City (Nam Định City, October 2010), photographed by the author.

Chapter Three: Major Locations of Field Research



Photograph 3: Construction work in progress (Trần Quang Khải, Nam Định City, October 2010), photographed by the author.



Photograph 4: “Urbanity” in the Trần Quang Khải ward (Nam Định City, July 2006), photographed by the author.



Photographs 5 and 6: The Thống Nhất ward: a new urban area (Nam Định City, October 2010), photographed by the author.

percent).¹⁹ The unemployment rate for the urban area of the Red River Delta is officially 5.13 percent²⁰ and hence slightly higher than the national average. According to (official) sources, the unemployment rate in Nam Định City is between 2 and 7 percent, but unofficial sources claim it to be as high as 20 to 25 percent (personal communication April-May 2004, June 2006 and October 2010).

Some of the first research conducted in the urban Red River Delta after *Đổi mới*

Unlike many places in Vietnam, Nam Định City is by no means a tourist site. Attractions are few and range from the heroic statue in front of a local hotel to a small Buddhist temple, a church from the French colonial period and the wittily named “Boat Club”, a Vietnamese restaurant that features a handful of dishes and sits opposite a small artificial lake. In Nam Định

¹⁹ The information was collected at the Municipal Statistical Department in Nam Định City on 20 June 2006.

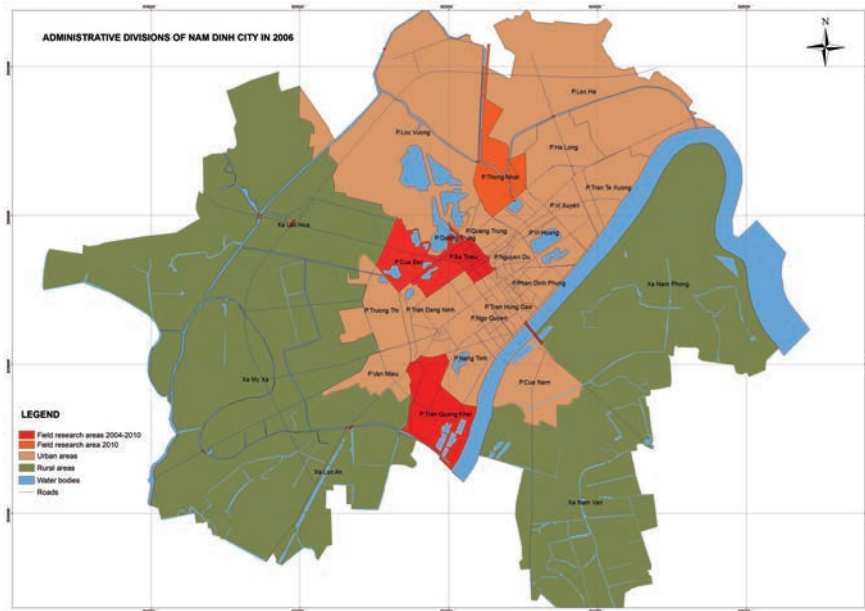
²⁰ General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2015c: Unemployment and underemployment rates for labor force of working age by region. In: GOS (ed.): Population and Employment. <<https://www.gso.gov.vn/SLTKE/pxweb/en/02.percent20Populationpercent20andpercent20Employment/-/E02.46.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=5a7f4db4-634a-4023-a3dd-c018a7cf951d>>, last accessed 20 November 2015.

City the tranquillity of the countryside of the Red River Delta seems to be part of another world as rows of motorbikes try to find their way through the endless traffic. The steady flow of traffic sounds, colored by the irregular interruptions of honking horns, only comes to a stop after eleven p.m. before it begins again in the early morning hours. Although the main street in Nam Định City is busy, crowded and loud, the side streets nearby are tranquil and empty, with men standing in front of their shops, women carrying heavy loads on their shoulders and children running after dogs. This intriguing contrast of urbanity with the persistence of rural elements highlights the process of uneven urbanization.

Nam Định City is both ordinary and exceptional: It is ordinary because it has many of the same characteristics that numerous other medium-sized cities in Vietnam have, such as the absence of tourism, a high unemployment rate and the observable migration patterns outlined above. It is exceptional due to its past as well as its governmentally planned future in which it will become the center of the Southwest Red River Delta. Hence Nam Định City is in some ways representative of other middle-sized Vietnamese cities that face similar changes. Furthermore, it is ideal to research the processes of greatest interest to me in a place where only a handful of foreigners live since tourism is nonexistent. From a social anthropological point of view, then, Nam Định City provides a uniquely rewarding opportunity and experience.

With the aim of making comparisons within Nam Định City, I decided to undertake in-depth field research in four different wards. In the following section, I will describe in detail the procedures and methods used.

The first ward Bà Triệu is situated in the historic center of the city and is characterized by a generally wealthy population and correspondingly high incomes. This ward not only has many medium and large private businesses that sell a range of goods, including motorbikes, clothes, jewelry and electronic goods, but it also has many small shops. Cửa Bắc, the second ward, is a medium-income ward that originates in the city center and spreads out into the so-called “new urban areas”. These new areas correspond to former agrarian land, such as rice fields and ponds, which is now being used for residential purposes. Over my research period of seven years, the “Vanish-



Map 3: Administrative division of Nam Định City in 2006, map by Dao Ngo.

ing of the Rice Fields” became very apparent in this ward and especially in the next ward.

The third ward, Trần Quang Khải, represents a poor ward; it has one of the highest unemployment rates in the city. Many people who were formerly involved in Nam Định's textile industry reside here [Party Committee of Nam Định's Textile Factory (ed.) 2004: 236]. When the textile industry suffered a collapse in 1995, hundreds and possibly thousands of employees were laid off. Despite countless attempts, I was unable to find precise data on the number of people who were released. Neither former board members of the textile factory nor members of the Vietnamese Communist Party were able to or allowed to share precise data. Even in published archives and materials I could not find the exact number of people who were laid off. Former employees mention thousands of people; officials say that the number was about one hundred although they add that even for them it is impossible to provide a concrete number. Apparently all the personal data of the em-

ployees was intentionally burned or “lost” in the turbulence of those days. The former director of the textile factory died in a “car accident” that – according to the local gossip – was not accidental but carefully arranged and executed.²¹ The reason for this “orchestrated accident” is apparently because the former director did not “adequately share” his wealth, which he acquired through corruption, with others and ignored their “warnings” about sharing it (Information received by the author in 2006 and 2010)²². In 2010 Vinashin, a state-owned firm and the most important employer in Nam Định City, went bankrupt. In my follow-up study in 2010²³, the major employer at that time again let numerous people go, apparently because of the financial crisis. But according to my data, the reason was mainly because of internal management failures (see Wehrli 2012 a). In 2010 I included the recently established Thống Nhất ward as the fourth ward that I researched in Nam Định City.

Challenges: The “CIA” and living in a Vietnamese *hộ*

The advantages of conducting research in Nam Định City were accompanied by some challenges as well. While living in Nam Định City, I was frequently asked by interviewees why I had not chosen to conduct research

²¹ As in most cases of such “car accidents”, gossip pointed to different culprits. Some names were dropped, one of which was mentioned numerous times. Yet the driver of the car only executed the plan and received a rather high amount of money. As is common in such cases, a “pension” for his *hộ* would be sponsored in case of his death.

²² The complex web surrounding the acquisition of wealth – its links to corruption and knowledge about how to spread a portion of this wealth to others in order to acquire more wealth – will be analyzed at a later time.

²³ Vinashin was a state-owned shipbuilding firm in Vietnam. One of the factories was located in Trần Quang Khải in Nam Định City, close to a river. Before its collapse Vinashin was the largest shipbuilder in Vietnam, accounting for approximately 80 percent of its shipbuilding capacity. At the time I was conducting research, information on the collapse of Vinashin was not yet complete. It is now publicly known that Vinashin was one of Vietnam’s leading industrial concerns, and entered into a partnership with Damen, Kongsberg, and Hyundai (see e.g. Wall Street Journal, Reuters or Neue Zürcher Zeitung, (see Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vinashin>, last accessed 6 September 2015).

in a tourist spot or in the South of Vietnam, especially “Saigon”²⁴ (Hồ Chí Minh City), where there would be lots of entertainment possibilities. Officials questioned whether it might be wiser to choose another research location where “relevant research topics would exist”. To put it diplomatically, both my research topic and my decision to undertake my research in Nam Định City caused scepticism (see also the following chapter). Some people mentioned Nam Định City’s lack of attractiveness and the intention of many young people to make their livings in Hà Nội or even in Hồ Chí Minh City in order to have a “better life” with more opportunities in education, income and entertainment. Others expressed curiosity about my interest in conducting research and showed their pride as Nam Định citizens by pointing out newly built houses and mentioning further changes that will transform the city into a “modern one”. Interestingly, the same questions were raised again when I returned in 2010, as well as when I chatted online with some of my interviewees or friends while I was in Switzerland, or during the times I was in Los Angeles or Paris and affiliated with universities there as a Visiting Scholar. For many of my listeners, it seemed unbelievable that I intentionally chose to live for a long period of time in Nam Định City.

Other relevant reasons for the comparably low number of studies on small- and medium-sized cities include Vietnam’s recent past and the difficulty in obtaining official permission for in-depth research (see also Chapter Two, a prevalent research gap). This is still due to a widespread mistrust and the sometimes-justified fear that “*tây*” foreigners sneak into society in order to “steal” relevant information or to “indoctrinate” their interviewees with “anti-socialist values and/or ideas”. Unfortunately, some persons also mistakenly tried to identify me as an undercover CIA agent. I do hope that by now these fears and misconceptions about me have proven to be groundless.

My experience of living in a Vietnamese *hộ* proved to be extremely valuable for my research process. It greatly facilitated access to the interviewees and the different field sites. In addition it allowed me to become part of a *hộ*, to become the “daughter” of a “father” and a “mother” and

²⁴ The name “Saigon” is still predominantly used to reference Vietnam’s economic capital Hồ Chí Minh City.

have an “older” and a “younger brother”. (The brothers were already living outside of the *hộ*. The older lived in Hà Nội while the younger lived in Hồ Chí Minh City and at times in neighboring areas of Nam Định City.) It was sometimes also challenging on a personal level, especially when it came to conflicts within the *hộ*.

The interviewees were pleased when they learned that I eat the same Vietnamese food as they do and that I enjoy an occasional sip of coffee at one of the street cafés located around the artificial lake in the city’s center. A sense of “community” also emerged when we discussed common challenges. For example, “my” *hộ* was likewise affected by the regular cuts in electricity and the heavy air pollution that caused itchy eyes and coughs, and was at times accompanied by such a thick, dark, nebulous smoke that breathing became difficult. At times this pollution lasted for a couple of hours a day; once, it lasted for four days and made it almost impossible to leave the house. The smoke was a result of the burning of waste material from hospitals, factories and repair shops. The burning of rice fields added to the smoke, although to a smaller extent.

During my follow-up study in 2010 in Nam Định City, I stayed in a hotel instead of at my former *hộ*. Both the father and the oldest son of the *hộ* had died suddenly – and according to the local talk mysteriously – in their home between 2007 and early 2010.²⁵ In 2010 the by then heavy heroin addiction of the younger brother and his involvement in crime and assaults added to the fact that not living in the *hộ* was a better option for conducting the follow-up study. While conducting research in Hà Nội in 2004, I lived in a hostel; in 2005 and 2006 I lived in the house of friends; and in 2010 I rented an apartment.

Hà Nội: My second field research locale

In order to follow my interviewees and to make comparisons, I included the capital Hà Nội. The advantages of doing so include being able to highlight differences and similarities both in income-generating activities and in personal as well as collective “norms”, “values” and beliefs. Compari-

²⁵ In order to respect the privacy of everyone involved, I will not detail the circumstances of the deaths that occurred.

sons are also relevant with respect to paths of migrancy since numerous inhabitants of Hà Nội originate from NamĐịnh; other citizens of NamĐịnh have migrancy-related living and work experiences primarily in Hà Nội, or perhaps merely dream of having the; and last but not least numerous people migrate between the two cities. They have life cycle-related work experiences that are interrupted in case of pregnancy and are taken up again after, or they receive an offer to work in a city thanks to the recommendations of their kin, to name but a few examples.

Seen from a methodological point of view, multi-local fieldwork offers numerous advantages but also creates challenges (see e.g. Marcus 1995). These *hộ* members gave me in-depth insights into what Granovetter has called the “embeddedness of their networks” (Granovetter 1985). What Granovetter means by the concept of “embeddedness” is that people’s economic activities are embedded in their social relations, and whether or not people can trust each other depends on the kinds of social relationships they have.

In addition to the predominant direction of emigration from Nam Định City to Hà Nội, immigration to Nam Định City also occur. Some entrepreneurs from Hà Nội have gone to Nam Định City for investment purpose. In addition to large-scale factories in the EPZ zones, one finds “haute couture” coiffeur and beauty salons as well as clothes shops in the upper price segment. These latter investments have proven to be extremely profitable, despite their “international” prices (Information collected by the author in 2006 and 2010). It was only towards the end of my field research in 2006 that I became familiar with these shops. In 2010 more of these shops had opened and were profitable. If we consider the official, average income of Nam Định City (or even of Vietnam), it is clear that the clientele of these shops forms part of the nomenclature, the elite of the Communist Party. I was often told that these Party elites had acquired so much money over the last decade that it became hard for them to find ways to spend it. The class disparities in today’s Vietnam and, as I will demonstrate in the upcoming sections, the relevance of the “social field” are impressive.

Chapter Four: The Research Design

The goal of this chapter consists in demonstrating how the broad data sample was conducted. This chapter focuses on the most relevant aspects of the research design. The data comprises the translation and transcription of fifteen focus group discussions and 127 qualitative interviews. These translated and transcribed interviews were extracted out of a total of 253 recorded interviews and focus group discussions. The sample as a whole is even broader and consists of 253 recorded and 185 unrecorded qualitative interviews and focus group discussions (see below Table 2). The extensive data sample stems from my inquisitiveness to understand the complex interdependence of economic, social, cultural and religious dimensions of the different *hộ*.²⁶ In addition, I wanted to understand changes, and therefore re-interviewed some members of the *hộ* and/or accompanied them over a period of time. The data was collected over a period of seven years between 2004 and 2010, in the cities of Hà Nội and Nam Định.

The methodological approach of this research closes a research gap in both social anthropology and Vietnamese studies (as discussed in Chapter Two). In the following section, I will describe my methodological approaches for data collection; the sample of longitudinal and multi-local research and the follow-up study conducted in 2010. I will demonstrate how I analyzed and recorded the data. To conclude, I will describe some personal impressions from my field research.

Methods of data collection

Methodologically, the qualitative data (e.g. Silverman 2005) collected between 2004 and 2010 in the urban Red River Delta was based on a

²⁶ Whenever I asked questions of economic aspects, I became aware of the interconnectiveness of the economic with the other dimensions like cultural or social one's and vice versa. For this reason I included various domains within society. A member of the *hộ* is, for example, not only deciding on the basis of his or her own individual preference as to whether to accept a job or not. These decisions are also influenced by other members of the *hộ* (see Chapter Five).

hermeneutic understanding of the ethnographic process of research (Amit-Talai 2000, Spradley and McCurdy 1980). In this multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus 1995), I conducted *biographical interviews* to trace life cycle related events as well as *hộ* relationships and positions. Additionally, I carried out *unstructured and semi-structured interviews* (e.g. Harell and Bradley 2009), *informal interviews* (e.g. DeWalt/DeWalt 2002: 120-140, Goffman 1981), *expert interviews* (e.g. Bogner and Menz 2001, Gläser and Laudel 2006, Meuser and Nagel 1991) and *focus group discussions* (e.g. Barbour 2010; Bohnsack 2010). Since I was not only working in the “native language” but also taking part in the everyday lives of citizens and living myself in a Vietnamese *hộ*, *participant observation* [e.g. Dewalt 2002; Dewalt, Dewalt and Wayland 1998, Hume and Mulcock (eds.) 2004, Spradley 2006] was used to comprehend the local world, or in the words of Barnard and Spencer, for “working in the native language and observing events in their everyday context” (1997: 616).

Hence, the use of a holistic concept – with participant observation, *field notes*, a variety of interviews, and as Liljeström et al. (eds.) suggest by “looking at people’s housing and everyday comfort” (1998: 37) – provided me with a wide range of possibilities for the classification and understanding on the quest for wealth and beliefs in (post)socialist northern Vietnam. In addition I collected *maps* issued by local authorities, NGO’s as well as international organizations (e.g. SDC, World Bank). These maps and *written documentations* are relevant for understanding how global and national political goals impact livelihood experiences on a micro-level. The maps also show the planned and implemented process of urbanization, on compulsory or free resettlement and on the establishing of so-called “new urban areas”. By these means, past, present, and future data relevant to Nam Định City and Hà Nội were acquired. The most relevant ones are maps of the city’s boundaries, numbers of inhabitants, income distribution and activities performed in different wards, current statistics on the amount of children or migration patterns, future plans with respect to large population resettlement, urbanization and “modernization” projects or the establishing of “EPZ” – economic processing zones.

Furthermore, *research in archives* was conducted and *statistical data* (e.g. on age and gender, *hộ* size, income, level of education, varieties of

jobs, religious affiliation) issued by the “Municipal Statistical Office of Nam Định City”, the “Statistical Office of Nam Định Province” and the “General Statistic Office of Vietnam” (GSO) were collected to contextualize my qualitative data. Last but not least, I undertook a follow-up study in 2010 to expand and cross-check the previously conducted data that serves as a means to reach comparison in *longitudinal studies*.

The sample of longitudinal and multi-sited research

This qualitative sample was analyzed by qualitative methods. Following a two-month, exploratory field research in 2004, the first in-depth ethnographic research of nine months was undertaken between 2005 and 2006. In the first three months, I lived intermittently in Hà Nội and Nam Định City to receive the official research permit for conducting field research²⁷ – a requirement that is still necessary in contemporary Vietnam – to establish further contacts with interlocutors in both cities and to collect statistical information on which three different wards in Nam Định City were intentionally chosen.

The goal of selecting three urban wards (*phường*) in Nam Định City in 2005 and 2006 was to reach comparison and thus a broader understanding of the city of about 245,000 inhabitants. The wards themselves were selected by intention as they represent different income groups in Nam Định City. In 2010 a fourth ward was included. The total of four wards (Bà Triệu, Cửa Bắc, Trần Quang Khải and Thống Nhất) were described in more detail in the previous chapter. Necessary preconditions for building this sample were numerous initial interviews as well as informal conversations with *hộ* members. Based on this groundwork, in 2005-2006 forty-eight *hộ* were then chosen and semi-structured interviews conducted. An overview of these forty-eight interviews can be found in the Appendix (see Appendix 1).

In Vietnam every ward consists of several population groups that are again controlled by a local head of a population group. With respect to the

²⁷ This was possible thanks to the institutional affiliation and the support granted by the Institute of Anthropology at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences in Hà Nội (Vietnam).

data collection between 2005 and 2006, I conducted interviews with forty eight *hộ*. In each of the three wards, I conducted interviews in four different population groups and therefore selected four persons in each population group²⁸, thus allowing for further comparison inside the wards themselves. The criteria for selecting the four population groups out of twenty for Bà Triệu, thirty eight for Cửa Bắc, and twenty three for Trần Quang Khải have been focused on migration rates (permanent residents versus residents moving in and out), job professions, recent established groups and thus long- and short-term residents. For the ward Trần Quang Khải, an equal amount of rural and urban parts has been selected. If some population groups inside the wards had the same characteristics, the choice for one of the population groups has been taken out *per random*. Although the number of population groups is not identical, the number of inhabitants in each of them reaches around 8,000 (Information collected by the author and received by the Chairmen of the three wards in June 2006).

The goal of working in these three wards between 2005 and 2006 was aimed at, first, finding out a wide range of income groups and corresponding expected diverse living standards, including not only poor or rich people but a high variation within the social strata. Second, migration and emigration patterns not only from within the city itself but also from rural parts towards Nam Định City, from the city towards rural parts and – as it turned out to be far more the case – towards a bigger urban center could be investigated. The third reason lay in the expectation of gaining more differentiated insights into the city as a whole and the diverse processes of urbanization, which are underway. Especially, the Trần Quang Khải ward and, to a lesser extent, the Cửa Bắc ward are characterized by the eradication of rice fields and fish ponds in order to establish more houses and enlarge roads (see photographs 3, 5 and 6). At first glance one could not guess that the area now looking very urban was a few years before anything but urban.²⁹

²⁸ In one population group of both Bà Triệu and Cửa Bắc, I conducted five interviews. Because my first interviewee was chosen for me by local authorities, an interview conducted in Cửa Bắc is therefore not included in my analysis (in order to maintain my criteria which guarantees representativeness).

²⁹ More details on the expansion of the city, including future plans related to the expansion and “upgrading” of some areas, will be presented in a future paper.

Chapter Four: The Research Design

Selection criteria for identifying the *hộ*

Nam Dinh City	Hanoi
1) Different wards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Trần Quang Khải</i>: low income (textile and shipbuilding industry) • <i>Cửa Bắc</i>: middle income (self-employed and state officials) • <i>Bà Triệu</i>: high income (entrepreneurs of a "traditional" <i>hộ</i> entrepreneurs in the center of the city) • 2010: <i>Thống Nhất</i>: newly established ward with a broad income strata (rural low income population to "nouveau riche" such as Entrepreneurs or high-ranking state officials) 	1) "Snowball-system"
2) Position of the <i>hộ</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the street (ideal for an additional income) • Offside the street 	2) Members of a <i>hộ</i> from Nam Dinh City <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For example: a second branch of a business or commuters • Education or further training
3) Employment (combined with 1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State employee's, self-employed with and without license, employees outside of the state sector, combinations thereof, unemployed 	3) Employment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State employee's, self-employed with and without license, employees outside of the state sector, combinations thereof, unemployed
4) Religious affiliation and social networks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ancestor worship, Confucianism, Vietnamese forms of "Buddhism" (e.g. <i>Đạo Mẫu</i>), Catholicism, combinations thereof, atheism, memberships in social networks (e.g. in the Vietnamese Communist Party, mass or business organizations) 	4) Religious affiliation and social networks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ancestor worship, Confucianism, Vietnamese forms of „Buddhism" (e.g. <i>Đạo Mẫu</i>), Catholicism, combinations thereof, atheism, memberships in social networks (e.g. in the communist party, mass or business organizations)mass or business organizations)
5) Size of the <i>hộ</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual, couple with / without children, number of children ("norm"), employees, grandparents, grand grandparents 	5) Size of the <i>hộ</i> and gender sensitive approach <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual, couple with / without children, number of children ("norm"), employees, grandparents, grand grandparents
6) Composition of the <i>hộ</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different age groups: 20-40, 40-60, 60+ • Gender sensitive approach: equal amount of men and women as first interviewee's 	6) Composition of the <i>hộ</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different age groups: 20-40, 40-60, 60+ • Gender sensitive approach: equal amount of men and women as first interviewee's

Table 1: Selection criteria for identifying the *hộ*, table by the author.

The choice for selecting the *hộ* themselves was taken per semi-random, as the category was set out to include people living in front of the streets and inside the lanes (thus allowing socio-economic comparison), and with respect to gender (men and women), age groups (20-40, 40-60, 60+), household size, religious affiliation (e.g.ancestor worship, Catholicism, Vietnamese forms of Buddhism or no religious affiliation³⁰), and households

³⁰ The relevance of the religious affiliation will be detailed in Chapter Eight.

incomes classified as poor, middle or rich (see Diagram 2, Appendix 1 and 2).

Before choosing the *hộ*, I walked through the whole area and inside every little lane in order to “know” who is living where. Subsequently the selection has been taken according to the criteria mentioned above. People selected have then been asked if and when they have time for an interview. In case nobody was there, but the house had nevertheless been chosen per random, neighbors were asked, and the *hộ* was visited on a later occasion. At the beginning I faced some difficulties as local authorities insisted to “suggest” *hộ*. In my opinion this would have jeopardized the validity and representativeness of the whole research. Therefore, it had – and in fact was – to be strictly ruled out; after several meetings with high-ranking Communist Party members and even with the current and the former mayor of Nam Định City, my concerns were comprehended.

In addition to the interviews with these *hộ* that are based on this sample technique, I conducted further interviews: first, with other members of the identical *hộ*; second, with members of completely new *hộ* (with whom I became familiar with through living in both Hà Nội and Nam Định City); third, by recommendations (e.g. by colleagues, friends or interviewees); and fourth, based on kinship ties (e.g. a business woman mentions another business branch that belongs to her cousin when I contacted her again to understand the broad networks). While some of these interviews were recorded, others, especially informal conversations, were not.

To conclude, the aim of this sample is a double one: on the one hand, it represents the *heterogeneity* of Nam Định City, and on the other hand, it allows comparison. The data base provides the following information: number of people living in the wards, *hộ* sizes, religious affiliations, and length of stays in corresponding wards, *hộ* incomes and expenditures as well as the age groups, gender or the composition of the *hộ*. This information serves as my quantitative base. Thus, the sample reflects the complexity of the available data base and represents the broad strata of *hộ* inherent in Nam Định City.

The follow-up study of 2010

In the social sciences, the advantages of follow-up studies are well-known (see e.g. Lee 2003). Some researchers – also in the Vietnamese context – value the advantages of a repeated cross-checking and examination of a given research subject (see e.g. Endres 2011; Nguyen-vo 2008; Salemin 2008; 2002; Wehrli 2012a; 2011). Due to economic and time constraints, however, follow-up studies tend to be the exception rather than the rule.

As part of my longitudinal research process, I conducted a follow-up study between August and November 2010 to compare past research data as well as the living conditions of the *hộ*. Before the implementation of the follow-up study, I critically revised the academic literature. Methodologically, the follow-up study built on and benefitted from data obtained in 2004, 2005 and 2006. I compared the results of my biographical and semi-structured interviews with some of the *hộ* members I had interviewed before in three different *phường* (wards). Out of the formerly forty-eight interviewed *hộ*, I selected twelve *hộ* to be re-interviewed by paying special attention to an equal distribution within the three wards, with respect to gender and age groups, religious affiliations and income (see Appendix 2).

In addition thirty-three of the 42 experts whom I interviewed during 2005 and 2006 were interviewed again in order to trace changes that have occurred since then.³¹ On the other hand, the research scope was expanded and twelve new *hộ* in Hà Nội and in Nam Định City were included. Of special relevance was the integration of *hộ* in the recently established ward Thống Nhất that corresponds to the fourth researched ward in Nam Định City. This so-called “new urban area” of Nam Định City bears the conflictual characteristic that former inhabitants who are being forced by the Vietnamese government to move out within the next four years are momentarily sharing the ward with well-off (Vietnamese) immigrants who will become its future residents.

In Hà Nội, *hộ* were identified based on two fundamental procedures: first, households were chosen randomly in different wards of Hà Nội to get an initial overview of the city and its wards; and second, household

³¹ In the last years, some of the former interviewees died. Sadly, most of them passed away due to illnesses or accidents and just two people due to their old age.

members were selected from those who migrated from Nam Định City to Hà Nội and whom I knew based on prior contacts in Nam Định City. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, biographical interviews, expert interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in both cities (see Table 2). I either contacted the experts directly because of their relevant knowledge with respect to my research or was acquainted with them based on previously elaborated networks. Table 2 shows the interview style (semi-structured, biographical, expert-interview), the location (Nam Định City or Hà Nội) and time (2005 and 2006 or 2010). To enhance the readability of this table, focus group discussions were added to the interviews, although this method differs from the other interview styles.

Year Style *	Semi-struct. interview household NDC	Semi-struct. interview household Hanoi	Biograp. interview NDC	Biograp. interview Hanoi	Focus group- disc. NDC	Focus group- disc. Hanoi	Expert- interview NDC	Expert- interview Hanoi	Total per year
2005-2006	48	46	8	6	9	12	20	22	171
2010	20*	21**	2	4	5	4	14	12	82
Total	68	67	10	10	14	16	34	34	253

Table 2: Year, interview style and place of the recorded interviews, table by the author.

* Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted in the three former wards (four interviews in each ward) with the same member of the *hộ* as in 2005-2006. The other eight interviews were conducted with *hộ* members of the fourth selected ward, Thống Nhất.

** In addition to twelve new *hộ*, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with the same persons as in the research conducted between 2005 and 2006.

In addition to these recorded interviews, field notes were applied to preserve information gained in 185 relevant but *unrecorded qualitative interviews* and in relevant *informal conversations*. The sample described in Table 2 corresponds exclusively to the *recorded* interviews and focus group discussions. The sample of this research consists of 253 recorded and 185 unrecorded qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. In Appendix 1 and 2, the age, gender, number of *hộ* members, jobs, income and the religious affiliation of the forty-eight *hộ* interviewed in 2006 and of the twelve, which I re-interviewed in 2010 are listed.

Methods of data analysis

The method of *Grounded Theory* (Dey 1999, Glaser, Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1996) was applied for the data analysis of the 253 recorded, and for the 185 unrecorded qualitative interviews. Grounded Theory is a method to reflect on and inquire about social reality (Strauss and Corbin 1996). Grounded Theory refers to the use of categories that grow out of the data. The methods of Grounded Theory prevented me from neglecting important aspects during the process of fieldwork and in the course of conducting the interviews. In effect, the theoretical framework of Ground Theory guided the interpretation of the ethnographic data (see e.g. LeCompte and Schensul 1999, Silverman 2001).

Preliminary analysis based on the Grounded Theory referred to, for example, the following relevant categories that served as the base on which the overall research aim and the three research questions were formulated. The initial categories pointed to, for example, the relevance of the economic position of the *hộ* (poor, medium or rich), the significance of the various types of capitals in Bourdieu's sense (e.g. economic, social, symbolic or cultural), the relevance of categories that enable research differences within society (e.g. age groups, gender or "social field"), and the consequences of publicly shown, religious affiliation (e.g. forms of Vietnamese Buddhism or Catholicism).

On bits and bytes³²

An average interview of this sample lasted about 70 minutes. Most of the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and later on translated and transcribed. Given the colonial past of Vietnam, some interviewees wished during the whole interview or during a part thereof to speak French, German or English.³³ I respected their wish to speak in another language than the native one. The elder generation had acquired this knowledge during their

³² The term bit and byte are borrowed from computer networking. Both terms refer to digital data transmitted over a network connection. Here, I use the expression on the one hand to refer to the technical part of recording the interviews, and on the other to allude to the personal and professional network during fieldwork.

³³ One person wished to speak Russian but since I do not speak this language, this was not possible.

Chapter Four: The Research Design

time as students or researchers in France or the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). The younger generation became fluent in English due to their research time in English-speaking parts of the world. The 253 interviews and focus group discussions were recorded on mp3 to reconstruct the content itself as well as the circumstances of the interviews (e.g. interferences of other persons or the flow of the interview). Based on these mp3 files, the transcription and the subsequent translation of a total of fifteen focus group discussions and 127 qualitative interviews were undertaken by five field assistants between 2006 and 2007 for the interviews conducted between 2005 and 2006 and by four assistants between 2010 and 2011 for the interviews conducted in 2010.³⁴ Each transcription and translation was cross-checked by me to guarantee accuracy.



Photograph 7: Photo composition in the hộ of Dũng N.³⁵ (Nam Định City, October 2010), photographed by the author.

³⁴ Thanks to funding received between 2005 and 2006 from the program “Jeunes chercheurs” of the Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE) that was founded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and support by the program “Échanges universitaires” in 2010 of the KFPE, I employed the field assistants and paid a salary.

A personal note

Counter to my expectations, most of the interviewees were open and transparent, not only with respect to their answers, but also when it came to their willingness to share personal insights into their lives. Experiences were marked – as in everyone’s lives – with hopes and sorrows, and with positive and negative memories. Some felt a sort of relief, others thanked me for the opportunity to talk extensively for their first time in their life with a foreigner (“*tây*”), and some even offered me presents, ranging from family pictures taken due to a special occasion, items they sell in their shops, gifts, invitations for meals, and further visits to their homes. It was easy to observe that the common, first miscellaneous gaze, along with an observing and somehow distant habitus, was slowly replaced – after having exchanged some words in Vietnamese – by confidential gestures. Most of the interviews were characterized by an “honest dialogue”³⁶ and a mutual interest, as not only I was asking questions, but in return “had” to satisfy their curiosity about my way of living.

Personally, I did not expect the interviewees to be so emotional. Their ways of expressing their feelings in and around the interview took, at times, the form of tears as they told about experienced hardship in the past; on the other hand, sometimes there was much laughter and friendly forms of touching. During the follow-up study in 2010, some interviews were only possible in a second step because of the *hộ* exchange of news and gossip. However, some *hộ* refused to be interviewed without giving any explanations. In some cases, I later learnt the reasons, which were often severe family problems such as heroin abuse, sick household members, or “madness”

³⁵ During the follow-up study, I was shown a photo composition in the living room of “important” *hộ* events. To my surprise, I found myself in the middle of the picture next to the head of the *hộ* I had interviewed in 2006 and his friend.

³⁶ The form of dialogue is, according to my conviction, an important fact in order not to have an asymmetrical relationship, characterized by unequal possibilities of expressing one’s opinion and experience. It would be naïve to believe that I was exclusively told the “truth”. Besides intentional lies, psychological tests prove that everyone sometimes reconstructs past events to “remake the past” and their personal biography. This challenge can be addressed by cross-checking the data to corroborate questionable information, and by transparently highlighting whether or not the information received from the interviewees seems trustworthy and correct.

Chapter Four: The Research Design

due to the death of family members or the local explanation of “sorcery”. In the subsequent chapter, the central research concepts of this research will be scrutinized.

Chapter Five: On the Household, the *Hộ* and the *Hộ Khẩu*. The Central Research Concepts

“The household is a fundamental social unit. Households are more than groups for dyadic pairs. They have an emergent character that makes them more than the sum of their parts. They are a primary arena for the expression of age and sex roles, kinship, socialization, and economic cooperation where the very stuff of culture is mediated and transformed into action. Here, individual motives and activities must be coordinated and rendered mutually intelligible” (Netting, Wilk and Arnould 1984b: xxii).

The household is the central research concept of this study. Therefore, I will discuss its theoretical and methodological use in detail. In addition, my aim is to contribute to an understanding of the role and functions of *hộ* in modern Vietnam.

As a first step, I will refer to the conceptual use of the household in social anthropology. Second, I will examine the emergence of so-called *household studies* and their relevance for the social sciences in general and for social anthropology in particular. I then will shift my attention to the specific locality of this research in order to scrutinize the Vietnamese household as my basic object of research. In the third section, with the goal of critically reflecting on my chosen concepts of the household and the *hộ*, I will discuss methodological and ideological challenges, as well as researcher bias. In the final section, I will present the specific theoretical and methodological contribution made by the conceptual use of the household. To conclude, I will scrutinize other relevant pairs of research concepts such as “gender” and “sex,” “norms” and “values,” and “modernity” and “tradition.”

On the use of the household in social anthropology

A shift in the attention of social scientists, as well as the (re)emerging relevance of the household concept for social anthropology, is well illustrated by Ratjhe’s observation that

“the household is society’s most commonplace and basic socioeconomic unit”
(Rathje 1981: 6).

The phrase stands as a paradigmatic example of the shift in attention that is revealed by the prevalence or absence in particular decades of so-called *household studies*. If one reviews academic publications with respect to *household studies*, it becomes obvious that from the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1970s the household was of little interest to social science scholars (see Netting et al. 1984: xix). Research concepts, analysis, and data were concentrated on individuals, “tribes,” clans, social groups, and the nation-state, to name but a few. Yet one has to add that this holds not true for some ethnographies where the household indeed played a crucial role. A noteworthy exception is the broad field of peasant studies and later on urban anthropology where the household has always been a central concept.

Interestingly, in ancient Greece as well as in the Roman Empire, the concepts of the household and the family played a crucial role in both literature and the “social sciences”. Historical evidence also makes clear that census-like data was collected based on households. Furthermore, vivid debates about and theoretical attempts to distinguish between the “household” and the “family” can already be identified at that time.³⁷ Homer, for example, differentiated between “family” and “household members” in his research on different ethnic groups (Homeri Opera (1902): Ilias II, verse 867). In ancient Greek, the idea of *economics* referred to the science of administering the *oikos*, the household and its property. In contrast to the term *oikos* (household), *family* originally designated a Roman property holder and included not only his immediate kin but also the free and unfree slaves who formed part of his household.

Oikos referred to the private domain and the domestic domain that were open to everyone. In ancient Greece, a sharp distinction prevailed between the *oikos* and the *agora*, the marketplace. The latter was the public domain and only accessible to free citizens, that is to say, only accessible to men. Women and bond slaves were excluded.

³⁷ This debate reappeared again in the 1970s (see below).

For centuries, the household remained the basic unit about which censuses collected information. However, the Greek and Roman empires shared research interest in the household, and the family faded with the demise of the two empires and re-emerged only near the end of the nineteenth century. From the perspective of social anthropology and sociology, and with respect to studies about the household, the work of Engels is among the most influential (Engels 1986 [1884]). Like other scholars, and common in science in the nineteenth century, Engels was influenced by evolutionism and popularized the unilineal evolutionary view of the family. In part, his assumptions were based on the famous work of Bachofen *Das Mutterrecht* (The matriarchy), Bachofen 1975 [1861]) as well as on Morgan's theory of kinships systems (Morgan 1877; 1871; 1851).

In the socioeconomic context of industrialization and “modernization”, Engels described how with the rise of private property and monogamous marriage, the nuclear family became for the first time in history the “economic unit of society” (Engels 1986 [1884]: 138).³⁸ According to Engels, the separation between the workplace as a public sphere and the home as a private sphere was the product of industrialization. In his famous work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, Engels detailed how household management lost its public character and became a private service (Engels 1986 [1884]: 137). Such a clear-cut division of this kind was non-existent in the preceding centuries. One of the outcomes of the separation between the workplace and the home relates to the gendered role division between men and women. Since the household affairs were clearly separated from the public sphere, the retreat of women into the private sphere became a logical consequence. Along with this, the wife's role was more and more confined to the private sphere and hence to the household. Engels stated that since the household no longer concerned society, the role of the wife corresponded to that of a “servant” (Engels 1986 [1884]: 137). Evidence of these new roles, obligations, and duties is reflected in literature, as well as mirrored in the analysis by Engels and Marx, who considered the change in the family system as a consequence of capitalism. With the rise of

³⁸ In this study I will not discuss whether the conditions of the nineteenth century can or should be compared to the eras described above in Ancient Greece and in the Roman Empire.

capitalism, conflicts between the classes increased. Marx and Engels differentiated between the “bourgeoisie” and the “proletariat”; the former owned the means of production while the latter only possessed their labor and were de facto without possessions (Marx, Engels and Hobsbawm 1999 [1891]). Their groundbreaking work later influenced the work of Luxemburg (1913) and was influential in social anthropology for both neo-Marxist theorists such as Meillassoux (1975) and feminist theorists like Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974) and Ortner (1985). Engel’s approach was likewise taken up by theorists whose work centered on the analysis of the so-called “unpaid or underpaid work of women” (see below).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, formalist and later on structuralist approaches emerged and theoretically and methodologically contradicted the speculative reconstructions of evolutionism, and hence of evolutionary theory. The founders of social anthropology – Bronislaw Malinowski for the European and Franz Boas for the American context – produced empirical fieldwork results that contradicted former evolutionary assumptions (see e.g. Malinowski 2005 [1922]; Boas 1970 [1897]).

Despite some neo-evolutionist trends in social anthropology, it seems clear to me that empirical research has convincingly demonstrated that the so-called “natural evolutionary stages,” through which family structures, economic conditions, and “religious stages” change together and in the same direction, are no more than ideological assumptions.

A turning point in *household studies*

Household-based studies became increasingly important with the renunciation of the so-called *grand theories* in social anthropology and sociology in the late 1970s. Since the 1970s *household studies* has (re)emerged and is conducted all over the world and remains of interest in the social sciences to the present day. This fact is certainly related to scholars’ interest in finding out how household members act and what role “culture” plays. Most scholars agree with Hammel that households are “the next bigger thing on the social map after an individual” (Hammel, in: Netting, Wilk and Arnould 1984a: 40–41) and proceed to answer the three “W-Questions” (who, what and where) with respect to researching the household. The composition of

the household as well as the actions of its corresponding agents (e.g. Bourdieu 1980) differs clearly with respect to cultural and socioeconomic circumstances (e.g. a Yoruba household versus a Pakistani household). Initial research on *household studies* was principally conducted in rural and peripheral regions. Later, urban and central regions as well as policy-related debates on households formed part of the research agenda (e.g. the growing number of single or elderly persons).

In the context of the commencement and increased academic popularity of *household studies*, a group of renowned social anthropologists and historians gathered at a Wenner-Gren symposium to debate whether the “household is a significant unit in the description, comparison and analysis of human societies” (Netting, Wilk and Arnould 1984a). The symposium was called “Households: Changing Form and Function” and aimed at bringing together scholars to contribute to the question of “what the household does and how it works” (Netting et al. 1984a: xix). The conference papers were reviewed and published as an edited volume (Netting et al. 1984a: xix), one of whose significant contributions has been to overcome the shortcomings of earlier studies that emphasized evolution and typology.

After years of vivid debates and a futile attempt to find a universal definition of the household, the consensus has become that the household is useful as a recognizable unit of comparison, not only for its value in academic research but also for its practical relevance. This is because the concept of the household is also broadly applied by governments, NGOs and international organizations. In fact, socialist and capitalist governments continue to collect basic census data at the household level. For example, projections for ideal and anticipated future developments are based on census material (see Chapter Five). With respect to Vietnam, relevant data on censuses and on past developments are available online (see e.g. General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2010).

Based on research data gathered in the last decades, scholars agree on the function of the household as a universal and recognizable concept for cross-cultural and historical comparisons (Netting et al. 1984a: xix). Kunstadter points out:

“Despite the existence of a few ethnographic anomalies, most people in most societies at most times live in households, membership in which is usually based on kinship relationships of marriage and descent, which are simultaneously a combination of dwelling unit, a unit of economic cooperation (at least in distribution and consumption), and the unit in which most reproduction and early childhood socialization takes place” (1984: 300).

In an attempt to identify a cross-cultural scheme that is sensitive and adaptable to diverse ethnographic variations, a categorization of five household types has been elaborated by Hammel and Laslett (1974) and by Sanjek (1982). These major household types are: solitaries, non-family households, simple family households, extended family households and multiple family households (for details see Sanjek 1996: 286).

In the 1990s a shift towards *security* occurred in *household studies*. In addition to the social sciences, political economy looks into the subject of households and defines them as “consumption units”. This attention has revealed the often “invisible work” (e.g. in the realm of reproduction) mainly accomplished by women [e.g. “Bielefelder Soziologen”, Jelin (1991)]. Espling sums up two important contradictions regarding the household concept. On the one hand, households can be a safety net in which individuals pool incomes and other resources as well as share consumption. On the other hand, household strategies to reduce vulnerability sometimes impose unequal burdens on household members. As women have increasingly taken on income-generating activities in addition to their household tasks, they often work more hours than men (Espling 1999: 37). Although the household is considered an entity, it is also true that because of possible conflicts of interest household members do not always act as a unit (see e.g. Hostettler 1996; Meillassoux 1975). Therefore, the household cannot be considered a strictly defined unit.

A further characteristic of households is their *embeddedness in broader networks* (e.g. extended kinship; marriage rules; friends; political, religious and economic networks), which can be affected by migration from urban to rural areas and vice versa. If we take into account the complexity of possible forms of living, it is not surprising that a unique consensus on the household’s nature does not exist. Often, but not always, household members are linked by kinship or marriage; yet these concepts – as well as gender- and

age-related membership – are emic in nature. As Goody (1972) states, a household may assume different forms as members arrive and depart and new households are established. This can be correlated to *life-cycle-related events* (birth, marriage, divorce, death) or to the incorporation of friends or sojourners into the household, to name but a few options. The latter is the case for some of my interviewees, especially for medium- and large-sized business households, since workers often eat and in some cases even sleep during most of the year at the employer's house, thus becoming a quasi-household member (see Chapter Five). A similar phenomenon for households at this same income level is the fact that they are very likely to have a housekeeper who cleans the house, washes the clothes, sometimes cooks and, in rarer cases, is also responsible for “shopping” in the local markets.³⁹ Now and then such housekeepers also sleep at the house instead of returning to their own households after work. Another work-related extension of the household is the case of students (often from rural areas) who tend to stay with city relatives as they further their education (e.g. the nephew of one of my interviewees). When conversing with and interviewing members of a household, I always asked about temporary and permanent persons who shared space with other household members but were not related by blood. Consequently, the variety that exists in the “co-resident” unit is apparent. To conclude, one can say that a household can consist of an old, widowed man or a childless couple; range from a nuclear to a multi-generational household; include kin, friends, employees, or temporary sojourners, to name but a few.

Netting, Wilk and Arnould assembled various definitions of the household and summed them up in a concise definition:

“the household as such is ‘remarkably fluid in structure and impermanent in boundaries’ (Wheaton 1975), a ‘process’ rather than an institution (Hammel 1972), a task-group rather than just a product of cultural rules (Carter, Anthony, Robert Merrill 1979: iii), with a history of adaptive consolidation and nuclearization” (Herlihy in: Netting et al. 1984a xviii).

³⁹ Based on personal observations, interviews and informal conversations during field research in 2005, 2006 and 2010.

In the next section, I will investigate whether the distinction between “family” and “household” is useful or relevant with respect to this research.

Family or household?

In academic discourses it was – and sometimes still is – a matter of debate whether one can use “family” and “household” interchangeably or whether one should define and use these concepts differently. Often the two are distinguished in terms of household as a co-residence and family as a kinship unit. In my opinion the distinction is relevant to our ability to work with precise and transparent concepts. In this respect the research of Yanagisako (2015; 1979) is pertinent. She precisely analyzed differences between the family and the household as well as other forms of domestic groups that uniquely exist in Japanese society (e.g. *shotai*, *kazoku*, *dozoku* and *ie*).

With respect to the definition of the “family”, there are debates about whether family members need to be consanguineous (Seddon 1976), if agnatic kinship (based on the father’s side) is relevant and if marriage in general transforms people into family members. I agree with Linton who points out that households, like families, are culturally defined. Yet the household is a so-called task-oriented residence unit, while families are conceived of as kinship groupings that need not be localized (Linton 1936: 152–159). In practice an overlap between the household and family members often occurs since relatives often sleep and reside in the same household. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the theoretical distinction is useful for social science research and analysis because it conceptually and methodologically sets the frame about whom and what is being researched. Therefore, one can practically summarize the distinction between the household and the family by using the example of dogs: a dog living in a Vietnamese household that consists of a father, mother and two children is a household member but not a family member.

In order to investigate the Vietnamese “way of life”, the concept of the household is my point of reference. Living as a single person remains an exception despite ongoing changes. This is due to the high rate of marriage and – in the cases of Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City – the scant availability of living space. I understand the household as a “co-resident unit” and

thereby follow Kleinen (1999: 117). Whenever I speak of the Vietnamese household in subsequent chapters, I will be applying the emic Vietnamese form of household: *hộ*. If the term “household” is used, it refers to the general concept of the household as discussed above.

The *hộ khẩu*: The Vietnamese registration system of the household

The basic research unit of this research is the household in Vietnam. In 1954 the Communist Party of Vietnam came into power. During the socialist era, the socialist regimes in Vietnam and China sought to transform the unequal structures of the household. Similar attempts were also undertaken in other socialist countries such as Cambodia and, to a lesser extent, Laos. The household was identified as the primary location for producing and passing on economic, cultural and educational value. The socialist authorities of that time identified these values as “traditional”, “patriarchal” and “capitalist”. These values were opposed to the aspirational ideals of the socialist regimes, which aimed at promoting “modern”, “egalitarian” and “socialist” values. Therefore, the goal of the authorities consisted in deconstructing the unequal structures of the household in particular and the old structures in general in order to build up a “new socialist society”.⁴⁰

In 1954 the Communist Party of Vietnam introduced the household registration system called *hộ khẩu*, which is based on the Chinese *hù kǒu* (see Solinger 1999). This registration system was used to regulate the urban and rural division of labor, to control migration and to support institutionalized socialist production.⁴¹ The system of the *hộ khẩu* (household registration system) was especially relevant during the subsidy period when all registered people received quotas.⁴² In those times the authorities also forced

⁴⁰ In my dissertation on Cuba, I analyzed how Fidel Castro and Che Guevara aimed at building up a “new society” based on the ideal of the “new man” [Original: *hombre nuevo*] elaborated by Che Guevara (see Guevara 1978; Wehrli 2009: 78-81).

⁴¹ According to Decree Number 36, signed by the Ministry of Labor on 9 September 1960.

⁴² In Cuba a similar system called the *libreta* still exists and provides basic food items such as sugar, rice, bread and, depending upon availability, oil, eggs and chicken. Between 1960 and the early 1980s, rum, cigarettes, clothing and hygienic products formed part of the *libreta*. Cuba’s head of state Raúl Castro has announced that in the future the *libreta* system might only be available to poor households.

people to migrate from urban to rural or – according to the region and in rare cases – from rural to urban areas. Even now the Vietnamese authorities differentiate between urban and rural origins with respect to rights for registered housing, workers’ rights and school access for offspring. In the Vietnamese context, the *hộ khẩu* is also a means to distinguish between official and unofficial residents. Consequently, numerous migrants living and working in large cities such as Hà Nội are “unofficial” residents.

In 1997, every household (regardless of whether it consisted of one or more persons) in Vietnam received a record book that constituted the basis for population data.⁴³ Although the meaning of the *hộ khẩu* and the *hộ* has changed over the decades, it remains a valuable analytical concept for identifying how these changes manifest themselves, as the following two examples will demonstrate. First, in contrast to the subsidy period before *Đổi mới*, the official registration of a *hộ* member no longer grants access to food subsidies from the government. Another relevant change that becomes evident while analyzing *hộ khẩu* statistics over the last decades is the significantly smaller size of the *hộ* [from six children in 1970 to 2.03 in 2009 (General Statistic Office of Vietnam 2010b: 62)]. This is due to the strictly implemented “two-child policy” (see Chapter Eight). Since the *hộ* remains the official data unit for statistically measuring changes, it also offers a valuable means for comparison over the decades.

The relevance of the *hộ* also gained momentum with the re-emergence of the market driven, *hộ*-based production that became the norm as one of the consequences of *Đổi mới*. Consequently, the importance of the *hộ* to the “wealth of the nation” significantly increased. Tran and Nguyen state that the household became an independent economic unit and that this implied economic differentiation among households (1995: 205). The diverse outcomes with respect to income generation by the *hộ* will be analyzed in Chapters Six and Seven.

Given the strong Vietnamese valuation of lineage and kinship, as well as of moral duties, rights and obligations, the *hộ* also serves as a safety net. I consider this to be of immense relevance in the context of Vietnamese soci-

⁴³ See Decree Number 51, signed by the Government of Vietnam on 10 May 1997, and Circular Number 06-TT/BNV (C13), signed by the Vietnam Ministry of Home Affairs on 20 June 1997.

ety. Although households serve as a safety net in numerous societies, this is by no means a universal phenomenon. Research on the English household, for example, makes clear that the household has never been an autonomous and self-contained unit in English society. Laslett has demonstrated how the orphans, widows and paupers produced by economic hardship are handled by public charities and local communities, not by household members (1969: 199-223).

Seen from a general point of view, the analysis of households has the advantage that households are readily identifiable, countable, and – of great importance for social science – comparable. Notwithstanding, this every concept also has its disadvantages, and it is important to be aware of possible pitfalls. In the following section I will analyze those that are the most relevant with respect to my research.

Challenging aspects of the *hộ* and the household concept

In this section I focus on three main problematic aspects of the *hộ*, namely, methodological challenges, ideological challenges and researcher bias.

Given the broad data that anthropologists gather, it is inevitable that overlaps and sometimes even contradictions between categories occur. If one reviews the social anthropological literature it becomes evident that researchers have defined ethnographically specific groups and labelled them as, for example, “domestic groups” (Goody 1972), “production-consumption units” (Cleveland 1980), “budget unions” (Seddon 1976) and “hui members” (Wehrli 2006). This fosters a precise description of a given group but has the disadvantage of making comparison difficult (Hammel 1980). As research data make clear, these economic groups sometimes tend to be more important for the individuals involved than the households to which they belong. With respect to my data however it is clear that by far the majority of the persons I interviewed identify more with the *hộ* than with any other economic or religious membership (research data gathered between 2004 and 2010).

In addition to the analytical inadequacies of various categories, methodological problems arise, for example, with respect to sampling: In order to make comparisons, a large number of cases sampled at several points in

time must be collected (Netting et al. 1984a: xxiv). This is a solution not often available to historians, sociologists or social anthropologists. With the aim of reaching the goal of a broad and transparent data sample, my research was conducted in two different cities over a longitudinal period between 2004 and 2010.

In addition to these methodological challenges, ideological challenges exist as well. Historians – and in the context of (post)socialist societies, social anthropologists to some extent as well – who are unable to conduct research on their own, but instead must rely on the proposed households by officials, may have little choice other than to accept the blocks of names in a census list as reflecting co-residential units (see Chapter Five). These blocks of names may represent government functionaries' stereotypes of who properly belongs to a household. Further problems can be identified with respect to culturally pervasive concepts that veil reality. For example, in the Vietnamese context, the “head of the *hộ*” is almost always and by definition the oldest man; or if more than one generation lives together and the oldest man is deceased, the oldest woman is considered the head of the *hộ*, not her son and his family. This clearly reflects the influence of Confucianism and is an impressive example of the preservation of “tradition” over a reliance on registered data. This becomes most evident in those cases – although they are rather rare – where land is officially registered in the wife's name. A further challenge in the Vietnamese context is the existence of a “mistress relationship”. A mistress may correspond to a “second wife” who is not officially married to the husband but sometimes lives together with him and his “first wife” and her children. In such cases it becomes evident that the ideology of the nuclear family model is often taken as the implicit prototype for the regulation of kin, sexual relationships and living arrangements (Lenero-Otto 1977). Based on my research data, “second wives” are in most cases living in separate *hộ*. Nevertheless, they are often economically dependent and therefore semi-present in most household decision-making processes.

Last but not least, the bias of the researcher has to be taken into account. Framed and formed by their own cultural, gendered and socio-economic backgrounds (Bourdieu 1980), it is unfortunately – and despite long-lasting conversations in our discipline – still the case that researchers expect to find

certain categories and answers, and thus enter the field filled with their own preconceptions about the expected “social reality”. The attempt to be aware of the unknown and to periodically reevaluate concepts by discussing them critically with colleagues – and even more important, with local colleagues and friends – might unveil such preconceptions. To do so is at least to make a worthwhile attempt to reflect on one’s own bias, and this forms an integral part of my methodological procedure, analysis and reflection (see also Strauss and Corbin 1996 for further discussion).

In order to respect the limitations of this research, I will not take up the current discussion in social anthropology about the “ontological turn” and what “reality” is or is not. A concise overview of that debate can be found in e.g. Carrithers and Candea (2010); Heywood (2012); Holbraad (2007); Viveiros de Castro (2004).

In the final section of this chapter, I will focus on the theoretical and methodological contribution of the conceptual use of the household, in relation to the *hộ*, for our discipline.

The theoretical and methodological contribution of the conceptual use of the household, in relation to the *hộ*, for social anthropology

The social anthropologist Selim has stated correctly that with the onset of the processes of renovation (*Đổi mới*) in 1986 the state retreated from numerous societal domains. As a consequence, a reorientation toward pre-socialist household structures and their corresponding rights and duties can be identified (Selim 2003a). To what extent this holds to be true with respect to northern Vietnam and the last decade, that is to say, from 2003 onwards, will be analyzed in the corresponding research questions.

The opening up of Vietnamese society towards capitalism also went hand in hand with processes of rapid urbanization and socioeconomic change. With respect to Vietnam, a former agrarian country that is now confronted with rapid urbanization, the statement by Netting et al. (1984a) holds true:

“The family household is an institution sensitive to minor, short-term fluctuations in the socioeconomic environment and a prime means by which individuals adapt

to the subtle shifts in opportunities and constraints that confront them” (Netting et al. 1984a: xix).

Werner and Bélanger, who have researched in northern Vietnam, are of the opinion that since the 1990s research has shifted to the micro-level, and so now they consider the emerging role of the household as the main unit of analysis (Werner and Bélanger 2002). The relevance of the household for understanding the changing situation in Vietnam has also been promoted by Hirschman and Vu Manh Loi (1996).

I aim to contribute theoretically to the further development of the concept of the household. With the goal of facilitating an overview of the relevant points in support of the study of households, I here summarize the most relevant ones. *First*, I am convinced that households serve on the micro-level as a mirror that exemplifies and reflects changes back to us (e.g. demographic changes such as smaller households, or the ideal of the “two-child policy”). *Second*, research on the household implies an innovative style of consideration that by acknowledging interdependence between the two avoids an exclusive concentration on either the individual or society (Wehrli 2012a). The investigation of households permits insights into complex processes of interdependence and allows for a deeper understanding of society. *Third*, the analysis of the household provides a valuable analytical tool for understanding highly complex “modern” societies that are marked by socioeconomic changes. In this respect I agree with Netting et al. (1984a) that the household neither disintegrates nor completely transforms itself when descent groups break down or when ethnic groups and cities coalesce (Netting et al. 1984a: xxiii). The analysis of the household, with its household members of different generations and genders, encompasses a distinct set of economic, cultural and educational values. The analysis of this makes clear how certain “values” have changed or not. Furthermore, it allows for tracing changes in the spheres of activity that underlie household forms. *Fourth*, the conceptual use of a household perspective gives insight into correlations between economic developments and changes of “norms” and “values”. These correlations cannot be reached with macro-economic theories of “modernization”. I will, for example, demonstrate how and for what reasons certain “values” inhibit intended developments. Ethnographic

research on the *hộ* level demonstrates that “traditional Confucian values” are predominant, despite the “gender equality” officially promoted by the Vietnamese government and various international and non-governmental organizations. *Hộ* members are socially encouraged and sometimes even forced to adhere to the Confucian obligation of having a male heir⁴⁴. One consequence of this social fact manifests itself in a statistically significant gender imbalance that results from female feticide (General Statistic Office of Vietnam 2010: 63; see also Chapter Eight). *Fifth*, based on the analysis of my extensive data material, I am of the opinion that social scientists in general and social anthropologists researching in Vietnam in particular ought to include both living and deceased household members within their field of inquiry. Deceased *hộ* members often if not in most cases escape the net of inquiry (see below). Scholars have already extensively examined how household members who are living elsewhere contribute to households despite their physical absence. Their contributions range from economic support in the form of remittances or material goods to symbolic support – for example, by counseling the household on decision-making processes [see e.g. Diaz-Briquets and Perez-Lopez (1997); Nquoi Viet (2010); Russell (1986); World Bank (2010); (2008); research data conducted between 2005-10]. *Hộ*-related decision-making processes in Vietnam are primarily related to life-cycle-related changes such as the entrance of a child into a new school (primary, secondary or university), consultations about the organization of a memorial for a deceased household member, spending larger amounts of money or building an additional floor or a new house (field data gathered between 2005-10). Yet another aspect of “absent” and yet “present” *hộ* members is relevant as it refers to the – at least for most of us – “invisible *hộ* members” in the form of ghosts, spirits and ancestors. In

⁴⁴ One might argue that family members (household members and family members of other households minus household members of other families) and not household members are the ones who are concerned with respect to religious rituals. Although this holds true for some rituals (especially those which only the oldest son can perform), it does not for others. In practice and as my data show, numerous other rituals are indeed performed by household members (also employees who are not kin related) since it is believed that those living under one roof need to “respect” the ancestors of the “family” and are expected to symbolically contribute (information collected during field research in 2010 and 2016).

northern Vietnam these invisible members form a part of every household and are regularly attended to. Although it might sound strange – especially in the socioeconomic context of “Western societies” – relevant decisions by the *hộ* are in most cases never made without prior consultation with the deceased. The relevance of ancestor worship in Vietnam⁴⁵ also manifests itself in the obligations of the living towards their ancestors as “absent and yet present *Hộ* members” (see Chapter Seven for a detailed discussion of ancestor worship). This sense of obligation clearly influences the actions of the living. This holds especially true if one takes into account that the relationship between the deceased and the living is seen as reciprocal and endless. *Sixth*, the study of the *hộ* has the practical advantage that this form of data is readily available and that interviewees are familiar with the concept. *Seventh*, it has the advantage of allowing for comparison between different households, between cities and regions, between different points in time and to a certain extent even between societies.⁴⁶

To summarize, one can state that the conceptual use of the household as a link between the individual and society is theoretically and methodologically relevant in the context of Vietnam. The analysis of households permits insights into complex processes of interdependence and allows for a deeper understanding of societies in transition (see e.g. Wehrli 2012a; 2012b; 2011). Thus, an analysis of the household in relation to the *hộ* provides a valuable analytical tool for understanding highly complex “modern” societies that are marked by socioeconomic change. In contrast to macroeconomic theories of “modernization”, the conceptual use of a household perspective enables insights into correlations between economic developments and changes in “norms” and “values” by indicating, for example, how and for what reasons certain “values” foster or inhibit intended developments.

The goal of the following section consists in demonstrating how other relevant concepts such as “gender” and “sex”, “norms” and “values”, and

⁴⁵ As stated previously my research data focus on northern Vietnam. Ancestor worship however is of high relevance for all ethnic Vietnamese, although practices and rituals performed in service of ancestor worship vary according to region.

⁴⁶ Difficulties in comparing the data cross-culturally and/or within one society have been discussed above.

“modernity” and “tradition” are theoretically used within the context of this research. Since these concepts are not as central as the concept of the household, this section will limit itself to outlining the arguments most relevant to this study and referring to corresponding debates in academia.

Further relevant research concepts for this study: “gender” and “sex”, “norms” and “values”, “modernity” and “tradition”

With respect to the use of the concepts of sex and gender, it is relevant to briefly clarify my own understanding of the terms. The categories of sex and gender have been extensively debated, criticized and reformulated since Simone de Beauvoir’s influential statement that one is not a woman, but becomes one (Beauvoir 2001 [1949]). Feminist theory in recent decades has been characterized by numerous and sometimes opposing positions. Various theories such as structuralism, neo-Marxism, postcolonial studies and (post-)structuralism have influenced feminist theory. And feminist theory has contributed valuable insights to a variety of disciplines by challenging former concepts as well as by introducing new ones. Some of the perspectives stated by authors such as Ortner (1974), and Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974), among others, have been partly revised, adjusted or expanded (see e.g. Ortner 2006; Ortner 1996; Ortner and Whitehead 1981). Yet some concepts loop around and (re-)emerge to correspond to a revival of older positions (see e.g. Rendtorff 1996). Despite numerous theoretical contributions, the most influential position today might be the idea that “gender is made” and is not static. This view implies a process of subjects constructing and altering society. In addition, the by now commonly used distinction between sex as “biological sex” and gender as the “social and cultural construction of sex” is widely being applied. In academia it is well known that gendered expectations of men and women are strongly influenced by corresponding “norms” and “values”, which are in turn mutually influenced, altered or subverted by the concrete actions of men and women.

In this respect I agree with Butler, who states that it is problematic to rely exclusively on the dualistic dichotomy between sex as a product of “biology and nature”, and gender as a “socially constructed one”. Butler is right when she questions whether biological sex is not also cultural,

because biology is always formed and constructed culturally (see e.g. Butler 1999 [1990]; 1997; 1993).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the distinction between sex and gender remains useful since both “biological sex” (sex) and “socially constructed sex” (gender) continue to form part of structural power constellations and specific forms of discrimination. Especially with respect to selective abortion, “biological sex” becomes a category with existentialist meaning. Throughout this study I will thus use “sex” as a biological category and “gender” as a socially constructed category.

The decision to focus on “biological” sex in order to explain a “cultural” social fact is also meaningful in the Vietnamese context. The social anthropologist Rydstrøm (2003), who researched in northern Vietnam, argues that in the Vietnamese context it is the “male body” that symbolizes the honor and continuity of the family’s name (see Chapters Nine and Ten).

Other relevant concepts are “norms” and “values” as well as “modernity” and “tradition”. “Norm” will be used to describe the established mode of behavior in any culture in which conformity is expected (see e.g. Hitlin and Piliavin 2004). Hence I will not use the term as a reference to the statistical norm but rather for the expected behavior or ideal norm [see e.g. Barnard and Spencer 1997 (1996): 615]. The term “value” will be used in its wider sense as a general principle that guides and directs daily actions. Both “norms” and “rules” are derived from “values”.

The analysis of “norms” and “values” is challenging because they are widely debated in complex societies and vary between subgroups and according to socio-historical contexts. Changes in “values” and “norms” mirror a society’s socioeconomic changes and will therefore be analyzed at the national, household and individual levels. With respect to the analysis of discourses, it is interesting to investigate how and why “norms” and “values” are emphasized or rejected, because this allows the drawing of conclusions about current power constellations within society. Thus, meanings are often interchangeable between “modern” and “traditional” and vary according to the socioeconomic context. The debate on “norms” and “values” is always linked to an evaluation of the past, the present and the future.

⁴⁷ For a critique of Judith Butler see e.g. Jagger 2008 and Müller 2009; for Butler’s reply see e.g. Butler 2004.

However, it would be far too simple to equate the past with “tradition”, the future with “modernity” and the present with a transition between the two. Such interpretations are often ambivalent in nature and tend to serve normative purposes if either “modernity” or “tradition” is equated with “better” or “worse” behaviors, living circumstances and so on.

In this respect it is useful to track the argumentation of influential organizations, such as religious institutions or the state, that aim to link “tradition” or “modernity” with normative meanings in order to motivate or inhibit a certain type of behavior. Among the variety of possible interpretations of the relationship between “tradition” and “modernity”, the following are widespread among Vietnam scholars: Some perceive “tradition” as being eroded by “modernity”; others think that a mingling of “modernity” and “tradition” takes place; while yet others argue that “modernity” is being “re-traditionalized” (see e.g. Taylor 2002: 7-8).

I will apply the highly ambivalent and extensively analyzed concepts of “modernity” and “tradition” by relying on current emic discourse prevalent in contemporary Vietnam. “Modern” thus equates to ideas such as industrialization, “progress” (GSO 2010a; Werner 2002), urbanization, equality among genders, and the “norms” and “values” that are being touted in the “civilization campaigns” (e.g. Harms 2009). These campaigns aim at reshaping the appearance of major cities by pushing the informal sector (see e.g. Cling et al. 2010) away from the cities’ centers and by improving hygienic standards (for example, by prohibiting street vendors from selling either raw or cooked food to customers). “Tradition” will be equated with Confucian “norms” and “values” such as patrilineality and patrilocality, as well as with sex- and gender-related obligations and privileges. I am well aware that “tradition” and “modernity” thus described may well be identified with the opposite meanings in a couple of decades. Nevertheless, it is productive for social anthropology to look at concrete living experiences, to analyze prevalent discourses and to identify how and for which reasons the corresponding meanings of “modernity” or “tradition” are being negotiated and mutually (re)constructed.

Nguyen-vo (2008; 2006) accurately demonstrates how, before *Đổi mới*, women who worked in the official economic sector were identified as “modern” and were officially praised in state discourse for their progres-

sive, so-called “modern values” (Nguyen-vo 2008). After *Đổi mới* however, the official discourse began to reformulate, in accordance with Confucian “tradition”, the “values” attributed to women working in the same sectors as submission, work and obedience. The interpretation of “norms” and “values” thus varies according to the point of view and transforms itself accordingly from “modern” to “traditional” and vice-versa (Nguyen-vo 2008; 2006).

Chapter Six: The Quest for Wealth in (Post-)Socialist Northern Vietnam

Vietnam is a socialist state that is facing numerous openings in the economic, political and socio-cultural domain. To acknowledge this fact, some scholars use the term “post-war Vietnam”. But since Vietnam has faced numerous wars and is – depending on the point of view – still facing some war conflicts (e.g. in the South Chinese sea), I think that this term is unclear. I prefer the term (post-)socialist northern Vietnam and therefore have added (post-) in parentheses throughout this research.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the Vietnamese household, the *hộ*, in theoretical and methodological detail. The goal of this chapter is to provide empirical evidence for my first research question about the social interaction of the *hộ* members and their means of earning an income. The analysis will foster an understanding of why the *hộ* remains of central importance within Vietnamese society despite ongoing changes. Furthermore, the results will shed light on culturally based assumptions and duties that are still relevant in these times.

The central research goal of this research is to scrutinize the *hộ*. My main research question is: What is the form of the *hộ* in Vietnam? In order to answer this question, I look at the following as well: How has the *hộ* changed with respect to the periods before and after the onset of *Đổi mới*, which was officially launched in 1986 by the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Vietnamese state? Do members of the *hộ* pool their income? Is it common to work in one job or multiple jobs in order to either advance one’s standard of living or that of all the members of the *hộ*? To understand the decision-making processes of the *hộ*, I will discuss who has the most important role in these processes within the *hộ* and explore whether the person with the highest economic “capital” has the most powerful position in the *hộ*. Last but not least, I will discuss the interdependence that exists between social responsibilities and income.

First, I will summarize the relevant results of my main research question. Then I will discuss the state’s promotion of self-employment to show

who is meant to form part of the so-called “new heroes of the nation”. Next, peculiarities of the Vietnamese labor context will be analyzed in order to describe how members of the *hộ* are making their living. Following these theoretical concepts, I present and analyze four case examples (case examples 6, 14, 15 and 42) from my field research that offer insights into the concrete daily lives of citizens in Nam Định. These cases will shed light on distribution mechanisms within the *hộ* as well as the social responsibilities and duties among *hộ* members. Official statistics and numerous studies exclusively refer to salaries⁴⁸. In the Vietnamese context however, in almost no cases do salaries equal income. This is due to the numerous jobs that are performed by some *hộ* members and the financial support that flows from the younger to the older generation. Therefore, it is useful to inquire what counts as income.

Based on these data, I give an overview of the incomes of forty-eight *hộ* in Nam Định City (see Diagram 2). To conclude I connect my theoretical assumptions with empirical data to show how the interviewees judge their income situation.

On the form and the economic activities of the *hộ*: Empirical results for the first research question

In my previous chapter on the household and the *hộ*, I presented some answers to the first research question of this research. I discussed the meaning of the *hộ* as well as the reasons for the introduction of the system by the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1954. As with the “two-child policy” introduced in 1983, it is possible to trace changes in the *hộ* before and after the onset of *Đổi mới*. Doing so makes clear how external factors affect individual decision-making processes. In contrast to the past when the slogan “the more children the better” prevailed, especially in the countryside, the political agenda of *Đổi mới* advocated the idea that “two children

⁴⁸ In 2006, I organized a workshop to share my research results in Nam Định City. Among the participants were the chief of the statistics department of Nam Định City who confirmed that statistics rely on the official salary. Consequently, he was surprised about the discrepancy between the statistically declared income of the *hộ* and my considerably (higher) research findings that comprised the salary and other sources of income.

make a happy family”. Hence, political regulations limited the number of children per couple to two. Theoretically parents are no longer able to decide for themselves how many children are ideal (Chapter Eight details the corresponding decision-making processes). Given the population growth of Vietnam, the aim of this restriction is to ensure sufficient workers for the ongoing economic growth of Vietnam without exceeding available living space.

State promotion of self-employment and the “new heroes of the nation”

Vietnam’s population is increasing, and jobs for millions have to be provided. In the context of Vietnam’s socio-political trajectory, this situation grew more pressing with the onset of *Đổi mới*. In contrast to the past when capitalist endeavors were for the most part strictly prohibited, or at the very least viewed sceptically, the Vietnamese government is now actively encouraging the population “to enrich themselves”. In parallel with this new paradigm, “successful businesspeople and entrepreneurs” are seen as the heroes of the post-*Đổi mới* era, rather than the soldiers who sacrificed their lives to defend the nation during the decades of war before *Đổi mới* (Wehrli 2012b: 297). Consequently, private businesses are promoted and a new set of professions in the domain of trade is emerging. Gainsborough, for example, noted already in 2004 that private firms were becoming more important, although the state’s business interests still predominated (Gainsborough 2004: 50). The promotion of income generation through self-employment has led to the spread of various kinds of *hộ* businesses and enterprises.

In contrast to the term “enterprise”, which refers to *hộ* concerns that regularly employ more than ten employees, a *hộ* business has to fulfill the following four criteria⁴⁹:

- “It is established by an individual who is a Vietnamese citizen, or group or household;
- no more than ten employees and only one business location;
- no business seal;

⁴⁹ Decree No. 88/2006/ND-CP of 29 August 2006 about business registration lays down the rules for registration of a *hộ* business.

- liable for the debts of the business with all of their assets” (Cling et al. 2010: 195).

Hộ members do not have to register their businesses if they engage in agricultural production or work as street vendors or as travelling or small vendors. When I make reference to these income-generating activities, I use the term “independent work” (“*làm nghề tự do*”). These activities, which also include services, do not require an official registration and provide “low incomes”. The definition of a “low income” is set by People’s Committees in provinces and centrally run cities (see Cling et al. 2010: 195).

With respect to Vietnam, one has to bear in mind that the gap in employment opportunities and living standards between urban and rural areas still prevails. That is why the impact of renovation differs between predominantly rural communities and the cities. The labor market in Vietnam is complex and offers numerous ways and means to make a living. For this reason, if one is researching how *hộ* members are generating their income, it is important to be aware of the idiosyncrasies of the Vietnamese labor market. The most relevant of these will be discussed below.

Unemployment, retirement and the category of “independent work” (“*làm nghề tự do*”)

According to the position of Le Hong Ha, the main problem in Vietnam is not unemployment but underemployment and generally low incomes (1995). In 2013 the official unemployment rate amounted to 2.18 percent for Vietnam, with a higher unemployment rate in urban areas (3.59 percent) than in rural areas (1.54 percent). The corresponding underemployment rate was 2.75 for the country as a whole and was lower for urban areas (1.48 percent) than rural areas (3.31 percent). In the Red River Delta, the official unemployment rate is 2.65 percent, which is higher than the national average. In urban areas it even rises to 5.13 percent as compared to 1.60 percent for the rural areas. The underemployment rate is 2.66 for the Red River Delta, with 1.33 percent for urban and 3.20 percent for rural areas (GSO 201c5).⁵⁰ Yet it is relevant to note that these official statistics

⁵⁰ General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2015c: Unemployment and underemployment

with respect to the unemployment rate are low and would be regarded as full-employment in other countries.

My research results in both Nam Định City and Hà Nội show that numerous interviewees are officially unemployed. Yet they do not necessarily “sit at home” and “wait for a job”. With respect to the sample of the forty-eight *hộ* researched in Nam Định City in 2006, eleven people would be labelled as unemployed⁵¹ according to the official categories, because they neither work for a state firm nor do they own a private business. However, if one is analyzing what these “unemployed persons” do, it becomes clear that ten out of eleven of these persons “work independently”. Only one sixteen-year-old man, who had just finished school and who is inclined to gambling and playing video games in the various internet cafés of Nam Định City, is still looking for a job (case example 43). In the Vietnamese context, such officially “unemployed people” are categorized under “independent work” (*“làm nghề tự do”*). Examples of such professions that fall under this category are “*xe ôm*” drivers (motorbike drivers who provide taxi-like services to customers), construction workers and street vendors.⁵² Thus, it is important to bear in mind that unemployment in the formal sector does not imply that no job is being performed (see e.g. House 1984).

In addition to people who are officially labeled as “unemployed” although they “work independently”, another form of unemployment exists that is masked by an official status of being in “retirement”. This hidden form of unemployment is common and often targets people well beyond the age of forty, consequently leading to other forms of income generation. In this sense, it is relevant to inquire about income sources in both the formal and informal sectors.

rates for the labor force by age and by region. In: GOS (ed.): Population and Employment. <https://www.gso.gov.vn/SLTKE/pxweb/en/02.percent20Populationpercent20andpercent20Employment/-/E02.46.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=5a7f4db4-634a-4023-a3dd-c018a7cf951d>, last accessed 5 December 2015.

⁵¹ With respect to unemployment, I am referring to the unemployment status expressed by the interviewees at the time of the interview.

⁵² Unlike many jobs that are equally performed by both genders, in Nam Định City “*xe ôm*” is an exclusively male job. This is not the case in other parts of Vietnam; nevertheless, I would say that it is overall a “male-dominated” job. (Source: Participant observation during field research in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2010).

Jobs in the formal and informal sectors

Hart (1973), who based the distinction between formal and informal sectors on wage employment and self-employment, first proposed the term “informal sector”. The informal economy is sometimes also referred to as the “informal sector”. Keith Hart stated precisely that the informal sector refers to

“those economic activities which take part outside official or recognized arenas and therefore usually escape both regulation and the official record” (Hart 1973: 61).

Research interest in the informal sector has risen ever since, but a clear definition of the term does not exist (see e.g. Widderich and Wehrhan 2000: 113 ff.). Jobs and income possibilities are not restricted to the formal sector, nor are they limited to legal options. Hence my research questions focus on both formal and informal methods of income generation. In the opinion of Elwert et al., neither illegality nor illegitimacy are characteristic of the informal sector (Elwert et al. 1983: 282). Komlosy et al. state that informal activities are generally not recognized by the state and that they border on legality (Komlosy et al. 1997, in: Widderich and Wehrhan 2000: 114). The ILO takes into account the effects of globalization and talks of the “informal economy” concept, which covers both the informal sector and the different forms of informal employment found in the informal and formal sectors (ILO: 2002). To put it in a nutshell: the significance of the informal sector as a segment within the economy is highly disputed.

With respect to Vietnam, when Cling et al. (2010) researched the relevance of the informal sector in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh. When Cling et al. (2010) pioneered research into the relevance of the informal sector, they discovered its economic volume and socioeconomic relevance were much greater than anticipated:

“The real number and economic weight of non-farm household business is still unknown. This is precisely one of the questions we aim to settle...” (Cling et al. 2010: 18).

Prior to their research, estimates of non-farm household businesses ranged from 9.3 million (Vijverberg 2005) to 2.9 million (GSO: 2006) for the same year, namely 2005 (see Cling et al. 2010: 18). One of their research findings points to a lack of interest by the state towards the informal sector. After having completed their research, Cling et al. reported “a total of 12.4 million jobs in the informal sector that is generated by 8.371 million informal production units, of which 7.388 million are held by a household business head in his/her main job and 1.037 million in his/her secondary job” (see *ibid.* 91-2). For enterprises, they calculated 1.894 million jobs (1.820 million as main and 74,000 as a secondary job) (*ibid.* 91-2). In 2007 the informal sector accounted for almost 11 million jobs out of 46 million, which represents almost a quarter of all jobs. With respect to Hà Nội, Cling et al. estimate that the informal sector accounts for 12.1 percent of Hà Nội’s GDP (*ibid.*: 139).

Regarding the local contexts of Hà Nội and Nam Định Cit, I consider everyday life there to be characterized by a melding of the formal and informal sectors. In my opinion, legal and illegal activities cannot be identified as exclusively related to one or the other sector (formal or informal) as they depend on the situational context. For example, two persons might both sell vegetables, but one might be performing a legal activity while the other might be acting illegally. The legal actor has a licence and a stable spot in one of the markets; the illegal actor has no licence but has a stable spot in the market. In the latter case fines or “gifts” have to be presented to local authorities in order to ensure the continuity of the business. I researched both the formal and the informal sectors, with the goal of including both kinds of income-generating activity.

The argument of Le Hong Ha holds to be true with respect to my research data: Numerous informants work in an official job and perform additional jobs in order to increase their incomes (Le Hong Ha 1995). The following diagram shows the income-generating activities and income strata of the forty-eight *hộ* in Nam Định City.

It is relevant to note that in Nam Định City most *hộ* members work either as self-employed entrepreneurs or as state employees (see diagram below).⁵³

⁵³ In Hà Nội the work composition of *hộ* members is more diverse. With respect to my

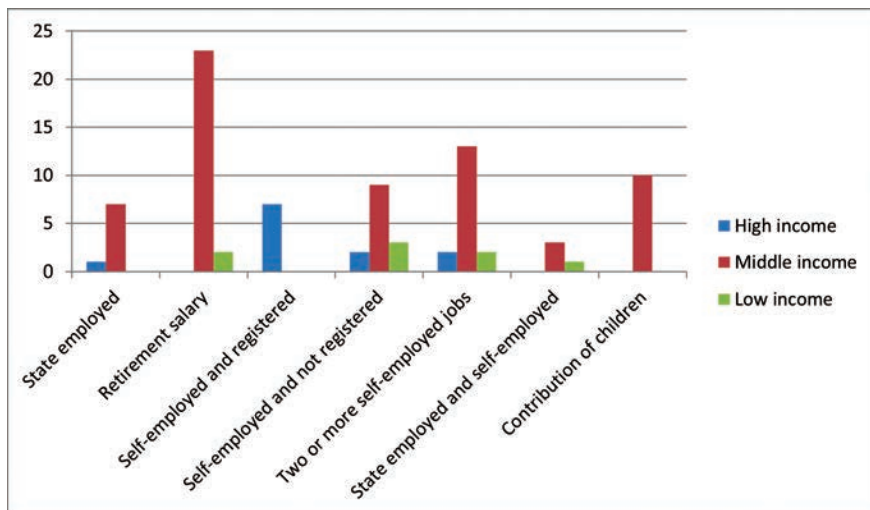


Diagram 1: Income-generating activities of the hộ researched in Nam Định City between 2005 and 2006, diagram by the author.

Based on my sample, members in twenty-one out of forty-eight hộ worked in more than one job between 2005 and 2006. Interestingly, this is the case for all income strata but is especially common among the middle-income hộ. Out of these twenty-one hộ, sixteen belong to the middle-income ranks, two to the higher and the remaining three to the lower.

Only eight out of forty-eight hộ are employed by the state. The small percentage of those who work exclusively as state employee refers to the transformation of the economic sector as a whole. The socialist planning with state employment as a rule gave way to the “market-economy with socialist direction” where the state retreats and paves the way for hộ or individual pursuit of income. Thirty-eight hộ are self-employed entrepreneurs, one person relies exclusively on her retirement salary and one person has no proper income and lives apart from her hộ.

The “retirement salary” category is of interest since people can receive a retirement salary at a comparably young age – e.g. in some cases, such as

sample, 65 percent of the hộ members worked either as self-employed entrepreneurs or as state employees.

textile workers, this can occur already at the age of 40 – and still continue working as a self-employed entrepreneur. I also inquired about individuals who officially register their self-employment activities. Only those *hộ* that belong to the “high income strata” register their self-employment activities (see Diagram 1)⁵⁴. This finding also became apparent in the context of Hồ Chí Minh City (see e.g. Cling et al. 2010). An official license is needed in order to circumvent fines and insecurities in the form of unpredictable demands linked to corruption. Yet it is not uncommon for additional “businesses” to be located in the informal sector and hence to operate without a license.

With respect to my sample, ten *hộ* benefit from the contribution of their children to the *hộ* income. All of them belong to the middle-income ranks. During field research I noted that the offspring of parents with a low income tend to work themselves in jobs with lower income, leaving thus little for savings and support (e.g. for their parents or in-laws). This evidence is not unique for Vietnam and can be found elsewhere as well. However, this explains why some *hộ* members (especially those of a lower income) do not share their income and/or resources. The explanation of Minh is exemplary as he concludes that this “circumvents endless quarrels and justifications about priorities on our tight economic budget” (Minh, Interview number 171, Nam Định City 2006). Like the low-income *hộ*, those with higher incomes reported no contributions from their children. Here the reason lies in the fact that all of these *hộ* mentioned that financial support was unnecessary for them.

Subsequently, I will discuss two case examples: one of a very successful businesswoman and one of a single mother who struggles to make ends meet. Both share the characteristic that they rely on one income source.

⁵⁴ Based on my sample a majority of the “high income strata,” *hộ* in Hà Nội officially registered at least one of their businesses in the formal sector. The *hộ* businesses of the “middle” and “low” income strata were – as in Nam Định City – not registered.

Case example of Thảo N.: The growth of an import-oriented *hộ* business

Thảo N., who was born in 1973 and was at the time of the interview a thirty-seven-year-old businesswoman, owns a shop that sells a variety of electronic goods, which range from refrigerators to washing machines and cooking stoves, to smaller items such as common household appliances, like rice cookers and fans, to luxury products such as electronic toothbrushes and microwaves (case example 6). Ten years ago, Thảo N. established her business in one of the oldest wards of Nam Định City, Bà Triệu. This ward is famous for its predominantly wealthy population and businesses that attract numerous customers, not only from the city itself but also from nearby rural provinces. Over the past ten years, her business has constantly increased in both sales volume and net income.

Similar to numerous successful medium businesses with a legal license to conduct a business, Thảo N.'s business is linked by social networks to other businesses within Vietnam. As network analyses demonstrates (see Wasserman 1994, Grieco 1995, Schweizer 1998, Scott 2004), the embedding into a broader network is not only beneficial with respect to economic support in case of temporary problems but also proves to be advantageous with respect to diverse other forms of social or cultural capital in Bourdieu's sense (Bourdieu 2000, 1980). Besides valuable contacts, social capital entails, for example, emotional support, and cultural capital provides knowledge about business options or ways of acquiring an official license.

Granovetter (1995: 130-131) points out that family-based forms of economic activity along kin networks remain common and have a significant potential for economic success. This notion contradicts Weber's position that kin-based organizations would be replaced by bureaucratic organizations (Weber 2002). In contrast to *hộ* businesses where the whole nuclear family is involved, the participation of Thảo N.'s family is rather limited. For example, her husband is not involved in her business but instead works for the government. Although Thảo N.'s business is officially independent of others, she stays in close contact with her younger sister, who operates a similar business in a nearby province, and with her younger brother, who owns two larger businesses that also sell electronic goods, in the capital Hà

Nội. Her brother has more than 40 employees and a monthly net income of about USD12,000, whereas her own net income exceeded USD3,000 in 2006 and USD5,000 by 2010. Thanks to her growing sales volume, Thảo N. has not only managed to raise her net income but has also benefited from better trading conditions with famous South Korean and Japanese brands. She has been able to undertake regular business trips where she has become familiar with the advantages of new products, has met other Vietnamese and Southeast Asian business operators in order to exchange knowledge, and, last but not least, enjoys some days off that help her to recover. Prior to 2007, she was invited to participate in business trips within Vietnam, and since then she has also received invitations to join business events in China, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. As a result of her broadened network, her knowledge about doing business has increased, a fact that motivates her to consider establishing a branch of her company beyond the national borders. When I last met her in October 2010, she was assessing foreign laws and regulations, and she was evaluating corresponding advantages and disadvantages in order to decide on whether to open up a branch outside of Vietnam.

Case example of Lán N.: Surviving thanks to the selling of vegetables

Lán N. is a 25-year-old woman and mother of a 13-month-old son (case example 15). She lives in one of the poorest wards of Nam Định City, Trần Quang Khải, and, like the majority of her neighbors who have experienced years of unemployment, she is looking for a job and is hence not included in the statistics of unemployed persons (see above). In fact, the high unemployment rate and Lán N.'s poor economic and educational background have jeopardized her dream to obtain an official job with a fixed salary and the future right to receive a pension. Thus, she has created an employment niche for herself and sells vegetables from her rented field in the nearby markets. Due to her small income, she has not yet been able to buy a permanent market stall, much less dared to increase her business activities by applying for an official license. Instead, her life is characteristic of numerous other women who work in the informal sector (see Cling et al. 2010).

Her working days start at 4 o'clock in the morning as she drives to the nearby field that she rents in order to grow vegetables. After watering the vegetables and harvesting some, she loads as much as possible on her bicycle and heads to the market. Over the past seven years, Lán N.'s monthly income has risen to approximately USD24 in 2010 compared which about USD16 in 2005 and 2006. Despite this overall increase in Lán N.'s income, she has not been able to increase her net income during the last years due to a parallel rise in other costs, such as health and food. Lán N. is one of those persons who have to be considered the most vulnerable, not only within her ward but also within the national context of Vietnam. Without the economic support of her mother who benefits from a retirement pension, Lán N. could barely survive. Out of my research sample, Lán N. and four men who work independently as *xe ôm* (motorbike taxi drivers) are found to be among this group.

The following two examples illustrate the complex ways in which income-generating activities can be combined.

Case example of Quang N.: A worker in a beer factory and his small “zoo”

When I first met Quang N.⁵⁵ in 2006, he was a thirty-year-old worker in a beer production factory. Quang pointed out that he loved to work sometimes two shifts a day “if my health allows me to do so” (Quang N., Trần Quang Khải, NDC, April 2006, case example 42). Quang N. shares a five-room house with his wife and their two sons. His older brother with his wife and two daughters, as well as Quang's mother, father and the brother of his father, are co-residing in the same house.

In 2006 Quang's salary was around 1 to 1.5 million VND depending on the number of shifts he worked and the “incentives” he received, which in his case accounted for about 3 million VND per year. Quang's salary however forms only a part of his net income. After inquiring about the ceramic lying around his property, I found out that he – as one of his side jobs – is planting, cultivating and later selling bonsais. As we continued with the

⁵⁵ In order to guarantee their anonymity, I have chosen pseudonyms for all the interviewees mentioned hereafter.

interview, I probed further about possible “side-occupations”, whereupon a whole set of occupations, almost a new world, opened. It became evident that he along with other *hộ* members raises about thirty chickens, twenty geese and a slightly higher number of rabbits. Furthermore, he owns about ten cows in the countryside, looked after by employees. Last but not least, he raises about forty crocodiles, which he sells after several years to Hải Phòng where they will be processed into leather purses. Quang even planned to enlarge his “zoo” as he intended to raise a bear and milk it for its bile.⁵⁶

As the interview continued, a neighbor joined us in the shade and drank beer out of plastic bottles. The beer was not offered to him as a welcoming gesture but was exchanged for some Vietnamese dong. Hence the “smuggling” of beer from Quang’s job at the factory in order to sell it to male⁵⁷ customers is another income source. The total income of these extra sources amount to about 5 million VND per month.

Analysis

The *hộ* of Quang is both independent and dependent. Independent in the sense that his official salary is exclusively used for the needs of his wife and children, such as health and education costs, presents, clothes and sanitary items. Dependent because he is expected, as the owner of the extra incomes, to economically and emotionally support his parents and at times his older brother. His economic “capital” (Bourdieu 1980) is consequently

⁵⁶ In Vietnam, like in China, bile from the bear’s gallbladder is highly esteemed and appreciated by some people for “medical as well as stimulating reasons”. Some local restaurants in Nam Định City offered small portions of it for an average of about 80 USD (Information collected by the author during field research between 2006 and 2010).

⁵⁷ It is common in northern Vietnam that women living in rural areas and medium-sized cities, such as Nam Dinh, are not expected and in many cases are even socially discouraged from drinking alcoholic beverages or smoking. In this case Quang stated that his wife was not used to drink, and she herself stated that she was not allowed to and therefore “only once tried a sip of beer without enjoying it” (Ha N. Trần Quang Khải, NDC, June 2006). Based on my participant observation, unmarried women and women in larger cities in general enjoy drinking. In southern Vietnam they also smoke in both public and private settings (field observation 2004-2010).

the highest within the *hộ* despite his position as the youngest adult male *hộ* member. Food and beverages are being paid out of both his salary and his extra incomes. Once in a while his parents also help with the feeding of the animals without asking for financial compensation.

The example of Quang makes clear that the *hộ* can be a safety net – as Espling 1999 states – in which individuals pool incomes and other resources and also share consumption. Yet household strategies to reduce vulnerability sometimes impose unequal burdens on household members (Espling 1999: 37). During my visits to this *hộ* in 2005, 2006 and 2010, it was evident that most of the workload with respect to “big money activities” was shouldered by Quang, while his wife and the wife of his brother were responsible for all the household tasks as well as attending to the clients who came in to drink beer. His brother worked only at his official job and relaxed far more than Quang did.

Without an openness and interest in finding out the unexpected, I would have relied on the standard questions I usually asked and thus missed out on the largest part of his income and lifestyle activities.

Case example of Tuấn N.: Combining rural and urban lifestyles

In the case of Tuấn N., the kind of job performed depends on the season. Tuấn owns a small shop located in front of his house where he serves – as he proudly states – “breakfast for hungry people” (case example 14). In the morning he sells green tea, coffee and noodle soup (“*phở*”), attends to customers during the day with small refreshments and sells nutritious packaged products as well as products for hygienic or cleaning purposes throughout the day. Furthermore, he resells vegetables that he purchases early in the morning at the market, about eight kilometers away, and resells them at a small interest rate. His house is located in Trần Quang Khải. In contrast to the *hộ* of Quang, Tuấn’s house lies next to a rural ward (“*xã*”). It consists of two floors. On the ground floor are his shop, the bathroom as well as the kitchen. On the upper floor are the two rooms used by him and his wife and their two children. As in many houses, a small altar for the ancestors is located at the entrance of the shop.

The routine of his main job is interrupted twice a year for a time period of approximately two months. During this time he works in his parents' rice fields, which are located about fifteen km away from his *hộ*. These activities provide not only additional cash income but also rice, vegetables and meat for his *hộ*. From time to time his wife, who works in one of the few remaining garment factories in Nam Định City, uses her weekly day off in order to attend to customers. This allows Tuấn to fulfill part of his duty as the oldest son by working on the farm of his parents, and to give them a hand with agricultural activities. In his case these consist of raising and slaughtering pigs and chickens, and planting vegetables and rice. Asked about his reasons for deciding on this lifestyle, the forty-four-year-old man smiled and explained that he enjoyed his work as a farmer but appreciated at the same time the privileges of a "more urban lifestyle with the possibility of buying luxury goods from time to time". Besides his higher income, Tuấn further profits from his "urban lifestyle" that has allowed him to install sanitary conveniences like a modern toilet and bathroom. Living in the city also offers the advantage that he and his wife and children are closer to their workplaces, the factory and the school.

The example of Tuấn's *hộ* is characteristic of people within Nam Định City who have recently moved there but still maintain close ties to their relatives in the countryside. The *hộ* as such is independent, and yet filial obligation assumes the active support of the oldest son towards his parents in the countryside. As a self-employed individual with a comparably low income that averages about 700,000 VND per month, Tuấn, like many others, has no official day off and works every day in his shop or in the agricultural domain of his parents. His only "holiday" consists of the festivities around the Vietnamese New Year, *Tết*, when almost all business activities close down for at least three days. The income of Tuấn's *hộ* is pooled in combination with his wife's regular salary that averages 600,000 VND per month, the incentives that she generally receives twice a year amounting to 850,000 VND, Tuấn's cash income from his shop and his salary in the form of natural produce that he receives from his work as a farmer.

In the following section, I will examine whether salary can be taken as corresponding to income.

On the gap between salary and income: “incentives”, “stimulations” and “envelopes”

The previous two case examples of Quang N. and Tuấn N made evident that an interviewee’s official salary and income are not always identical. This is due to the widespread fact that numerous *hộ* members in northern Vietnam are officially employed and operate additional “businesses” as well. These businesses may range from small activities such as offering green tea in front of the house to high-income revenues such as land speculation or the selling and reselling of gold. Looking only at Quang’s salary, his income would seem to be average or even comparatively rather poor. But based on knowledge about the other forms of income his *hộ* possesses, he turns out to have one of the richest income levels in Trần Quang Khải, his ward in Nam Định City.

Speaking of the Vietnamese context, “envelopes” containing money can – depending on the situational context – signal the existence of corruption. “Excellent students” for instance openly receive an envelope containing money at the end of the school year. Higher-ranking officials tend to receive money more discreetly; it may, for example, be wrapped inside the daily newspaper (various participant observations of both examples during field research in 2005, 2006 and 2010).

“Incentives” refer to an additional salary that is generally paid monthly and is sometimes calculated based on a worker’s performance. In some governmental positions, the incentives include payments for gasoline, food, etc. “Stimulations” are – according to the information received – meant to be paid less regularly, generally twice a year: on the occasion of “*Tết*” (the Vietnamese New Year), and on the Vietnamese National Day. Employees working for the state and for private persons receive both forms of extra income.

According to official sources in Vietnam today, income differences between rich and poor are considerable.⁵⁸ This aspect will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. When I asked interviewees about their in-

⁵⁸ In Vietnam the income of the “richest” is nine times higher than the income of the “poorest”. (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2009a). My qualitative data point to an even higher income gap.

comes, most of them⁵⁹ were unexpectedly willing to disclose it towards the end of the first interview or during a repeat visit to their *hộ*. The fact that I was living in the locale of my field research over a period of fifteen months enabled me to cross-check and compare the information received within the different wards, within different socioeconomic fields and across time (2005-10). Based on these comparisons, I consider the information I collected on amounts of income to be accurate. This data is listed in detail in the Appendix (see Appendix 1 and 2). Yet two limitations must be mentioned. First, as soon as one of the *hộ* members (generally the husband) was in a higher- or even in a high-ranking governmental position, information about income remained vague and only the official salary and incentives in small amounts were mentioned. This also held to be true for interviewees who were engaging in illegal activities such as gambling and smuggling. Second, as soon as neighbors with *hộ* members who had middle or higher incomes joined the interviews, the subject was redirected and answers about income would be given only after the visitors had left. In the first example mentioned above, the extra income in the form of “envelopes” clearly corresponds to money from “corruption”. In the local discourse of both Hà Nội and Nam Định City, and depending on the point of view and the socioeconomic position of the interviewees, money originating from corruption was often paraphrased as “motivation”.

Based on the information received with respect to all sorts of income, I created a list (see Appendix 1) and a diagram (Diagram 2). The diagram exemplifies the average income of the *hộ* researched in the three wards between 2005 and 2006. The data is calculated with respect to concrete answers provided by the interviewees. The data that I collected during a follow-up study in 2010 can also be found in the Appendix (see Appendix 2) and will be discussed in the upcoming chapter.

⁵⁹ Of the forty-eight interviewed *hộ* in Nam Định City in 2006 and the ones I re-interviewed in 2010, only four *hộ* did not want to reveal their income. Three others did not want to reveal all their sources of income due to their high income position. This was something that I obviously respected as a personal matter and a decision for the *hộ* members to make. In one case the interviewee disclosed official incomes, but because of her husband's high-ranking government position, she did not state the amount received from “envelopes”, which in this case was obviously money from various forms of corruption.

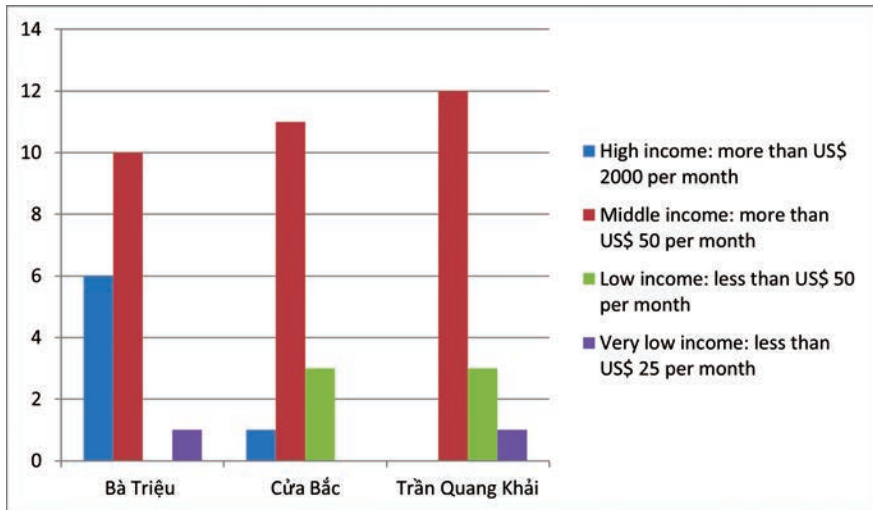


Diagram 2: Income strata and wards of the *hộ* researched in Nam Định City between 2005 and 2006, diagram by the author.

The above diagram refers to the income strata of the *hộ* in the three wards that I researched. As outlined in Chapter Four, these wards were intentionally chosen because they allowed me to research socioeconomic differences within Nam Định City. As might be expected, most of the rich people live in the traditionally wealthy ward of Bà Triệu (six out of forty-eight *hộ*). However, I also found a very poor *hộ* in this ward. The total income of this *hộ* is less than US\$ 25 per month. With respect to my sample, no *hộ* with a low income are to be found in this ward. Out of the seventeen *hộ* researched in Bà Triệu, ten are to be found in the middle-income strata. With respect to the overall distribution of the income, the percentage of the middle-income *hộ* is highest in all three wards (10 out of 17 for Bà Triệu, 11 out of 15 for Cửa Bắc and 12 out of 16 in Trần Quang Khải). The Cửa Bắc ward, which is representative of numerous middle-income *hộ*, and Trần Quang Khải, the poorest ward, showed more similarities than I expected. Despite their overall ranking as a middle- and poor-income ward respectively, they both have a comparably high amount of middle-income *hộ*, followed by rather few low-income *hộ* (three in each ward).

The comparably high percentage of “middle income *hộ*” in Trần Quang Khải, the poorest ward of Nam Định City, can be explained by the fact that I integrated various forms of incomes that are never integrated in official statistics. If I had relied solely on official employment and retirement salaries, as the official statistics do, the percentage of poor-income *hộ* would have been far higher. This holds true for the Cửa Bắc ward and especially for the Trần Quang Khải ward, where numerous former employees of Nam Định’s textile and ship building industries reside. My data demonstrate that twelve out of sixteen *hộ* in this ward generate a middle income. I am interested not only in why and how incomes are generated but also in the decision-making processes that are responsible for the distribution of this income. This will be scrutinized subsequently.

The most powerful position with respect to decision-making processes in the *hộ*

When I speak of “power”, I follow the definition of Weber, whereby power is “the ability of an individual or group to achieve their own goals or aims when others are trying to prevent them from realising them” (Weber 2002 (1921): 28). Thus, each member of a household has either more power or less power than the others, which influences their bargaining power in decision-making and negotiating processes within the household.

When I analyzed who had the most powerful position with respect to decision-making processes in the *hộ*, I inquired into domains such as the economic (e.g. who controls income and expenditures), the socioeconomic (e.g. who works inside or outside of the *hộ*, what amount of work is done and who is responsible for each *hộ* task such as child-rearing, cooking or cleaning), the social (e.g. who has more free time, who has membership in (mass)-organizations) and the cultural and religious (e.g. who follows what belief forms and participates in religious groups or festivals).

In addition, I inquired about land and house ownership, inheritance rights⁶⁰ and if and to what extent this might influence power games in the *hộ*. An analysis of the *hộ khẩu* (household registration system) shows, for

⁶⁰ In addition to information collected during field research, I relied on the following source: Luật Đất đai. Law on Land (2010): Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Tài Chính.

example, that the ownership of the house and in most cases also of the land is attributed to the husband, and only in rare cases to both the husband and wife (information collected during 2004 and 2010; see also Werner 2002: 36-37 and the following two chapters).

Interestingly, the majority of the interviewees (of both genders and of all generations) mentioned that in principle, the house and land belong to the married couple. In practice, however, and based on the patrilineal inheritance system whereby the land and house are always given to the oldest son, daughters need to “move out” if a son is present. Consequently, it is fair to state that ownership of the house and land strengthens the position of the husband or of the oldest man in multi-generational *hộ*.

Based on the analysis of the whole data received, I identified three categories in order to highlight who has the most powerful position with respect to decision-making processes within the *hộ*: the couple, the husband, the wife – or someone else accounted for in the category “Other”. As expected, decision-making processes are (sometimes aggressively) negotiated within the *hộ*, leading on many occasions to conflict (see below case examples 29 and 30). Significantly, I learned that the person who has the most powerful position within the *hộ* tends to hold this position in all the domains mentioned above. I expected this to be far more fluid and to be negotiated depending on the context.

My analysis makes clear that in twenty-five out of forty-eight cases, husbands had the most powerful position in the *hộ*. This holds to be true regardless of their economic contribution (e.g. such as a higher, equal to or lower salary than the wife⁶¹), the way the income was generated (e.g. state employee or self-employed) and the economic income strata of “rich”, “middle-class” or “poor”.

Interestingly, only in seven out of forty-eight cases husbands and wives are equally involved in the decision-making processes. I find it striking that this is more likely to happen for the “rich” than for the “middle” or “low” income strata. When the wife is the main decision-maker, she earns far more than her husband (case examples 10 and 12) or is the main person responsi-

⁶¹ In this respect the interview of case example 9 is relevant since the wife runs a motorcycle-selling business and generates the highest income of the *hộ*.

ble for keeping the business running (case example 29). In one example, internal conflict is evident even in the face of economic profit for the *hộ*. The wife significantly improved her own economic situation as well as the *hộ*'s due to land speculation in a rural part of Nam Định. She even falsified the husband's signature and revealed this only after having successfully resold the land. The wife justified her actions with the explanation that because her husband would have opposed "any risky endeavor", she was "forced to do it without his knowledge". I had the impression that even though the profit accruing from the sale was successfully invested in the *hộ*'s business, her husband still resented her actions when I met them again in 2010, years after the incident. The power of men and of the traditional system of norms and values with respect to decision-making processes becomes even more evident if one analyzes the category "Other". The analysis of the category "Other" reveals traditional Vietnamese norms and values that correspond to core Confucian values.

In accordance with Confucian norms and values (see Chapter Seven), the oldest man has the most powerful position in all the *hộ* within the category "Other" where an adult man is living. Interestingly, this represents all the five multi-generational *hộ*, regardless of the higher income generated by other *hộ* members. This means that based on my sample, the multi-generational *hộ* evaluates Confucian norms and values higher than, for example, the economic contribution of an individual *hộ* member. If no men were present, the oldest woman, the widow, held the most powerful position with respect to decision-making processes. This is also in accordance with Confucian norms and values. How such decision-making processes affect and influence the life of other *hộ* members is very well demonstrated by the example of the widow and main interviewee of *hộ* number 30.

Case examples

In 2006 the widow co-resided with her younger son. The older son was already living separately with his own *hộ* in Nam Định City. Four years later the younger son "also followed the advice" of his mother and founded his own *hộ*. Due to internal struggles between the wives of the two brothers, the widow "suggested" that the older son move to Hà Nội while the younger

son and his *hộ* remain in Nam Định City. In her opinion, this wise decision led to the long wished-for harmony which transpired after her older son's move to Hà Nội. She contently added that not only the *hộ* "emotional situations" but also the businesses flourished thanks to her orders, since her older son worked and earned far more in Hà Nội than in Nam Định City.

In three remaining cases, the widow holds power over her daughters (case examples 4 and 8) or her grandson (case example 24). In the other three examples, the mothers hold the most influential position within the *hộ* due to the absence of the husbands (case examples 15 and 23)⁶². The remaining interviewees include the only single man of the sample in Nam Định City (case example 19), and a student who rents a room in a foreign *hộ* and receives financial support from her parents and her older brother (case example 16).

Conclusion

I aimed to identify the person with the most powerful position in the *hộ* with respect to decision-making processes. The ensuing analysis shows that decision-making processes that give an equal voice to men and women were clearly the exception and existed in only seven out of forty-eight *hộ*. However, husbands and, in multi-generational *hộ*, the oldest men held the most powerful position within the *hộ* for the vast majority (thirty out of forty-eight). The fact that these men hold a stronger position than women as well as the dominance of widows over their sons in cases of co-residence both reflect the operation of core Confucian norms and values (see Chapters Seven and Eight).

Besides the importance of the core values inherent in Confucianism, it is relevant to note that the *hộ khẩu* (household registration system) reflects that the ownership of the house and sometimes of the land is often attributed to the husband, and only in rare cases to the husband and the wife (see above). Hence, it is relevant to state that although equal before the Vietnamese law, inheritance and land/housing rights seem to be attributed

⁶² In case example 15, the female interviewee co-resides with her mother, and in case 23 the decision-maker is the mother of two teenagers.

in favor of male heirs. This doubtlessly strengthens the position of married men within the *hộ*.

Le Hong Ha (1995) argues that low incomes force people to work more than one job. My broad data sample did not show a connection between the number of jobs and income. *Hộ* members with a high income engage in extra activities, as do *hộ* members who have to work more than one job because of their low incomes. And some *hộ* with high, average or poor income levels limit their income-generating to one activity. These results make clear that when doing field research in northern Vietnam, it is important to be open and inquire about activities performed in both the formal and informal economies. With this in mind, I investigated how *hộ* members actually judge their incomes. First, I interviewed each person about his or her particular living situation as an individual within the *hộ*. Second, I asked each of them about the living situation of the whole *hộ*. Interestingly, the majority of the *hộ* members pool their incomes, thereby creating a high coherence between the *hộ* situation and the individual circumstances of each member. My research findings showed this to be true regardless of gender, age, income or location. Surprisingly, only one *hộ* member stated both his own and the position of his *hộ* as being rich; in fact his was the richest *hộ* in my sample (case example 21). Others with obvious signs of wealth – such as a car, a five-story house located on the main street and a monthly average net income of more than 3000 USD – declared their *hộ* as having a “middle” income. The respondents based this classification in relation to *hộ* they thought to be richer on the same street. Three *hộ* (case examples 6, 9 and 38) – that were obviously earning high incomes – labeled their economic situation as one of “middle income” although they knew about their privileged situation. Yet they indirectly confirmed themselves to be among the “rich”. This becomes clear if one analyzes the words they used to describe their living standards. They subtly acknowledged their “high income”, for example, by noting that extra lessons for their children amounted to more than 3.0 million VND per month.

Hence *hộ* with a wide range of economic differences ranging from monthly incomes between 1.0 million VND (63 USD) to 2000 USD were equally self-positioned by the interviewees as “middle” income. This demonstrates that while speaking of categories such as “high”, “middle”

or “low” income, so-called “hard facts” like income need to be understood in relation to the subjective evaluation of the interviewee. With the aim of making useful comparisons, I calculated the *hộ* income and constructed a list that refers to “high, middle, low and very low income”. These categories were also double-checked with local experts both in Nam Định City and Hà Nội in order to ensure their usefulness. One could further divide the “middle income” into upper, middle and lower incomes but for the current purpose this would not have made sense.

On a theoretical level, the results obtained through this research and analysis have confirmed some questions elaborated a priori. Nevertheless, they also led to new assumptions: I had expected the results concerning the economic income disparities to be large but I was amazed by the wealth I encountered in this medium-sized city. For some *hộ* it is not even worth discussing whether to send their children abroad for private schooling: their concern is not the annual expenditure of 20,000 USD or more but their children’s “ability”. Hence the varied range of income from as little as 400,000 VND (less than 25 USD) to more than 3000 USD per month is noteworthy. In order to consider these examples in the broader context of Vietnamese society, it is useful to shed light on income stratification. In my opinion, it is difficult to measure or identify the real income gap between the richest and the poorest due to various and sometimes hidden forms of property such as diverse bank accounts, gold, land, valuable goods, and incomes from informal or illegal business. Nevertheless, the average per capita income allows for some comparison and proves that in 2002 the income of the richest was 8.1 times higher than the income of the poorest (General Statistics Office 2002). In 2008, this gap slightly increased to 8.9 times (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2009a). My qualitative data point to an even higher income gap. This can be explained because my data does not only rely on the official salary but also includes other forms of income as outlined above.

To conclude, the first two sub-questions can be answered in the affirmative: the majority of all *hộ* members researched in Hà Nội and Nam Định City pool their incomes and work more than one job at a time in order to increase the living standards of a particular individual or of the other *hộ* members. With respect to Nam Định City, forty-five out of forty-eight *hộ*

pool their income; and in twenty-one out of forty-eight *hộ*, individual members work in one or more jobs (see Diagram 1).

A personal note

In numerous interviews as well as in formal and informal conversations, interviewees shared information on “extra incomes” ranging from “incentives” and “stimulations” to “envelopes.” Sometimes, obviously amused by my interest, the interviewees mentioned numerous examples to illustrate the variety of extra incomes. This enabled me to map differences with respect to their socioeconomic position and to learn that in addition to a salary, incentives form part of income. I, too, would give my field assistants such incentives. Since I was living in the *hộ* of a higher ranked official, I was often present when his wife received envelopes and critically discussed whether the amounts were sufficient or not.

The quest for wealth and the quest for belief

This section will link the first and the second part of this research. The prior chapters of this study highlighted the rapid pace of change in the two northern Vietnamese cities Hà Nội and Nam Định. Despite numerous changes in the economic sphere, it is relevant to note that the Vietnamese state is still a socialist one that tolerates rather than drives these changes. Throughout this research, I therefore write (post-)socialist to emphasize that Vietnam is a socialist state, and add the (post-) in parenthesis to indicate that numerous “openings” in the economic, political and socio-cultural domain are taking part. Social control and sometimes surveillance is still strict – like in other socialist and non-socialist states known for monitoring their subjects – but the consequences nevertheless are – at least to my knowledge – far less severe than before the opening-up.

One assumption of this study is that households, or in the context of Vietnam, the *hộ* represent a link between the individual and society, both of which are embedded in the supra local. The *hộ* is the place where gender, kin roles and relationships in general as well as economic forms of cooperation can be analyzed thoroughly. I use the Vietnamese word *hộ* advisedly

because a Vietnamese household does not equal a non-Vietnamese one. The two most obvious distinctions lie first in the elaborate, hierarchical structure of a Vietnamese *hộ*, in contrast to a non-Vietnamese household. Second is the fact that the *hộ* composition in Vietnam is also comprised of invisible *hộ* members such as ghosts, spirits and ancestors. Indeed, the living commemorate their ancestors on a daily basis. The Vietnamese conventionally accept that every *hộ* member is embedded in a hierarchical net, which is structured by age and gender and implies mutual rights, obligations and duties. This can imply a safety net, where all members are (theoretically and ideally) taken care of, but it can also lead to restrictions in individual freedom and decision-making. Research on English households has, for example, proven that older persons sometimes need support from the government because their offspring are unwilling to take care of them. Although such a change might well occur in the coming decades in Vietnam, it is not yet common.

Consequently, the majority of people are embedded in various forms of networks that can act as safety nets. These same networks, however, may also serve as obstacles preventing a permanent escape from poverty. As such, social networks build links between actors and structures, between the micro- and the macro-level (Dahinden 2005: 47). Therefore, it is necessary to critically question, contextualize and analyze every case example and to avoid an onsize-fits-all explanation. For this reason, I have researched not only social differentiations such as gender, generation or job; but I have also examined for each person or *hộ* the available resources and forms of “capital” in the sense of Bourdieu.

The relevance of the *hộ* as well as the diverse ways of securing a livelihood in (post-)socialist Vietnam has been analyzed in detail in the preceding chapters. In the economic sphere, I have demonstrated that due to policy changes and the processes of *Đổi mới*, a comparatively low number of interviewees work in state-related occupations such as civil servant or factory worker. In a sample of forty-eight *hộ*, only eight worked in state-related jobs (see Diagram 1). This result is in accordance with the fact that the private sector has created three times as many jobs as the state sector in the post-1975 period (Le Hong Ha 1995). I also showed that the overall net income of my informants was higher in 2009 and 2010 compared with 2006 –

evidence that is paralleled by statistics on the national level (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2009b, 2009c). This likewise holds true for the net income of the twelve interviewees whom I re-interviewed in 2010; incomes had improved in ten out of the twelve cases and decreased in two (see Appendix 2). Despite decades of socialism and the ensuing policy changes, it has become clear that numerous “traditional” norms and values associated with Confucianism continue to shape the social structure today, for example, with respect to decision-making processes within the *hộ*.

In the second part of this research, I will scrutinize the relevance of the belief system, including religious and moral convictions. The socio-political relationships between the genders, their embeddedness in social networks and the state doctrine will be analyzed in detail. I will show how the socialist state actively promotes its “two-child policy” and supports discourses that highlight the so-called relevance of “having at least one son”. The following chapters will also seek to answer why a socialist state might advocate core Confucian values. Additionally, I will pay attention to the social embeddedness of the *hộ*, in order to demonstrate how ideals, social control and institutionalized relationships in and outside of the *hộ* are connected. An interrogation of these connections will reveal how the various elements shape and define specific economic activities in the complex politico-economic system of today’s (post-)socialist Vietnam and the socio-cultural and social-moral orientation of the still kin- and *hộ* oriented social system.

Chapter Seven: The Quest for Belief in (Post-)Socialist Northern Vietnam

“The Đổi mới state uses constructions of gender as a form of state power” (Werner and Bélanger 2002: 23).

The previous chapter inquired into the quest for wealth. The following three chapters will focus on the quest for belief in Vietnam. The first of these three chapters provides the ground for the following analysis of the quest for beliefs and my answer to the second main research question.

First, I will examine the relationship between gender and the state before and after the *Đổi mới* era. Through this examination it will become clear how the ideological contradictions between ideals that envisage gender equality and ideals that adhere to so-called traditions manifest themselves. I will not analyze in detail to what extent Vietnamese women are equal to men, nor will I compare measurable indices of women in neighboring countries (e.g. life expectancy, income, educational level). Instead, common and widespread beliefs such as ancestor worship, Confucianism, forms of Buddhism, Catholicism and combinations thereof as well as their influence on corresponding norms and “values” will be presented. Based on official statistics and concrete case examples derived from field research, I will demonstrate whether and how these beliefs are influential in the everyday lives of citizens.

In this chapter, I will scrutinize the importance of the prevalent “values” in Vietnamese society that continue to structure daily actions to this day. This approach demonstrates how external structures influence individuals and how these individuals in turn undertake actions in order to live according to their ideals. In the subsequent two chapters, I will discuss a complex socio-cultural phenomenon that reflects one aspect of how status and socio-political relationships between the genders are sometimes constructed. In the case of female feticide, the abortion of a fetus is because of its female sex. As such, female feticide is an extreme example of a possible interplay between social inequality and status in maintaining traditional im-

balances between the genders, which in turn shapes state discourse, social pressure and individual- or *hộ*-related actions. Concrete empirical case examples from field research will permit further insights. In the next section, I will discuss gender and state power in the pre- and post-*Đổi mới* eras.

Gender and state power in the pre- and post-*Đổi mới* eras

The view is often put forward that Vietnamese women enjoy a comparably greater status than women in surrounding Asian countries such as China, South Korea and Japan. Taylor points out that these claims are primarily the product of historical materials, traveler observations and anecdotal assertions (2002: 7). The debate has also focused on whether Vietnam reflects a Northeast Asian patrilineal or a Southeast Asian bilateral kinship pattern (Insun Yu 1999). Historians continue to debate about whether some regions of Vietnam were previously structured matrilineally and/or matrilocally, thus guaranteeing more specific rights to women (see e.g. Wilcox 2005; Krowolski 2002), or if patrilineality and/or patrilocality prevailed in certain times and/or places. The legend of the Trung sisters, which is still frequently recalled in public memory, exemplifies this debate.⁶³

The Red River Delta is well known for the value it places on Confucianism (see e.g. Gourou 1936; Krowolski 2002: 73-88; Pham Van Bich 1999), a tendency that can partly be explained by the centuries-long influence of the Chinese. Patrilineality and in a certain sense patriarchy implied that women had fewer rights than men. Nevertheless, this does not correspond to a general devaluation of women since their status and their rights of inheritance varied over the course of the centuries and according to regions and classes (see e.g. Insun Yu 1999, Tran 2008 and Wilcox 2005).

⁶³ The Trung sisters were female generals who fought against the Chinese invasion between 40-43 B.C. Over time, a new element was added to the story, according to which their combat was exclusively motivated by the defense of their husbands who were captured by the Chinese. The addition of this element alters, devitalizes and reinterprets the original sense of the combative and audacious actions of these Vietnamese women against a foreign invasion. According to this version of the story, the women's combat was motivated by an appropriately feminine loyalty toward their husbands. "Norms" and "values" are restored so as to correspond with Confucian gender expectations. Interestingly, it is this interpretation that is still recalled today.

Bélanger, however, assures us that everything that has been written about the so-called traditional Vietnamese family affirms the higher value of a son compared to the value of a daughter (2005: 287).

The fact that socialist discourse highlights and perpetuates the aspirational equality of both genders often leads to the conclusion that the wished-for ideal has already been reached. Numerous authors believe that gender equality has been attained in Vietnam and in other former socialist countries (e.g. Eisen-Bergman 1984; Pham Van Bich 1999). This might be explained by the fact these authors are convinced that the discursively propagated ideal of equality has also been implemented in reality. Pham Van Bich's research indicates how in the rural Red River Delta, Marxist ideology has impacted the Vietnamese family. Van Bich claims that a corresponding change in attitudes regarding gender has occurred despite the fact that some Confucian principles remain intact (1999). My research results, based on more than 400 qualitative interviews and oral histories, prove that such a radical change corresponds more to an imagined or discursively promoted ideal than to the lived experiences of the interviewed women and men. The majority of the interviewees in both research sites acknowledged that the ideal based on Hồ Chí Minh's socialist ideals was to establish gender equality – to share the domestic work and to attribute rights and responsibilities in a more equal way – but that in reality patrilineal structures and a corresponding power hierarchy were resumed as soon as the men returned from war. Surprisingly, the interviewees wondered if I was simply reciting official discourse, or if I was making fun of them or if I was questioning how such an idea as “gender equality in Vietnam” could possibly alter societal structures within such a short period of time. As a consequence of this question, numerous interviewees in Nam Định City started to wonder again if I was after all a spy sent by officials who aimed at secretly finding out through such questions whether the interviewees “really defended socialism”. It took me quite some time to calm the rumors and assure the interviewees that I was not a spy but only asked such “stupid questions” in order to learn more about society and to find out why other Vietnamese and foreign scholars believed in such a change. The anthropologist Verdery has experienced similar situations in the course of conducting research in Romania (see e.g. Verdery 2002; 1999).

Since the 1990s academic interest has also taken a new turn with respect to gender issues in Vietnam. Werner and Bélanger argue that:

“The Đổi mới state uses constructions of gender as a form of state power” (2002: 23).

Furthermore the authors are convinced that:

“The discourse of womanhood is still very much a state function, as it was in the pre-Đổi mới era. [...] ‘patriarchy’ and ‘tradition’ are thus engendered by the needs and functions of the Đổi mới state. As such, they are not revivals or reassertions of earlier practices, but constitute new [emphasis in the original] practices” (2002: 23).

In this context scholars have debated whether the “general situation of women had improved after *Đổi mới* or not” (see e.g. the collection of articles in Werner and Bélanger 2002). There are many skeptics who identify the retreat of the state as imposing more unequal burdens on women, and many optimists who expect the reform process to lead to greater individual “freedom”. It is primarily women, for example, who are laid off from state sector jobs (Research Center on Women’s Labor, cit. in Werner and Bélanger 2002: 34). Furthermore, women predominantly work in small trades within the informal sector but not in the export industry where income is considerably higher. Furthermore, they hold fewer influential political positions. I argue that while women have gained some advantages – such as comparably higher net incomes that they can spend for themselves – other aspects especially in the domain of the “ideological” are likely to change less quickly (see the following section).

Vietnamese and foreign researchers alike assert that women have less free time, because they endure a “double burden” represented by housework and income-generating activities. Others point to the several “double standards” that allow or even expect men to have extramarital affairs while women are supposedly not allowed to do so (Nguyen-vo 2002: 129-151). Inequality between the genders also becomes evident in inheritance rights and in land allocated to a *hộ* because the title is usually held in the man’s name (Information collected during 2004 and 2010, see also Werner 2002: 36-37). In short, numerous authors present a variety of domains where

(in-)equality could be further researched. Relevant to this is also a recent statement from the Vietnamese authorities that aims to prevent the current state of affairs in which men apparently are respected and women disdained (GSO 2010a: 64).

Confucianism and ancestor worship: emic beliefs that influence “norms” and “values”

Despite decades in which this socialist country was officially atheist, ancestor worship never ceased to be popular and valued. In social anthropology the term “ancestor” is used

“to designate those forebears who are remembered, and to denote specific religious practices as a part of such phrases as ‘ancestor cult’ or ‘ancestor worship’” (Bloch 1996).

Some Vietnamese authors ask whether it is more appropriate to use the term “ancestor cult” or “ancestor religion” (see below). The distinction between “religion” and “cult” has been extensively debated within academia (see e.g. Durkheim 1994 [1915], Weber 2007 [1934]; 2002 [1921], Geertz 1973), and Vietnam scholars refer to this debate when asking whether the “Vietnamese form of the ancestor cult” corresponds to a “cult” that forms part of Confucian beliefs, or if “worship” or “religion” would be more appropriate to use. Others argue that these beliefs are a superstition or a “tradition”. Still others say on the contrary that such beliefs represent the most fundamental value of Vietnamese society (for a detailed discussion see Nguyen Khac Vien 1994a; 1994b, Nguyen Thanh Huyen 1994: 27-53). This tendency is in sharp contrast to the 1950s when the Communist Party in accordance with Marxist ideals aimed at eliminating beliefs and “religion as the opium of the people” (Marx 1976). For this reason the Vietnamese Communist Party undertook reforms that aimed at eliminating practices that involved the attempts of the living to communicate with the dead (e.g. through offerings and prayers). Despite former Party disapproval of ancestor worship, this practice has been sustained and is generally accepted in present-day Vietnam (see Malarney 1996).

Ancestor worship (*Nối dõi tông đường*, the continuity of the filial family line) is a central element of Confucianism and must be – according to the “traditional” beliefs that prevail especially in northern Vietnam and China – exclusively performed by a son. The methods and the particulars of how ancestor worship is practiced vary. The most notable differences consist in the right to perform the ritual, the donations offered and the rigor with which the practice of worship is being followed (Information received by the author between 2005 and 2010; Wehrli 2011: 247-249). These rules seem to be less rigidly interpreted in the southern part of Vietnam. In the southern provinces, it seems not uncommon that women are also allowed to perform funeral rituals and ancestral worship (Information received by the author between 2004 and 2011). It would be interesting to examine – based on extensive research in southern Vietnam – if these ideological or religious convictions are responsible for the comparably lower rate of female feticide (see the next chapter). Just as in other Southeast Asian countries, ancestor worship has a long “tradition” in Vietnam and existed well before the introduction of Confucianism. However, ancestor worship was later integrated into Confucianism as an essential element. The term Confucianism itself implies numerous ideological convictions that vary – for historical reasons – according to region and time. For example, Hirschamn and Vu Manh Loi researched the Confucian impact on both Catholic and non-Catholic Vietnamese families in the rural Red River Delta (Hirschamn and Vu Manh Loi: 1996); Haines studied the interplay between seniority, linearity and equality in Vietnamese kinship under the Le Dynasty (1984). From my point of view as a social anthropologist, the most interesting trend consists in the movement that was originally launched in the 1990s by the Vietnam scholar Nguyen Khac Vien (1994a). He argues that to this day Confucianism is a cult; but that one has to transform Confucianism into a “truly Vietnamese religion”. In my opinion this is an interesting attempt as it aims to strengthen the nation-state and the Communist Party by referring to the “tradition” of “one ruler” or “one father who looks after his children”. Historically, Confucianism was prominent in Vietnamese society between 1075 and 1919 (Rydstrøm 2010: 171).

At the beginning of the 21st century – and according to official statistics – the majority of Vietnamese citizens declared themselves atheist

(about 70 million), followed by Buddhists (about 12 million), Catholics (about 6.5 million), Cao Dai (2.5 million), Hoa Hoa (about 1.5 million), Protestants (about 1 million) and others (about 2 million) (Baan Ton Giao Chinh Phu: Governmental Committee for Religious Affairs 2007)⁶⁴. Interestingly, I could not find official statistics about adherents to Confucianism. Officially everyone has the right to practice a religion, and even Vietnamese Communist Party members are no longer excluded from the Party if they admit to being part of a cult, engaging in a form of worship or practicing a religion. In practice, however, religious freedom is rather restricted when it comes to Catholicism – a fact that can be easily explained because of historic reasons such as the “anti-colonial struggle for independence”. Consequently, and as some of my interlocutors have stated, numerous Communist Party members hide their Catholic faith even today because they want to avoid exclusion from the Party and wish to secure a promising future. For this reason, all five of the interviewees who are both Catholics and Party members still fear sanctions for showing their faith in public. Consequently, some Catholics prefer not to get married in a church. Instead, they ask a priest to secretly marry them in their house, in the presence of a limited number of trustworthy family members. This fear of sanctions also becomes evident with respect to the public demonstration of religious symbols. While non-Catholic symbols are prominently displayed in the entrance rooms of houses, the majority of Catholics are cautious about where they place religious symbols; sometimes they hide them in closets. It is only after I won the confidence of interviewees that they revealed their personal experiences as Catholics and showed me personal religious items and props (Information received in 2005, 2006 and 2010).

Despite the official declaration by the majority of Vietnamese that they are atheist, my observations and the information received during field research indicate that more than 95 percent of the people living in the Red River Delta practice ancestor worship (data from field research between 2004 and 2010). The official statistics with respect to religious identification do not reflect this fact. Yet ancestor worship is prevalent and even practiced by persons who identify themselves as atheists, despite the fact

⁶⁴ Statistical data on how many Vietnamese adhere to Confucianism is not available.

that they might also identify as Buddhists, Confucians or Catholics. In fact it is difficult and in many wards (*phường*) even impossible to find someone who neither believes in ancestor worship nor has internalized consciously or unconsciously the fundamental principles of this worship.

My results show that how worship is performed, as well as its ascribed symbolic and economic relevance, depends not only on the socioeconomic context but also on the beliefs of each *hộ*, which often correspond to those of the patrilineal kin. Even in the present, Confucianism structures society because it includes virtually every member of society by placing each one into a web of mutual rights and privileges.

Ancestor worship is believed to guarantee the wellbeing of parents and the patrilineage in the afterlife. Despite numerous differences between “Catholic” and “Buddhist” beliefs, some common points can be identified. Buddhists as well as the majority of Catholics in the Red River Delta believe in the relevance of ancestor worship.⁶⁵ This relevance of ancestor worship for Vietnamese Catholics became evident after the Second Vatican Council in 1962, when they were granted the exclusive right among Catholics to practice ancestor worship.

Helle Rydstrøm describes the main doctrine of Confucianism as follows:

“[...] the ideal society is ruled by the Emperor, or Heaven’s Son, and marked by unity, harmony, order and stability. As Confucianism does not encourage equality but rather respect of those who personify social order, ‘Three Bonds’ (Tam cuong) define social relations [...]” (Rydstrøm 2010: 171).

The cornerstone of Confucianism corresponds to three obligations that differ according to gender and generation: Men have to respect the ruler (*quân*), the professor (*su*) and the father (*phu*) [see e.g. Mai Huy Bich 1991; Marr 1981; Tạ Văn Tài 1981; Trần Đình Huou 1991]. Women are

⁶⁵ To my knowledge statistics that indicate how many Catholics adhere to ancestor worship are not available. However, I was able to interview numerous believers and priests between 2004 and 2010 as well as the former bishop of Nam Định province. Based on my observations and my analysis of the interviews, the indications are that more than 95 percent of Vietnamese perform ancestor worship (Expert-Interview conducted in Nam Định City, June 2006).

required to obey their fathers; after getting married their husbands; and as widows their oldest sons. This subordination of women to male relatives from birth to death reinforces male domination and the patrilineal hierarchy. In addition to these obligations, Confucianism demands that women behave according to four virtues that are formulated in a rather general way but emphasize the importance of a women's docile behavior in attitude (*hạnh*), language (*ngôn*), work (*công*) and appearance (*dung*) (Rydstrøm 2010: 171-2).

Of course “norms” and “values” attributed to gender are not confined to the Vietnamese context. The social anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu demonstrated in his ethnographic work on Kabyle society how morally “correct” behavior differed between women and men, and elaborated how the inferior socioeconomic position of women was reinforced (Bourdieu 2000 [1972]). In accordance with the code of Kabyle⁶⁶ society, women were not allowed to look directly into the eyes of men. Instead, they were required to avert their gaze towards the ground and to walk with their heads bowed, behind men. In contrast men were expected to walk upright and with certitude. This is not to say that a rigid division between male and female behavior still exists in today's Vietnamese society or that such a division was true for all classes and regions in the past. Some critiques of Bourdieu even point out that Kabyle society was never structured in such a rigid way. However, there is an obvious parallel to Confucian “norms” and “values”, which aim to define ideal ways of gendered behavior and thus legitimize domination.

Ngo Thi Ngan Binh (2004: 47-73) analyzes how Confucian behavioral norms have changed in the last decades and concludes that the less strictly they are followed the more freedom women experience. A greater extent of independence might allow a woman to launch a professional investment, for

⁶⁶ Bourdieu's structural and dichotomist analysis faced numerous and sometimes justified critique (e.g. Brubaker 1993; De Certeau 1988; Nooteboom 2003; Viazzo and Lynch 2002: 423-452; Wehrli 2009: 43-53). In my opinion, it is relevant to state that Bourdieu also included examples that transgressed these binary categories. For example, in his analysis of Kabyle society, Bourdieu detailed the socially expected and yet differing behavior among forgers, which entailed both male and female behaviors and therefore cannot be ascribed exclusively to either male or female habitus (Bourdieu 1972).

example, or expand her educational background. The businesswoman Thảo, described in Chapter Six, is exemplary in this regard. With the onset of the economic reforms of *Đổi mới*, the four virtues and the three demands of obedience are now considered “traditional Vietnamese values” (Rydstrøm 2010: 171ff.). This set of “values” can be found in everyday discourse in northern Vietnam when people say that “everyone ought to get married and have children”. The consequences of this will be discussed below.

Marriage and children as an integral part of “natural desires”

Throughout Vietnam, marriage has been considered a “filial duty” and choosing not to marry implies a failure to fulfill this obligation (see e.g. Nguyen Huu Minh 1997; Williams 2005). Williams (2005), for example, compared Vietnam with Thailand and the Philippines and demonstrated that marriage was clearly seen as an integral part of life in Vietnam, and to a comparatively lesser extent also in the Philippines and Thailand:

“People who don’t get married in Vietnam are considered abnormal. Non-marriage is even considered a cause of degeneration of the society” (Williams 2005, cited in Lung Vu (n. J: 2).

Some authors have studied women who prefer to remain single and have “rejected” husbands (see e.g. Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong 2002: 89-110). Based on their findings – which also correspond to mine – the status of non-married women within Vietnamese society is generally less validated than the status of married women. This indirectly confirms the norm of marriage. Recent research conducted by the Gender Institute of Hà Nội concludes with satisfaction that “Vietnamese values” such as marriage remain predominant. These ideals or these obligations, depending on one’s point of view, are also statistically evident and can best be shown by official statistics stating that 99 percent of all men in the age group of 50 to 54 years have been married at least once, while six percent of women in the same age group remained unmarried⁶⁷ (GSO 2010b: 47).

⁶⁷ The gender-related difference in this age group seems to be primarily a byproduct of the former wars that led to the deaths of tens of thousands of Vietnamese men.

Consequently, and regardless of the socioeconomic changes that have occurred during the last two decades, the majority of persons are integrated into a *hộ*. Anyone who lives as a single person, with friends or as an unmarried couple remains an exception⁶⁸. These circumstances are mainly caused by work or education-related situations, e.g. migrants from rural areas who decide to work in factories (see e.g. Selim 1998) or in one of the Economic Processing Zones (EPZ).

⁶⁸ In my research sample, I met only one person who lives as a single person (see Appendix 1, case example 19).

Chapter Eight: Controversial Gender Practices in (Post-)Socialist Vietnam: The Case of Female Feticide

“Một trăm con gái không bằng một dái con trai.”

“One hundred girls are not the equal of one testicle of one boy.”

(Vietnamese proverb, unknown origin).

This chapter fills a crucial research gap (Bélanger 2002) by providing missing and essential knowledge about the emic criteria used in decisions that lead to female feticide.⁶⁹ In this chapter I will examine how and why such inequalities are being reproduced, and the basis upon which they are being legitimized.⁷⁰ I will also explore my second research question about the reasons that lead to female feticide, posing additional questions that follow from it, such as: Is female feticide a post-*Đổi mới* phenomenon? Does the choice to undertake female feticide depend upon gender or generation? Or does this choice depend upon the position of actors in different “social fields” in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense of the term?

Relying on in-depth ethnographic data, I will refer to the emic concept of “lucky numbers” (“*số may mắn*”) in order to shed light on an aspect of gender relationships that has not yet been sufficiently discussed: the motivations that lead to female feticide. By this means numerous aspects of the complex interplay between gendered expectations, on the one hand, and socially imposed relationships such as inherent rules, roles, status (see e.g. Linton 1936) and power, on the other, will become evident.

In this chapter I will inquire into whether, as is often heard in local discourses, individual decisions to engage in female feticide are based in ideological convictions. I will also examine whether other reasons – such as economic, social and even personal reasons – are being concealed by so-called ideological reasons and, if this is the case, explore whether they can

⁶⁹ The topic of sex-selective abortion is not limited to female feticide but also includes male feticide.

⁷⁰ Some ideas in this chapter have already been published in an edited volume (Wehrli 2011). I would like to thank Monique Selim, Bernard Hours and Bernard Castelli for their comments, and the editor for granting permission to reuse some of that material.

be identified. In doing so I will analyze the socio-historic past of Vietnam, including the relevance of the decades of war, the emergence of the Vietnamese Communist Party and corresponding discourses on gender equality. In contrast to researchers who state that the abortion of female fetuses is a post-*Đổi mới* phenomenon I argue that even before *Đổi mới* “traditional methods” were applied that were believed to favor the birth of a son. In this sense female feticide in those days reflected – like a mirror – former inequalities that were always present but not necessarily visible. The implementation of the “two-child-policy” by the Vietnamese government will also be examined, followed by reasons that lead to female feticide. Jürg Helbling has insightfully noted that one can compare the current population pyramid of Vietnam with that of other countries after decades of war. When one considers the population pyramid of Vietnam, it becomes evident that a gender imbalance characterized by a statistically significant greater number of men than women holds true for the generation of thirty years and younger (this will be discussed below). The generation aged thirty to fifty years shows an equal distribution of the genders, and the oldest generation of fifty years and above indicates more women than men. The latter imbalance is undeniably a result of the numerous wars fought from the forties through the seventies (see Diagram 3 on the following page).

Vietnam faced decades of war – against the French, Japanese, Americans, Cambodians and Chinese – and the loss of innumerable citizens, mostly men. One can therefore ask whether the current Vietnamese state possibly advocates ideologies that foster the necessity of “having at least one son”. This would correspond to a subtle but effective way of encouraging parents to have sons. In post-World War II France, for example, the state actively encouraged parents to have as many children as possible and subsidized that. The goal thereof consisted in the felt necessity on the one hand to have more men to equalize the gender imbalance – because France too lost countless men during the war – and on the other hand, to foster a “production of boys” so as to be prepared in the case of wars yet to come.

Therefore, it is relevant to consider whether the strong promotion of Confucian values and the so-called importance of “having at least one son”

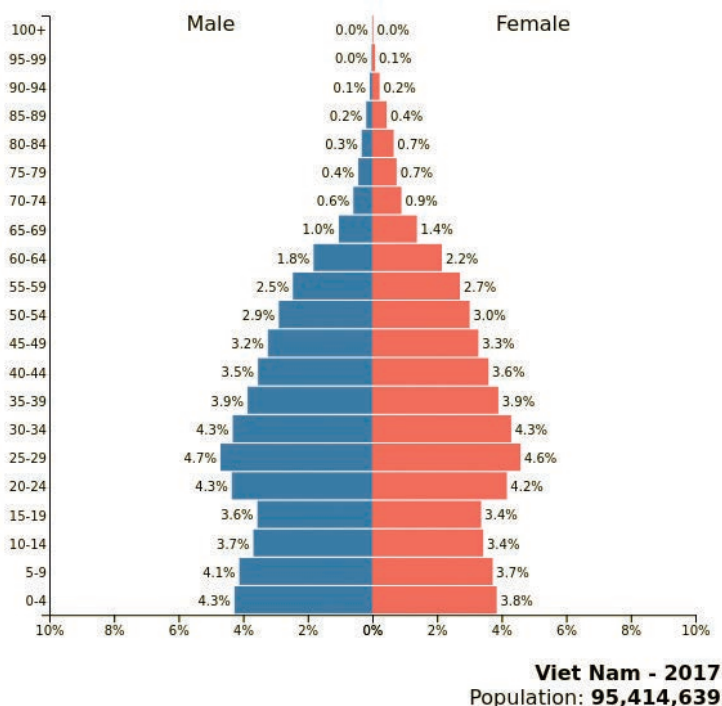


Diagram 3: Population pyramid of Vietnam (2017).⁷¹

is a way for the Vietnamese government to veil its potentially strategic goal of having enough young men in case of future wars.

In the following section, I will shed light on the local and national contexts with regard to female feticide in Vietnam.

“Lucky numbers” (“Số may mắn”)

“Lucky numbers” refers to emic convictions that have undergone little if any change through the various eras of colonial occupation, decades of war, socialism and a variety of socioeconomic changes since the onset of

⁷¹ Population Pyramids of the World from 1950 to 2100. <<https://www.populationpyramid.net/viet-nam/2017/>>, last accessed 2 August, 2018.

Đôi mối in the late 1980s. The family ideal represented by the expression “lucky numbers” refers to the ideal of having first a daughter and then a son. Before the implementation of the “two-child policy”⁷² in Vietnam in the early 1980s, “lucky numbers” was not limited to two children but could entail more. The principle, however, of having “at least one son” and ideally also one girl underwent no change, not even during socialism before *Đôi mối*. Hence “lucky number” refers to the obligation to have at least one son and to respect the limitations of the “two-child policy”. Its relevance with respect to gender relationships in general will be analyzed below.

While conducting research I heard the following proverb over and over again (field notes between 2005 and 2010).

“Một trăm con gái không bằng một dái con trai.”
(“One hundred girls are not the equal of one testicle of one boy.”)

Two questions arise with respect to this proverb: First, what does the proverb tell us? And second, how is it linked to past experiences and practices that have prevailed both in colonial and contemporary Vietnam?

In the following section, the focus lies on one possible outcome of this proverb, the controversial gender practice of female feticide. Abortion in general and female feticide in particular are delicate subjects that are taboo topics within Vietnam. For this reason I would like to add some preliminary remarks: In this chapter I aim at demonstrating how the power constellations that lead to female feticide are culturally, economically, socially and ideologically legitimizing structural inequalities that primarily and directly target women. At the same time, I must point out that men face its indirect consequences as brothers, fathers, cousins, lovers and partners. Hence I do not perceive women as the passive victims and men as the active aggressors. In addition, I will not be debating whether or not abortion is justified in general; instead I inquire to what extent female feticide reproduces gendered inequalities. If we consider that even before birth one sex is less valued than another, or is not valued at all, the question emerges as to whether this

⁷² In October 2017, the Vietnamese authorities decided to revise the “two-child policy.” Vietnamnet: <<http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/society/189374/vietnam-revises-two-child-policy.html>>, last accessed 2 August, 2018. I will discuss the reasons and implications thereof at the end of Chapter Nine.

fact refers to a deeply rooted inequality within society. Before elaborating further I will provide some background information.

Female feticide in global and local contexts

Global discourses that favor equality⁷³ among men and women are actively being promoted within Vietnam not only by local actors, but also by international actors. How discourses as well as “norms” and “values” that favor gender equality enter into conflict with Confucian ideals that emphasize the so-called importance of “having at least one son” will be discussed subsequently. If one examines the etymology of feticide, it becomes clear that the derivation of the suffix “icide” goes back to *occido*, the Latin term meaning “to fell or to kill”. Female feticide is the act of aborting a fetus because it is female. The frequency of female feticide is indirectly estimated from the observed high birth-sex ratio of boys to girls at birth. The natural ratio is assumed to be 100 girls for every 103 to 107 boys, and any number of boys above that is suggestive of sex selective practices such as female feticide⁷⁴ or infanticide.

Female feticide is not at all confined within the borders of Vietnam but is also very common in other countries such as India, China, South Korea and Taiwan that strongly validate patrilineage (Sen 1990: 20). Amartya Sen declared at the beginning of the 1990s that the number of “missing women” in China, South Asia and West Asia, as well as in North Africa, had reached “sixty to one hundred million” (Sen 1990: 20). This alerted the scientific community and some politicians as well. While the sex imbalance in these countries has been documented since the 1980s (Attané and Guilмото 2007), researchers like Guilмото discovered a statistically significant sex imbalance among newborn babies based on the Vietnamese population census of 1999 (Guilмото et al. 2009; GSO 2007). The sex ratio indicated more boys than girls had been born (110/100). Since 2006 the sex ratio has

⁷³ The term “equality” is a complex term that has been debated since the ancient Greeks who founded democracy based on the so-called equality of humans. However, this “equality” excluded women and slaves and was only valid for free men (see e.g. Habermas 1996 [1962]).

⁷⁴ The sex ratio corresponds to the number of boys in relation to girls.

increased even further: from 109.8 in 2006 to 111.2 by 2010 (GSO 2010a: 63). Surprisingly, the sex ratio was highest in the Red River Delta where it reached 115.3 by 2009 (GSO 2010a: 63).

FIGURE 4.4: SEX RATIO AT BIRTH BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC REGION, 2009

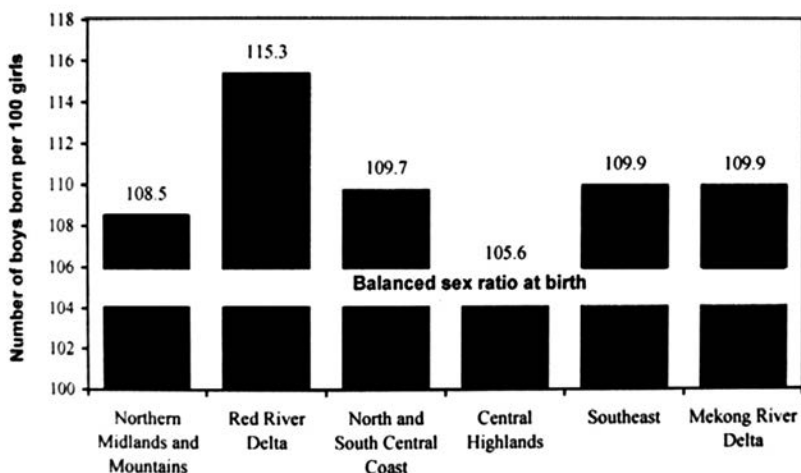


Table 3: Sex ratio at birth by socioeconomic region, 2009 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2010a: 63).

Sex ratio at birth by region and year						
	2005	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
WHOLE COUNTRY	105.6	111.6	112.1	110.5	111.2	111.9
Red River Delta	109.3	110.8	119.0	115.3	116.2	122.4
Northern midlands and mountain areas	101.8	109.1	114.2	108.5	109.9	110.4
North Central and Central coastal areas	104.7	112.4	108.2	109.7	114.3	103.3
Central Highlands	108.5	117.3	116.7	105.6	108.2	104.3
South East	106.8	117.5	116.8	109.9	105.9	108.8
Mekong River Delta	103.8	107.9	102.8	109.9	108.3	114.9

Table 4: Sex ratio at birth by region and year (General Statistics Office of Vietnam: 2015b).⁷⁵

⁷⁵ General Statistics Office (GSO) 2015b: Population and Employment. Sex ratio at birth by region. <https://www.gso.gov.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=774>, last accessed 14 December 2015.

Tables Three and Four show impressively that the Red River Delta has the highest sex ratio at birth, amounting to 115.3/100 in 2009 and already to 122.4/100 in 2011. The reasons seem to point to a rigid interpretation of ancestor worship. Already at the beginning of the 20th century, Pierre Gourou described how patriarchal Confucian values were dominant in the Red River Delta. I contend that this remains to be valid to this day, although admittedly these rituals are less rigidly implemented in the regions of the Southeast and in the Mekong River Delta. This can be explained by the fact that both patrilineality and patrilocality are less common in the Mekong Delta, than in the other regions of Vietnam. One region with a balanced sex ratio at birth is the “Central Highlands”. In this region numerous ethnic minorities reside who in some cases do not share the same cultural values (e.g. patrilineality, ancestor worship) as the ethnic Kinh.

Table Four analyzes the annual development of female feticide over the years from 2005 until 2011. In 2011, all regions except the “North Central and Central coastal areas and the Central Highlands” show a sex ratio imbalance at birth. Yet, in the previous years these two regions sometimes also indicated an imbalanced sex ratio at birth (e.g. in 2007 where it was 117.3 for the Central Highlands).

In Vietnam, abortions until 16 weeks – and sometimes later – have been legal since the 1960s. In fact, Vietnam and another (post-)socialist country, Cuba, share the highest abortion rates worldwide: each has an average of 2.5 abortions per woman (Henshaw et al., 1999). Gammeltoft’s study confirms that abortions have been prevalent since the 1960s and that they were often used as a means of birth control to terminate pregnancies (1999). She explains that this was because of the lack of chemical and mechanical contraceptives, and the refusal of men to use condoms. According to Vietnamese law, sex-based abortions and all prenatal techniques for identifying the sex of a child are forbidden (Gender Equality Law, December 2006). Nevertheless, clinics and even many pharmacies offer ultrasounds, so that interested and curious parents can identify the sex of their future child.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ In practice, people living in very remote areas and from poor backgrounds may face more difficulties; but it appears that these services are offered at affordable prices, and that people with few economic resources are willing to pay for these services in order to circumvent governmental sanctions (Information collected by the author between 2006

Nguyen Ba Thuy, the minister of health, has stated that the sex ratio is likely to reach 125 boys to 100 girls by 2020. This theoretically implies that by 2030 over four million men will be unable to find a female Vietnamese mate if this imbalance is not addressed. If neighboring countries such as Taiwan and South Korea are taken into consideration, some consequences of female feticide are already apparent. Kim Na Hyun points to the fact that Taiwanese and South Korean men are in the Vietnamese “marriage market” these days (see e.g. Kim Na Hyun 2007: 10-14). The fact that girls are aborted not only reflects inequality, but it also suggests a high probability that such inequalities will be reproduced in one way or another throughout the entire life cycle. Some researchers, for example, suspect that the imbalance will result in a scarcity of female marriage partners, as well as in more rape and female sex work (see e.g. Le Thi Phuong Mai 1998; and the study by Nguyen Thu Huong 2011). Another taboo topic that is likely to gain momentum is domestic violence. The potential for such continuing inequalities leads to ethical and personal challenges for the present Vietnamese generation, when parents are confronted with the decision about whether or not to selectively abort a girl. So, let us turn to the question of why the abortion of a female fetus is considered or undertaken.

The current academic debate on female feticide

With respect to female feticide, Croll (2000) and Guilmoto (2007) raise ethical questions; other researchers study the impact of technologies on these abortions. The anthropologist Rydström has researched female processes of socialization in Vietnam and argues that the masculine body symbolizes “continuity and honor” (2003). Based on her data, she concludes that the family’s name is inscribed on the body of a boy. The son is considered indispensable as a guarantee of the continuity of patrilineage and ancestor worship. This perception remains dominant within society despite omnipresent discourses that allegedly favor gender equality.

Studies about the emic convictions that lead to female feticide have been conducted in the rural parts of Vietnam (Bélanger 2006 and Gammeltoft 1999). Unfortunately, there has been much less inquiry into the

and 2010).

matter in urban areas, leaving a gap in knowledge (see e.g. Bélanger 2002; UNFPA 2009: 15). Bélanger believes that sex-related discrimination is less frequent in urban zones than in rural ones (2005). Because she expects to find less discrimination in urban areas, her argument perpetuates the normative assumption that urban areas are less “traditional” and have less “backward” convictions. Personally, I find this dualistic distinction to be far too simple; because neither are so-called urban and rural boundaries clear-cut, nor, in my opinion, is it possible to draw a clear-cut line with respect to beliefs of any kind. Nevertheless research in urban areas is vital in order to bridge this research gap. The urban places where I conducted research, Nam Định City and Hà Nội, are both part of the Red River Delta. As elaborated above, this region has the highest sex ratio at birth within Vietnam, which very likely is the result of a rigid interpretation of the so-called traditional Confucian obligations. Research in this region is thus promising as a means to identify why and how such forms of inequality are being constructed and reproduced.

Data from field research: “tradition”, kinship, social networks and social pressure

In the preceding chapter, I elaborated on and compared the situation of Vietnamese women with those of women in nearby Asian countries such as China, South Korea and Japan. This analysis of female feticide leads one to consider whether the so-called importance of having “at least one son” has a long “tradition” in Vietnam. Seen in this context, it is relevant to seek explanations for common – and officially illegal – practices of female feticide. The main reason why family planning techniques are used for having at least one son is the “traditional” conviction that boys are essential for guaranteeing continuity with the ancestors, and thus the wellbeing of the parents in the afterlife.

“A son is acknowledged as connecting the deceased and future members of his patrilineage by mediating physical, symbolic and temporal links across generations” (Horton and Rydstrøm 2011: 548).

Numerous researchers point out that abortions of female fetuses seem to be connected with patrilocal convictions that favor the importance of a son (see e.g. Bélanger 2006). The obligation to have a son does not signify that girls will be aborted. However, the governmental “two-child policy”, which requires parents to limit their offspring, enters into conflict with strategies to guarantee filial duty. The following reasons explain the importance of having at least one son. At the same time, they appear to legitimize – depending on the point of view – female feticide.

First, “traditional” reasons based on the necessity of guaranteeing not only continuity of patrilocality and the patrilineal line, but, as Bélanger notes, continuity with the patriarchal system (2005: 288).

Second, cultural and religious reasons based on the conviction that only boys are legitimately capable of performing the funeral rituals⁷⁷, and even more important, to practice ancestor worship in order to guarantee the well-being of the deceased, to arrange memorial services, devotions and also sacrificial offerings. Specific kinds of foods that vary regionally, or reflect the taste of the deceased or the household’s customs, alcohol and at times cigarettes are presented in front of the ancestor’s altar. A variety of other objects⁷⁸ made of paper are burnt in order to reach the deceased in the afterlife. According to emic convictions – that are also very common and

⁷⁷ One part of the funeral ritual has to be performed when the corresponding person dies. A second part takes place four years later when the dead body is exhumed. In accordance with “tradition”, the remaining bones are ritually and practically cleaned, and then buried for a second time in a smaller casket. The rituals and proceedings vary in their details according to the region, “*hộ* traditions” and last but not least, the economic circumstances of the living. Besides these two occasions, the death anniversary is always commemorated and generally involves prayers, a special meal as well as the invitation of other people (kin, often former work colleagues, some neighbors and sometimes friends). In addition some people who are believed to have the ability to interact with the deceased “ask” them for advice on life in general as well as on business-related questions (Information collected by the author between 2004 and 2010).

⁷⁸ Numerous shops specialize in selling such objects ranging from fake US dollars to cars, motorbikes, suitcases, TVs and even mobile phones. Between 2004 and 2010, I observed that both the variety and amount of these objects increased. This reflects the growing demand but also the considerable improvement of the economic living standards for the majority of the population (see Wehrli 2011).

widespread in China and other Confucian countries – the deceased will thus benefit from these offerings. My analysis, based on findings from my research from the North to the South, demonstrates that a consensus about the stated reasons for these sacrificial offerings does not exist. However, two main interpretations emerge: The first interpretation says that the offerings are necessary for the deceased, so that he or she can develop further and reach a higher status in the afterlife. The second interpretation says that the departed are only able and willing to help the living if they receive enough offerings; thus, the more one offers, the more one is going to benefit. This distinction among believers is also relevant to the identification of who is more apt to abort selectively. My data show that it is the latter group, which attributes more relevance to having “at least” one son and consequently shows fewer or no scruples with respect to female feticide. This is logically coherent since a direct connection is taken for granted and “one has to obey the deceased” in order to guarantee one’s own stable life in the present and the future.⁷⁹

Third, economic reasons. Apart from the economic support that is crucial for those who do not receive enough of a pension to guarantee their income, the certitude that social and material security will be assured is of utmost importance in a country where institutions such as old-age homes are scant.⁸⁰

Fourth, social pressure remains strong despite the socioeconomic changes that have occurred since 1986. This apparent fact is not only evident in daily life, but also finds its expression in jokes and a variety of subtle discriminations that are omnipresent in kin, social and professional networks. Hence social pressure classifies and reinforces inferior status. This rarely or never-mentioned aspect is relevant and not yet sufficiently researched due

⁷⁹ Similar beliefs also seem to prevail in some parts of India where numerous people believe that one’s own “Karma” can only be improved by the birth of “at least one son”. An escape from this vicious circle seems therefore impossible for some.

⁸⁰ With the exception of some ethnic minorities and a few areas in southern Vietnam, mainly in the Mekong Delta, patrilineality and patrilocality correspond to the rules within Vietnam. Thus the son and, in practice, mainly his wife, are expected to take care of their patrilineal parents in their third age.

to its subtle nature and the impossibility of measuring it adequately. My data indicate that the status of families without sons is inferior compared to those who have one or more sons. Hence social pressure classifies and reinforces this inferior status. Given that habitus (Bourdieu 1980: 101) is the product of society and bases itself on collective and individual experiences, the mechanisms that foster the perpetuation of power relations and female feticide will be scrutinized by analyzing the reasons for which even the so-called oppressed accept their destiny without opposition (Bourdieu 1980; 1979). This is a fact that reinforces the system.

Therefore, *fifth, symbolic reasons* that can be partially linked to social pressure. In contrast to the social, the symbolic targets the status of the individual; both men and women achieve an increase in their socially ascribed status as soon as they have a son.

Sixth, men's fear of losing influence. Based on my analysis of the research data I gathered from 2004-2010, the following hypothesis emerges: the observable advancement of women in diverse domains of society that were formerly considered “male domains”, such as education, the economy and especially politics, nourishes fears among men of losing influence. Or, as a retired, well-educated and middle-income academic summarized it, the fear of “becoming worthless and replaced, because women can do it all by themselves these days”. He went on to say that the only possible domains on earth that could not be touched by such advancement by women were religion and ideology (Interview conducted with Tiến in Hà Nội, October 2010). Tiến mentioned that these domains lay in the spiritual and “irrational” dimension, and he pointed out that “no one can prove with certitude that women can *equally well* perform the worship of the ancestors as men” (Interview with Tiến, October 2010). The economic advancement of women is likely to increase these fears, since economically successful women may gradually take over the role of caregiver to their parents and eventually fulfill the ancestor worship, prior reserved for sons.

Seventh, the beliefs of women who have already interiorized their socially “inferior” status. These women aim at having a son because they value girls less, regardless of whether or not this implies having an abortion (e.g.

the various interviews with Hien in 2006 and 2010). In this respect it is also relevant to note that the status of a Vietnamese woman improves considerably as soon as she gives birth to a son. On the one hand, the son guarantees that her status will remain stable even if her husband engages publicly in an extramarital affair (as became evident in the cases of two other interviewees in Hà Nội). In line with the rules of patrilocality and patrilineality, she will have the option of continuing to live with her parents-in-law. The underlying reason can again be traced back to the importance of the body, in this case the body of the woman that grants patrilineality. Giving birth to a son thus corresponds to social and economic security. On the other hand, the interiorization of external facts (Bourdieu 1980), that is to say, of these socially conferred “values”, can imply that women themselves are convinced that the other sex has more value than their own. This fact sometimes leads to conflictual decisions with respect to abortion: the woman follows through either because she prefers a boy or because she does not want her own destiny to be “duplicated” and endured by her future daughter.⁸¹

Women who actively advocate the patrilineal system by confirming its legitimacy are more esteemed than those who question it or refuse to reproduce it – in the literal sense of the word. Thereby the circle of oppression and re-oppression is closed.⁸²

⁸¹ Some of my informants explained this decision as being a result of their experiences with social and economic hardship and their conviction that abortion was a good way to “save a girl from a life of terrible hardship to come”. Others even referred to the spiritual realm and the conviction that their action “saved the soul of the unborn” because the soul received another chance of being reborn as a man, which would equal a spiritual advancement according to “Buddhist belief”. Four informants hoped that abortion would increase the chance of being reborn in a country where “babies” regardless of their sex would have a “happier life”. This last decision was prominent among women who strongly believed in rebirth and who also believed that rich people were rich because of better previous lives. Consequently, they praised or blamed their current situation on their own and sometimes also on their kin’s previous lives (Information collected by the author between 2004 and 2010).

⁸² Other examples of how the oppressed or those who suffer from discrimination reproduce the system are well known, for example among ethnic minorities and immigrant groups where one sees the phenomenon of “newcomers” often being the most disrespected by former immigrants.

To sum it up briefly, one can say that a son is perceived as necessary to the continuance of patrilineage. This, however, does not mean that daughters have no value. On the contrary, the family ideal consists of first having a daughter, and then a son. This leads to the question of whether the gender imbalance is a product of post-*Đổi mới* socioeconomic changes in Vietnam, or if this phenomenon points to cultural convictions that are part of a long “tradition”.

Is female feticide a post-*Đổi mới* phenomenon?

In what follows, I will elaborate how the structure of Vietnamese society is still heavily based on kinship, social, economic and religious networks. This interdependence exerts considerable pressure against norms and actions that are considered “non-traditional” or “deviant”. My analysis will offer insights into the confluence between obligations, responsibilities and privileges; and it will become evident how individual decisions can come into conflict with social pressure. Using this approach, the ideological contradictions between cultural “norms” that favor a male heir – even if these might imply female feticide – and discourses that envisage gender equality will become apparent.

In order to ascertain if female feticide is a product of the recent post-*Đổi mới* changes, it is relevant to consider statistics as well as research conducted prior to *Đổi mới*. The need to consider statistics and prior research becomes problematic, however, because Vietnam was involved in numerous wars throughout the last centuries until the late 1970s. During the Vietnam-American war and the following “Cold War” period, for example, the concerns of state employees and researchers were focused elsewhere than on gathering and utilizing statistics (see e.g. Sanjek 1990). Scholars from Vietnam and other socialist countries were also unable to conduct in-depth research during this period of time. Consequently, quantitative research data does not exist or is inadequate. Data on whether male and female newborns received the same care – for example, with respect to nourishment and vaccinations – are not available.

In 1963 the Vietnamese government introduced the so-called “two-child policy” in North Vietnam (see also Attané and Scornet 2009). After

unification the policy was implemented throughout the country in 1975. Formally however, the “two-child policy” was introduced in 1988. Since then the official size of a *hộ* corresponds to “one or two children” (*một hoặc cả hai con*). Population growth was perceived as a crucial paradox with respect to Vietnam’s development: a sufficient number of workers is necessary to guarantee a supply for the market economy and yet a “boom” of newborns is undesirable as it is perceived as an indicator that hinders the development of the country. In fact the Vietnamese “two-child policy” is only a requirement for the ethnic majority, the *Kinh* (*người Việt* or *người Kinh*), and does not apply to all ethnic minorities living in Vietnam. As a result the fertility rate dropped from about six children in 1970 to 2.3 in 1999, although local and national statistics reveal that the law was not always strictly applied (National Committee for Population and Family Planning 1999, cited in Bélanger 2005: 288). By 2009 the average dropped even further to 2.03 children (1.87 in urban and 2.14 in rural areas) and thus corresponded to the ideal plan of the government (GSO 2010b: 62).⁸³ In July 2015 Vietnamese authorities publicly announced that this policy might be abandoned in the future because a probable stagnation in population growth must be impeded. And in October 2017, the “two-child policy” was abolished (see Chapter Nine). With respect to female feticide, it will be relevant to investigate if the abandonment of the “two-child policy” leads to a decrease in female feticide.

Statistics that deal with the implementation of family policy are extremely detailed. Every household is listed and can be tracked back to the national, regional, municipal and smallest unit of the so-called “household population group”. Besides the exact location of each household in those administrative levels, the number of *hộ* members is mentioned. In a separate section, the number of women with more than two children is listed in order to raise awareness of this situation. Of course it remains possible that some “third children” remain undocumented in order to improve the score of the policy implementation. Yet the statistics I received from different

⁸³ In 1999 the difference between urban and rural areas was larger and corresponded to 1.67 children in urban areas and 2.57 children in rural areas, leading to an average of 2.33 children (GSO 2010: 64).

wards within Nam Định City were randomly double-checked during field research and did not reveal any mismatches (see Appendix 3).

Parents therefore face a double obligation: on the one hand they are not allowed to have more than two children, and on the other hand they feel obliged to “have at least one son” in order to fulfill their so-called Confucian obligation. If they have more than two children, monetary and social sanctions tend to increase in significance (see below). Based on field research conducted in the Red River Delta, my data confirms that before the economic reforms of *Đổi mới*, abortions were widely applied in order to regulate the number of children. Yet “traditional” beliefs and procedures that promised the birth of a boy were rampant. Since the 1990s these formerly orally transmitted “formulas” for guaranteeing the birth of a male heir are now widely analyzed and discussed in numerous publications. Female feticide reflects gender inequalities that are deeply rooted within society but were not as visible before *Đổi mới*. It would be far too simple to attribute these prenatal regulations exclusively to the recent availability of prenatal reproductive techniques. As my data demonstrate, it was common for people to try to influence and determine the sex of a future child by relying on special dietary supplements, sexual positions and calendar dates well before the economic reforms of *Đổi mới* (see e.g. case examples 61 and 180). To conclude, one can state that while female feticide existed before *Đổi mới*, the probability of a selective abortion has risen with the introduction and stricter implementation of the “two-child policy”, especially if the firstborn child is already female.

The taboo of abortion and female feticide

Every society has its own taboos: some are universal and others depend on the country or the social setting. In Vietnam it is common to ask questions about age, familial status or the number and age of children when encountering a new face. Unlike in other societies, these questions are socially accepted and even expected because they are indispensable in order to correctly address one’s counterpart when speaking Vietnamese.

How can it be explained that the majority of interviewees denied the prevalence of female feticide and sometimes even argued that such abor-

tions were meaningless because both sexes were equal? Do these arguments point to an idealization of their own society, or to a taboo? That the interviewees were simply unaware of this fact is highly improbable because they came from numerous “social fields” within society. Rather, to keep silent or to pretend that even publicly well-known examples are only exceptions that thus confirm the rule is to refer to a taboo. The fact that these kinds of abortions are officially proscribed does not explain why they form part of a taboo topic in Vietnam. In accordance with strategies that aim at disguising abortion, locally widespread discourses pretend that the gender disproportion is the product of a recent change in nutrition; other interviewees identified the reason as an inherent “natural debility” that all girls inherited and that lead to spontaneous female abortions; and still others explained the imbalance as a “supernatural coincidence” that will be reversed in the near future. In contrast to these explanations, statistics prove that female feticide exists; and it can be observed that numerous parents abort as soon as they know the sex of a child, especially if the first or the second child is already of the female sex.

As soon as my informants felt comfortable sharing their real experiences, the dissimulating discourses changed into a discussion of concrete personal experiences. The more the questions accessed this taboo, the more details emerged. Questions directed towards abortion in general⁸⁴ and towards abortions that targeted girls evoked contradictory feelings. Some interviewees became silent and others – especially those who initially denied abortion with vehemence and later on advocated it as a means to preserve the continuity of ancestor worship – again began to deny female feticide in aggressive ways. I posit this in part because some interviewees repeatedly spoke about how they had ended a potential life. Also, their statements revealed their explicit or implicit awareness that female feticide symbolizes prenatal inequality in society. Yet others were reluctant to talk about this subject or to express “their emotionality” (see Chapter Four). Reasons that lead to refuting this social fact might be explained by unacknowledged

⁸⁴ It is relevant to note that abortion also targets boys, although with different motivations: mainly it happens because a woman does not want to have a child. It would be interesting to know if parents who already have a son as a first child abort subsequent boys in order to have a daughter.

ambivalence. Numerous persons expressed the view that it was unjust to abort girls and recalled countless stories of relatives and friends who did so voluntarily or even involuntarily. An implicit consensus seems to prevail among almost everyone that “one has to do it” regardless of one’s own will. This balance between an action that is done based on one’s own “free will” and an action that is done because “one is forced to do so” is also built into the grammatical structure of the Vietnamese language. In my opinion the parallel between language and strategies related to abortions is of vital significance in order to understand corresponding actions. Nevertheless, it seems crucial to avoid the pitfall of assuming that abortions that are only motivated by the choice of the “right sex” are universally considered to be unjust.

“The ideal and happy family” between obligations and sanctions

In order to guarantee the success of the governmental family planning policy (GSO 2010a: 63-64), diverse forms of sanctions exist to target families that surpass the allowed number and do not respect the “two-child policy”.

The sanctions faced by people who have more than two children vary according to their position, income and social capital. People who are not directly employed by the state predominantly confront monetary fines – and depending on the context – social discrimination. State employees, however, endure more severe consequences. Members of the Vietnamese Communist Party, civil servants and also workers in state-owned enterprises and factories generally lose their jobs or are excluded from the party (see e.g. Hours and Selim 2003: 626, information collected by the author between 2005 and 2010). Between 1980 and 1990, people who worked in subaltern positions were not typically expelled from their jobs (Information collected between 2004 and 2010). Yet their professional advancement was extremely unlikely. This implies the existence of indirect sanctions. During this period members of the Vietnamese Communist Party were also not allowed to have more than two children and would have faced direct sanctions regardless of their children’s sex (Research data collected between 2006 and 2010). Not surprisingly, I met only four people in Nam Định City and Hà Nội – despite my vast research sample and numerous conversa-

tions – who had more than two children and still worked in the state sector. Their employment is characterized by its “inferior status”: one man worked as a security guard at night, one woman in a textile factory and the other two as cleaners. Everyone explained that their employers sympathized with their “bad destiny of only having girls” and allowed them benevolently to continue working. It was apparent that they all felt ashamed and tried to avoid this topic whenever possible in discussions with their colleagues at work.

Seen in this context, it is not surprising that the majority of the couples who aim at achieving a career in the state sector abort, if the prenatal ultrasound indicates that the second child will again be female. It seems likely that the implementation of family planning became stricter in 2009, as compared to 2005, although some exceptions continue to exist. The number of women having more than two children dropped from 20.8 percent in 2005 to 16.1 percent in 2009 (GSO 2010a: 64). The couples with more than two children correspond predominantly to those who first have two girls. This is supported by the statistics: the probability of having a boy as a third or fourth child is more than two times higher for women who do not yet have a son (60 percent) than for those who have had one (30 percent) (UNFPA 2009: 21). These statistics clearly prove that abortions play the dominant role. Corresponding data from my field research will be discussed in a later chapter.

The sanctions described above do not equally target people who work on their own – from small household businesses to entrepreneurs with a couple of hundred workers – or in a foreign company. These people are also required to pay a fine to the local authorities but in general face no license withdrawal or job loss. Depending on their connections to local authorities, the status of their family and their socio-economic capital in Bourdieu’s sense (1985; 1983), the amount of the compensation – or in the opinion of the majority of the informants, the amount of corruption – is negotiated (Information collected by the author between 2004 and 2010). Consequently, sanctions depend on “useful” relations. For some, the compensation does not cause any difficulties, but for others it represents a burden. The amount varies from small presents to several million in Vietnamese dong, equivalent to several tens of thousands in U.S. dollars. These widespread and

publicly known sanctions depend to a small degree on the sex of the third child. In accordance with the Confucian “tradition” outlined above, the majority of the population “sympathizes”, “understands” or even expects implicitly or explicitly that the parents “try again” to achieve the “lucky number” if the first two children are girls. In this case the rupture with the state rule is better accepted because the parents do so in order to respect and reproduce Vietnamese “tradition”. Numerous informants acknowledged that even state officials “express their sympathy” in such cases, as long as the parents are not employed by the state. However, families who have a third child after already having one or two boys are in the minority, and they face more severe social sanctions and higher fines (research data collected in 2010, and case example 10). In future research, it would be useful to statistically identify their percentage and to identify their “social fields”.

During my latest visit to my field research sites, I became familiar with another phenomenon that allows parents who have two girls both to fulfill their filial duty according to Confucian “tradition” and to respect the small family size. This phenomenon is adoption. In order to fulfill the official ideal, a trick is applied by the cadres to show that the *hộ* officially corresponds to the rule: The adopted child lives with the new parents but remains registered in the *hộ khẩu* (household registration book) of his or her biological parents until the child reaches full age. My data make clear that the adoption of a third child is not yet common and is a privilege of high-ranking Vietnamese Communist Party members. The adopted children primarily come from poor families who already have one or two children. Their sex is obviously male (Information collected in 2010).⁸⁵

“Lucky numbers” (“Số may mắn”): Games and jokes that reinforce the rules

Social anthropologists have for many decades taken an interest in the analysis of games and jokes as part of everyday life. Games and jokes reflect inherent aspects of society [see e.g. Geertz’s famous essay on the cock fight

⁸⁵ Surprisingly and despite widespread gossip in Nam Định City, some persons who adopted children manage to keep it secret. I would not have known if they had not confided in me.

(1973)]. They help to reinforce the rules and structure of a society, as well as its dominant ideology (Bourdieu 2000 [1972]). At other times these rules, which are deeply rooted in society, are being ridiculed in a comic way, which creates an opening for reconstructing the underlying official rules. This “liminal phase” (Turner 1977 [1969]) can also be characterized as using parody to question power relations (see e.g. Butler 1999 [1990]; 1997; 1993].

In Vietnam the family ideal is being reproduced in these ways and referred to as “lucky numbers”. In the following, I will focus on the description of this game that is in certain contexts also treated as a form of joking. This game is well known in northern Vietnam and is equally “played” in the center, although it is less popular in southern Vietnam. The goal of the game refers to the previously described family ideal that one has “to win”. The “comic part” of this game consists in ridiculing those who lose. Men often engage in excessive drinking during this game. Women equally participate but – as I observed especially in northern Vietnam – are generally required to refrain from the consumption of alcohol in order to respect “tradition”.

People win the maximum of ten points if they have – in real life – a daughter first and a son as their second child. Those who have a son followed by a daughter win eight points. Two sons and no daughter correspond to six points, one son wins five points, two girls and one son or two sons and one daughter wins three points. All others – this is to say parents who have one, two or three daughters and those who have no children at all – only win one point or even zero points, depending on the context, and thus lose the game.⁸⁶ The fact that one wins the game if the first child is a girl becomes evident if one takes into account the “tradition” in which the destiny of a daughter consists first and foremost in helping out her mother with household tasks and with the care of her younger brother.

This game evaluates persons in accordance with the degree to which they conform to the social ideal and reinforces the importance of patrilineality and hence the importance of having at least one son. Disguising this valorization as a game reduces social pressure. It allows persons who lose

⁸⁶ Consensus is lacking with respect to the people who have more than two children, because they do not always win the same amount of points. The reasons for this depend upon the situational context and will be discussed subsequently.

this game to “save face” by pointing out that they did not pick the “lucky numbers” in this game, but that they might do so in other “games” of society, such as in the field of work, politics or religion. The fact that almost everyone knows the rules of this game and does not oppose or ridicule them reinforces the validity of orthodoxy. The primordial value of a male child, the evident basis of the game, is also significantly illustrated by the proverb cited at the beginning of this chapter. “*Một trăm con gái không bằng một đái con trai*” (“One hundred girls are not the equal of one testicle of one boy”).

Mechanisms that reproduce inequalities

Following Phan Van Bich, I believe that Vietnamese society is still largely structured by a strong interdependence of complex relationships that encompass mutual obligations and rights (see e.g. Pham van Bich 1999). These networks often impede a young couple from opposing the will of their parents or other kin.

In the following I would like to present two stories that show to the extent to which the obligation of filial duty, including the importance of having “at least one son”, continues to be powerful today. A father of two girls told me how difficult life became for him and his wife when they had “only two girls” (Truyện T. 2010, case example 187). He himself showed joy when he saw his newborn second daughter at the hospital, and he pitied neither himself nor his wife. His own father, however, refused to talk to him for three days. The patriarch additionally protested the couple’s lack of dismay about having no son by refusing any food or liquid and shutting himself up in the house. This happened during the era of socialism, that is to say, before the opening up of *Đổi mới*.

TT: “When my wife gave birth to our second daughter I was happy to welcome the newborn and to hold her in my arms. Of course I knew that it was not allowed for me to have a third child and that I therefore had failed to fulfill my duty. However, my family did not understand me at all. In fact my father stopped eating and talking for three entire days. He was just sitting in his house, refused to go out and cried. It was the first time that I saw him crying. On the morning of the fourth day he sat next to me and told me how much he pitied me. As soon as he realized that I did

not share his apprehensions he became extremely angry and shouted that he will never understand how I can continue my life like that [pause]. Also at university, the majority of my colleagues, men and women, all professors you know, they didn't understand me either. This was also very hard for me; I even think that this slowed down my academic career. In their eyes I had failed and since I was not cursing my situation or my second daughter I did not receive the slightest support. I felt extremely alone and in a way I felt lost [pause]. My wife and I, we both felt so alone and lost."

(Truyện T., 55 years, married father of two daughters – 25 and 23 years old, born before 1986 – assistant professor at Hà Nội University, member of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Interview conducted in Hà Nội, November 2010).

The example of Truyện highlights that some parents perceive the birth of a child – regardless of whether it is a boy or a girl – as fortunate and are happy about it. Seen from the point of view of society, it is salient how *hộ* members, and in the case of Truyện, his father, took on the part of an intermediary between him and society. Truyện's father affirms his distress publicly, by refusing to take part in daily life, by secluding himself at home, by refraining from eating and by crying – a behavior that is not considered "masculine" in Vietnamese culture. His manifestations can be interpreted as a performance directed to the *hộ* and the public: He assumes the sorrow of his son and shows his support. Yet his lamenting reinforces the collective norm and corresponds to the anticipated habitus. As soon as he realizes that his son is not sharing in his mourning and suffering, the rupture with the filial obligation becomes virulent. On the one hand, Truyện does not conform to the ideal of having a son, and on the other, he does not appreciate the behavior of his father. This represents a lack of respect according to Confucian "tradition", as the son's duty consists in always respecting his father. Similar mechanisms become apparent at the societal level: despite a socialist discourse that officially attributes the same value to both sexes, Truyện discovered that even his colleagues – all of whom form part of the academic milieu, the so-called "intelligentsia" – did not support him.

According to public opinion, Truyện and his wife have failed twice: first because they lack a son and second because they do not lament⁸⁷ their des-

⁸⁷ In fact, Truyện's behavior is indeed exceptional because Vietnamese men and women seem to never tire of lamenting their "bad luck" that is responsible for not having a

tiny. Both of these facts have placed them outside of the norm and have – at least in Truyên’s perspective – slowed down his professional advancement.

Seen from an anthropological perspective and in order to reach epistemological conclusions, it is interesting to compare the experiences of Truyên with those of Dũng N. who originates from a similar professional and *hộ* social setting.

Almost thirty years later, Dũng N. sees himself confronted with a similar situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Dũng is also a member of the Communist Party, works as an engineer in the state sector and comes from a family where Confucian “values” and thus ancestor worship are highly esteemed, praised and perpetuated (Dũng N., 2010, case example 188). Officially, he declares himself an atheist but in personal conversations, he says he is a strong adherent of “Buddhist” and “traditional” Confucian “values”.

AW: *“Soon you will become a father. Do you have any preference with respect to the sex of your future child?”*

DN: *“Well, the sex of the first child is not that important because we will have another chance if the first one is a girl. Honestly, my wife and I are already very concerned and we hope to have a boy in order to know that we have completed our duty. In case the first child is a girl, pressure from our parents, colleagues and even some friends would be enormous [pause]. In addition I wouldn’t want my wife to undergo abortion. Certain women, in particular a colleague at work, consequently have suffered psychological trauma [coughs, then sighs]. But in any case, they saw themselves as forced to do it [to abort]. And in my case my parents and my kin will do everything in order to guarantee that I will continue the lineage; they require it also of me regardless of the fact that my older brother has already fulfilled the duty. Let’s hope that we will be lucky and that she [his wife] will give birth to a son.”*

(Dũng N., 31 years and recently married. At the time of the interview his wife was in the sixth week of pregnancy⁸⁸. Interview conducted in Hà Nội, October 2010).

boy; and they continue to do so even in the presence of their daughters. This behavior is only topped by those – who, it seems to me, are rare examples – who deny having any children at all because girls seem not even worth the effort of counting (for example, case example 53 or case example 215; Nam Định City 2004; 2006 and 2010).

⁸⁸ In 2011 when I chatted with him on the internet, I found out that he had become the father of a girl. In the latest chat, he told me about his wife and his plans to have a son

The example of Dững demonstrates clearly that the norm of filial obligation has not changed. Social pressure to comply with the family ideal still exists and is responsible for anxiety in future parents. A few can rely on sympathy in their corresponding social setting many however perceive female feticide as the only means to achieve the “lucky number”. The lucky number entails here both the obligation of having a son and respect for the limitations of the “two-child policy”.

The “obligation” to comply with traditional norms, and to maintain the approval of his kinship and society, remain of crucial importance for Dững as well as for many others and thus leads to a paradoxical situation: Instead of looking forward to the birth of a child, parents face anxieties with respect to its sex. The option of refusing to adhere to these “norms” seems to be out of the question for Dững, although he principally and – ironically – speaks out against any kind of abortion. These examples confirm that it is considered normal for married couples to aspire to having children and “at least one son”. The couple’s or individual’s will seems less important. This fact is also in accordance with the often-heard claim that the brick is not of importance but the complete wall is (proverb noted during field research in 2006 and 2010). Regardless of the social pressure, these two examples also make clear that there are – and always were – parents (women and men) who are personally content with having “only” girls. The obligation to have a son forms part of a complex system that reinforces patrilineality and remains officially connected to “values” that are perceived as “truly Vietnamese”. Surprisingly, my data make clear that even the young generation does not oppose these “values” but continues to respect them.

Truyện T. and Dững N. are both professionally and personally integrated in “social fields” that are characterized by a high conformity with “traditional values”. In such a “social field”, individuals are strongly integrated into diverse social networks that exert emotional and professional pressure, making it less likely for them to oppose ideals such as the one of filial obligation.

in 2016. Due to this situation, I did not ask more questions (Chat with Dững, December 2015).

Conclusion

I have shown that the proverb cited at the beginning of this chapter, “one hundred girls are not the equal of one testicle of one boy”, is still relevant in the Vietnamese context, especially within the Red River Delta areas where I conducted field research. My field research data as well as official governmental statistics confirm that abortion for the purpose of fulfilling the filial duty of having “at least one son” is a fact. The national sex ratio is 111.9:100 and the ratio in the Red River Delta is 122.4:100 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2015b). My analysis of decision-making processes within the *hộ* identified seven main reasons responsible for female feticide. Thereby, it became clear that not only beliefs and norms but also economic, demographic, social and symbolic reasons influence individual decisions about whether or not to undertake female feticide. In this chapter, I have synthesized the academic debate with respect to female feticide in Vietnam and integrated the results from my empirical field research. The foregoing discussion has delineated some of the reasons that can lead to feticide, corroborated both in academic debate generally and during my field research specifically, while other reasons as noted above became apparent exclusively in the course of my field research. The following two reasons emerged both in the academic debate and during my field research as elaborated above:

- “traditional” reasons based on the necessity of guaranteeing the continuity not only of patrilocality and the patrilineal line, but, as Bélanger notes, continuity with the patriarchal system (Bélanger 2005: 288, Wehrli 2011);
- cultural and religious reasons based on the conviction that only boys are legitimately capable of performing the funeral rituals and ancestor worship in order to guarantee the well-being of the deceased (see e.g. Gammeltoft 1999, Wehrli 2011);
- economic reasons, including, for example, that adult children traditionally have been responsible for the well-being of their parents in the economic, social and spiritual sense, and my data shows that whenever possible the younger generation continues to be expected to economi-

cally support their parents once they are retired (see also Chapter Six).⁸⁹ To put it concisely, sons are perceived as a safety net for parents in their old age. Therefore, some parents might decide to commit female feticide with the goal to “try again” until they can give birth to a son. Economic reasons are therefore relevant when we analyze the complex phenomenon of female feticide;

- social and symbolic pressure, as shown both by research data and the case examples highlighted above. Although these reasons are closely linked with the prior factors mentioned above, it is relevant to be aware of these apparent and sometimes subtle pressures, and to precisely define their corresponding reasons.

The deeply intertwined final reasons elaborated above – men’s fear of losing influence and the beliefs of women who have already interiorized their socially “inferior” status – show once again how complex the phenomenon of female feticide is. My data demonstrate that the four main reasons mentioned above are likely to occur for most of the interviewees. The final set depends more on the individual. All indications are that further in-depth research with a longitudinal period will be very promising.

The concept of the “lucky number” is well suited to demonstrate the interplay between individual decision-making processes, the influence of *hộ* members, extended kinships and last but not least the relevance of state policies on individual lives. At the same time, the analysis of this concept makes room for a discussion of the limits of governmental restrictions and collective pressure, as it will become clear how and why some actors oppose this power. The interplay between actors and structures, the internalization of external structures, the externalization of internal structures (Bourdieu 1980) as well as the inherent creativity (see e.g. Wehrli 2009: 393-394) of some actors in pursuing their own strategies will become ap-

⁸⁹ Following tradition, the parents have the right to co-reside with the *hộ* of their oldest son. In accordance with this tradition, it was and in most cases still is the oldest son who inherits the land and house rights. This in turn has meant that any properties remain in the patrilineal line, thereby guaranteeing continuity. Since daughters are expected to “marry out”, parents with no son fear that no one will or can take care of them once they enter their last decades of life. My field research demonstrates that economic support is still understandably a crucial aspect.

parent. “Lucky number” links the past with the present and is, at the same time, the guarantee that the patrilineal lineage will continue to be “lucky” in the future. The ideal of achieving the “lucky number” is also playfully integrated into games and jokes. But it also becomes apparent in the official sanctions by the Vietnamese government and in the gossip endured by families who fail – deliberately or not – to conform to this family ideal and its related “norms” and “values”.

Before the 1990s statistics were not wholly reliable. Therefore, we do not know if newborn girls were not registered at that time, or if infanticide and forms of infanticide in the guise of less care with respect to sickness or food prevailed. Although we cannot rely on statistical information, Bélanger states that in contrast to certain regions in China and India, female infanticide never was a “traditional” practice in Vietnam (Bélanger 2005: 294). This hypothesis gains further credibility if we take into consideration that within Vietnam both sexes are indispensable in order to reach the family ideal represented in the “lucky numbers”. Moreover, the number of children was previously not limited to two, and parents thus had more “chances” to reach this ideal.

Since 1988 the number of abortions is probably higher as a result of the introduction of the “two-child policy”. Female feticide may have become more urgent now that parents only have two chances to produce a son. However, I do not agree with scholars who claim that abortions have increased solely because of this policy. I believe that statistically significant female feticide is characteristic of the internalization of “values” that are attributed to the feminine as well as to the masculine body. The preference for a boy over a girl is a well-known fact. Not only is it predominant in games, jokes and literature, but it also becomes apparent in the proverb cited at the beginning of this chapter.

Parents, doubting their ability to calculate the specific days of conception so as to conceive a girl or a boy, often seek the help of a diviner⁹⁰ or are advised by their close kin to do so. Asking a fortune-teller for help is

⁹⁰ Before *Đổi mới*, numerous beliefs were officially declared as superstition and their practice forbidden (e.g. Nguyen Chi Thong 2003; Selim 2003b). Yet as in other socialist countries, they never stopped being practiced but were performed secretly and passed on orally from generation to generation (see also Wehrli 2009; 2007).

common, and since *Đổi mới*, some of the activities involving fortune-tellers are even practiced in public (see e.g. Selim 2003a, 2003b, field note entry September 2005). Although the success of these proceedings might remain questionable, their relevance for parents who aspire to have “at least one son” is nontrivial. This shift in responsibility is adding pressure on today’s generation, as will be demonstrated subsequently. It would be meaningful to know if parents in the past decided to abort a child at the moment that the fortune-teller identified the child as a girl, or if they simply kept on having more children until they finally had a boy.⁹¹ In order to dig deeper and be able to understand what statistics mean and how they come into being, it is important to listen to the stories of the people whose decisions eventually add up to those statistics. Thus, I am convinced of the relevance of longitudinal research in social anthropology. The formal and informal catching-up with interviewees, friends or both enables us to gain deeper insights into so-called taboo topics. My analysis, based on field research conducted in the Red River Delta, confirms that before the economic reforms of *Đổi mới*, abortions were widely practiced in order to regulate the number of children. Yet “traditional” beliefs and procedures that promised the birth of a boy were widespread.

Female feticide reflects an inequality engrained in society: the preference for a male compared to a female child. Despite discourses that favored gender equality – during socialist decades, by NGOs⁹² or by other national or international actors – this form of inequality yet awaits a solution. Discrimination against women has many faces. The extent of discrimination, as well as the interpretation thereof, depends to a certain extent on the bias of the observer. Yet discrimination against women in Vietnam (and elsewhere) becomes manifest in the fewer possibilities they have to reach high-ranking positions in economic, political, cultural and religious fields, and in salaries that are significantly lower than those of men, to name but a few ex-

⁹¹ The number of children as well as the availability of literature makes the second option more likely.

⁹² In the context of Vietnam and also in other (post-)socialist countries such as Cuba, it is relevant to state that numerous international and local NGOs correspond to former mass organizations that are being reconverted into NGOs (as also Hours and Selim stated 2003: 627).

amples. Furthermore, decision-making processes within the *hộ* reflect who has power (see Chapter Six). With respect to my data, these processes indicate an unequal relationship within the couple. This can but does not have to imply forms of discrimination. Last but not least, discrimination is being reproduced by the frequency of female feticide that reinforces patrilineality and, in a certain sense, the “patriarchy”. Nevertheless, this inequality does not mean that women receive no validation from society, as illustrated in the previous chapter.

In the following chapter the focus lies on interviewees who refrain from female feticide. I will analyze the decision-making processes within the *hộ* in order to identify the motivations of those who resist or refuse to abort based on the sex of the fetus.

This approach allows for comparison within society and shows whether female feticide is widespread throughout society, or if it varies according to the position of actors in different “social fields” in Bourdieu’s sense of the term (1980). If the latter proves to be the case, it suggests an increasing “plurality” within Vietnamese society.

Chapter Nine: The Relevance of the Entrepreneurs

“Field theory is a more or less coherent approach in the social sciences whose essence is the explanation of regularities in individual action by recourse to position vis-à-vis others. Position in the field indicates the potential for a force exerted on the person, but a force that impinges ‘from the inside’ as opposed to external compulsion” (Martin 2003).

In this final chapter, the merging of the “quest for wealth” in an economic sense and the “quest for belief” – for example with respect to gender-related “norms” and “values” as exemplified by female feticide – will become evident. The quest for belief becomes apparent from the various decision-making processes that are undertaken by the diverse *hộ* members with respect to their own *hộ* building. That is to say, some members conform with the state doctrine of complying with the “two-child policy” and have no more than two children, while others fulfill the so-called “obligation” of “having at least one son”, regardless of whether this implies female feticide or not. Yet other *hộ* members share the characteristic of pursuing their own way with respect to *hộ* building. They critically question the prevalent ideals and sometimes refrain from reproducing them.

Academic discourses have focused considerable attention on the normative aspects of abortion, yet there is not enough research about why individuals or social groups choose to refrain from selective, sex-based and in this case female abortion. I consider such information to be crucial because it allows us to find a way out of the “vicious circle” that reproduces inequalities. For this reason, my second research question examines the reasons that lead to female feticide. At the beginning of my research, female feticide was not at all on my “research agenda”. It was the situation of the *hộ* described next that made me aware of the topic of female feticide. The age difference between the firstborn daughter and her one-year-old brother is fifteen years (case example 46). The *hộ* members told me how difficult a time it had been for all of them until they finally had their long-wished-for son in their arms. The grandfather of the boy sighed and his wife stated that they could now die in peace. Overwhelmed with emotion the mother of the

one-year-old boy sobbed and told me in a low voice that she “filled up an ocean with her own tears in the last years”. This visit seemed to open up a wellspring of emotions. For more than three hours, *hộ* member after *hộ* member added his or her experience, while fruits, tea and rice were eaten and the baby boy was treated like a king. The only person who kept silent and was mostly ignored was the sixteen-year-old daughter.



Photograph 8: A multi-generational hộ (case example 46), photographed by the author.

It was this encounter that made me aware of the complex interplay of obligations in the economic, social, symbolic and religious domains, as well as how they can eventually lead to female feticide.

An in-depth analysis of my research material led me to discover the relevance of the position of actors within a given “social field”, a term I will discuss below in relation to in Pierre Bourdieu’s work. Initially, I researched whether categories such as gender, generation or class could be linked to specific decision-making processes within the *hộ*. My results unexpectedly demonstrate that female feticide depends less on the generation than on the positions of actors in different “social fields,” in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense of

the term. With respect to field theory, different methodological approaches prevail in the social sciences. Martin precisely states that:

“Social psychological theory is associated most notably with Lewin, the field theory of stratification or domination is associated most notably with Bourdieu and the field theory of interorganization relations is associated most notably with DiMaggio and Powell” (Martin 2003: 14).

In the following I will not elaborate on field theory in detail but instead will methodologically and theoretically focus on the concepts of Bourdieu.

Individuals – or, in the words of Bourdieu, agents – construct “social fields” and are in turn affected by such fields. The “social field” can be defined as a multi-dimensional space of positions such that every actual position can be defined in terms of a multi-dimensional system of coordinates whose values correspond to the values of different pertinent variables. Depending on historical and socioeconomic circumstances, fields can be stable or unstable.

“A field is a field of forces within which the agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field, these position-takings being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field” (Bourdieu and Accardo 1993: 35).

According to Bourdieu, every field also has a political dimension. It is noteworthy that the dominant discourse or ideology that prevails in a given society or in a specific socioeconomic situation can be challenged by agents who do not share this ideology. The dominant players in the field are called the “incumbents”. Cattani et al. argue that the “incumbents” are generally invested in maintaining the field in its current form, as changes to the rules of competition risk destabilizing their dominant position (Cattani, Ferriani and Allison 2014). Such a challenge of the hegemonic order will be outlined below. In the following I will demonstrate why and how some agents refuse female feticide.

The refusal of female feticide: the entrepreneurs

The state's "two-child policy" applies to the entire *Kinh* population. Yet my research indicates clear differences in attitude among agents. Agents who share the same position in a given field possess a common set of rules and actions. They also make use of their "power", which is a product of their social, cultural and economic capital (see e.g. Bourdieu 2000 [1972]; 1985; 1980; 1979). According to Bourdieu, the power relations between and in these social fields structure human relations. The agents in the fields do not always agree on the doxa, or the rules of the game, which in this context is the "two-child policy". The most relevant social field for my research is the economy. My analysis shows that within the social field of the economy there are various positions. In the Vietnamese context, these predominantly refer to the entrepreneurs who engage in businesses ranging from small to large, farmers, factory workers or governmental employees. These positions within the field can be further divided in accordance with the religious affiliation of the agents (e.g. Catholic and non-Catholic). In other words, the numerous entrepreneurs I analyzed are positioned variously within this field. My data demonstrates that some entrepreneurs show resistance to a strict adherence to the "two-child policy", and others even refrain from female feticide (see Decision Tree 1).

These agents share one characteristic in common: They are not employed by the state but gain their living as entrepreneurs, performing one or more self-employed activities and/or by having a small, medium or large *hộ* business (see Diagram 1). My analysis makes clear that from the economic point of view, they correspond to the emerging middle and upper middle classes and to a smaller extent, also to the "nouveau riche" class. In contrast to the "old" wealthy families – who continue to exist despite socialism – the "nouveaux riches" do not adhere to a strict interpretation of ancestor worship. The independence of the entrepreneurs from the state grants them the option of choosing their own way of living and sufficient economic means to circumvent or pay any monetary sanctions required by local authorities.

The opinion of Luu N., who will not comply with the “two-child policy” but adheres to the importance of “having at least one son”, is representative of these entrepreneurs (Luu N., 33, 2010: case example 76):

AW: *“If you consider having your own family, what is your ideal?”*

LN: *“I love children, I love them a lot and I would like to have five; at least four. My fiancée agrees to have four and I am still hoping that she will eventually agree to have five.”*

AW: *“Is the sex of the children important for you?”*

LN: *“For me the sex of a child has no importance, I love girls and boys. But of course I must have at least one son in order to respect tradition; this is an obligation.”*

AW: *“Is the ‘two-child policy’ not an obstacle with respect to your decision to have four or five children?”*

LN: *“No, I am rich, very rich, and since I do not aspire to enter the party, it is not important for me to respect this rule. Even if I have to pay, this has no importance for me, honestly it does not. Moreover, I believe that I will have more time to devote to my business and to making money if my wife is busy with five children.”*

AW: *“And how about the authorities? Don’t you think that having five children will entail problems for your business? For example, sanctions or fewer orders?”*

LN: *“No, no, not at all [chuckles]. On the contrary, if everyone knows that I have five children, everyone knows that this implies several tens of thousands of U.S. dollars for the authorities; this would doubtlessly augment my prestige as an independent, rich entrepreneur who has succeeded.”*

(Luu N., 33 years old, engaged, owner of a large business that has numerous branches in the South and in the North, as well as two in China. He is responsible for more than one hundred employees. Interview conducted in Hà Nội, September 2010).

The example of Luu is significant for those who intend to accomplish the “traditional duty” in their own way. Their economic capital allows them to refuse to comply with the state’s order, which is meant to be legally binding for everyone, to limit the *hộ* size. Thanks to their wealth, they see themselves as different from others and make this distinction because they can accomplish their Confucian duty by choosing an indirect way: either

by refusing abortion in general or by not aspiring to exclusively have boys as one otherwise observes.

Being Catholic and practicing ancestor worship

With respect to beliefs, it is interesting that the entrepreneurs have diverse backgrounds. It entails agents who identify themselves as atheists, Buddhists (expressed as “I follow the Buddha”; see also Salemink 2014), adherents to Vietnamese forms of Buddhism such as the “Mother Goddess cult” and even Catholics. In fact the percentage of Catholics in the Red River Delta and especially in Nam Định province and city is rather high. The percentage of Catholics is not accurately reflected in official statistics because some practitioners still prefer to officially declare themselves as “atheist” in order to avoid conflicts (see the previous chapter).

For social scientists the situation of Catholics in the Red River Delta is noteworthy. On the one hand, Catholics are ideologically required to oppose abortion in general; and on the other hand, they predominantly adhere to the practice of ancestor worship and are thus required to “have at least one son”. It is relevant to note that Catholics in Vietnam also perform ancestor worship. They share in this “Vietnamese tradition” like their non-Catholic countrymen and women. One can thus wonder if, seen from the perspective of their “syncretistic beliefs”, they value patrilineality as highly as their non-Catholic neighbors. Are they also convinced that sons are indispensable in order to perpetuate ancestor worship?

In this respect the example of Phòng N. is revealing: In the past her economic situation was modest, which led her and her husband to decide against having a second child. At the age of thirty-five, an age that Phòng regarded as appropriate for having a second child, she evaluated her economic situation as being more than comfortable enough to have another child. Nonetheless, she decided not to do so (Phòng N., 2010: case example 29).

PN: “I do not understand why almost everyone desperately wants to have a son. I am convinced that men and women are equal, even in some television programs they acknowledge it. I often ask myself why one ought to have a son.”

AW: “Yes. Some people explain it in terms of ancestor worship.”

PN: *“Yes, definitely. I do not have any doubts that my daughter will be absolutely capable of doing anything. She is intelligent and I have already shown her how to do it [the ancestor worship]. In addition the family lives not far from here [about 50 km away in a rural area] and they can always help her, even when I am dead.”*

AW: *“Do you think your family accepts your choice of not having a son?”*

PN: *“Well, I think my family understands that very well.”*

AW: *“And how about your neighbors?”*

PN: *“My neighbors [pause] mhm, until recently they tried everything to convince my husband and me to have another child, and that means obviously a boy. The gossip was almost unbearable and some of my former customers even stopped buying clothes at our shop. I worried a lot about that. They did not understand it, but in the last three years they have started to accept it and luckily they are once again focusing more on their own lives.”*

(Phông N., thirty-nine years old, owner of a hộ business with a legal license, married, mother of a seventeen-year-old daughter, Catholic. Interview conducted in Nam Định City, September 2010).

The example of Phông shows that a hộ that is happy with the decision not to have a son and is not trying to have a second child, may sometimes suffer from social, familial or professional discrimination. In the preceding chapter, the cases of Truyền and Dũng illustrated that this fact has not changed over the last decades: neither under socialism prior to the reforms of *Đổi mới* nor afterwards.

The individual refusal to comply with the so-called “filial obligation” in which a son has to perform ancestor worship becomes apparent in Phông’s choices. In her case the public reacted negatively, with some former clients refusing to shop at her business and neighbors engaging in excessive, pejorative gossip. Yet her relatives supported her decision and provided her the security that, even after her own death, her daughter would be granted support in both the spiritual and the economic sense.

Phông is among those who believe that girls have the same competence as do boys to perform ancestor worship. She offers support for her minority position by referring to the state media, which she identifies as one of the few public sources in favor of her ideals. Her experience demonstrates that sanctions against so-called deviant norms are not simply confined to monetary sanctions or jokes, but can lead to an existential crisis.

My data make clear that in Nam Định City and in Hà Nội, the majority of the Catholics I interviewed believe that not only men but also women are capable of entering into contact with the deceased, perpetuating ancestor worship and performing elaborate funeral rituals (Information collected between 2005 and 2010). Surprisingly, the conviction that daughters can perform ancestor worship is also common to two *hộ* in Hà Nội that are found in the “state-employee social field”. These *hộ* members said that, based on the above-mentioned knowledge, they would refrain from female feticide. In this sense, their beliefs differ clearly from those who adhere to a strict Confucian interpretation whereupon only men can perform ancestor worship.

Why do some entrepreneurs refuse female feticide?

In the following Decision Tree, I highlight connections between the number of children and any tendency toward female feticide. My goal is to demonstrate the demographic, age and gender composition of the 48 *hộ* I researched in Nam Định City. By this it will become clear who commits female feticide and also who refrains from it.

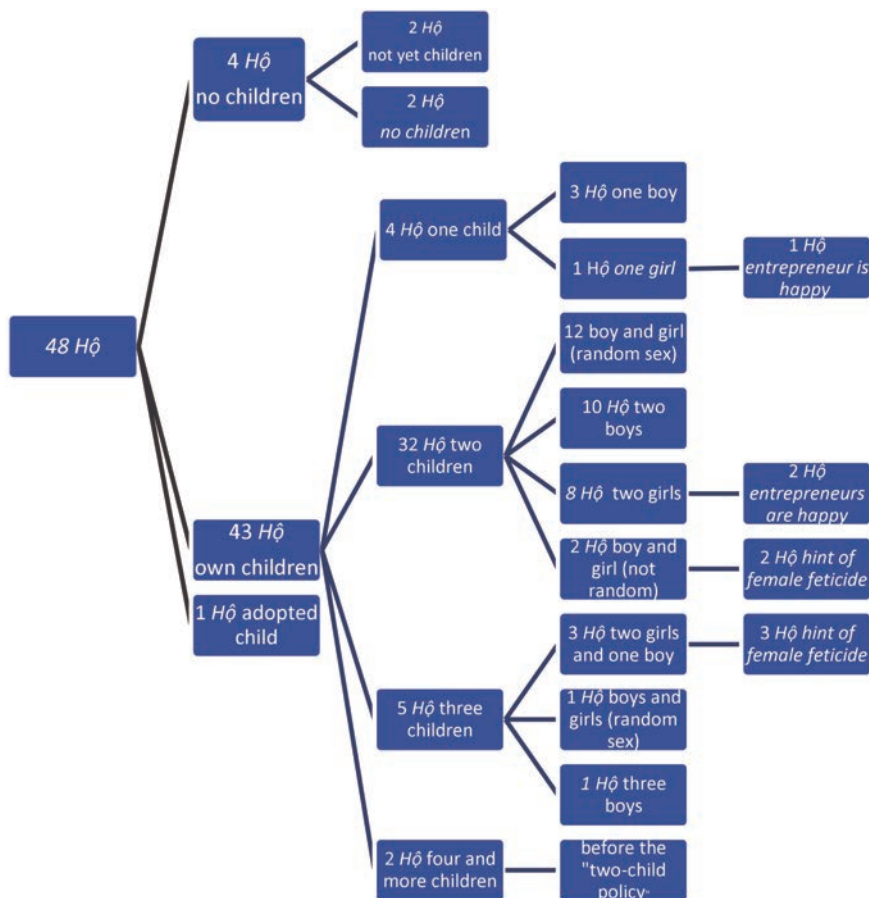
The following results are from the interviews with the forty-eight *hộ* in Nam Định City, which I conducted between 2005 and 2010. In 2010 I re-interviewed twelve *hộ* and learned about the following three births: the birth of a first son (case example 15), the birth of a second daughter (case example 10), and the birth of a third son (case example 40). The births of these children are included in the Decision Tree (see following page).

I began by listing all 48 of the *hộ*. Then I divided them further with respect to their *hộ* composition:

- four *hộ* have no children (case examples 8, 16, 19 and 43);
- 43 *hộ* have their own children (see case examples below);
- one *hộ* has an adopted child (case example 41).

As discussed above, in Vietnam and unlike in other countries, all married couples are expected to have children. As such, it is not surprising that 43 *hộ* declared they have their own children.⁹³ One couple was biologically unable

⁹³ The case example mentioned above, of a man with two daughters who adopted a son in order to comply with “filial duty”, is not integrated in this sample of the 48 *hộ*.



Decision Tree 1: Analysis of the hộ demography of the 48 hộ researched in Nam Định City between 2005 and 2010, decision tree by the author.

to have children and therefore adopted a daughter of the wife's sister.⁹⁴ The four *hộ* that have no children are further divided into two *hộ* that have no children and are unlikely in future to have any: one single man of fifty years (case example 19) and one single woman of fifty-one years who never married and co-resides with her mother (case example 8). The other two

⁹⁴ The couple is convinced that their infertility as well as the mental disability of their daughter are the product of Agent Orange (information collected in 2006).

hộ might have children in the future: they are a *hộ* with a young man of sixteen years (case example 43) and another with a young female student (case example 16).

In the next step, I examined the 43 *hộ* with respect to their demographic composition.

- 4 *hộ* have one child (case examples 15, 29, 39, 45);
- 32 *hộ* have two children (see case examples below);
- 5 *hộ* have three children (case examples 10, 12, 22, 26, 36);
- 2 *hộ* have four or more children (case examples 5, 24).

These outcomes motivated me to undertake a case-by-case study in order to further research the decision-making processes that resulted in the birth of the children. The ensuing discussion will examine, each of the four categories above.

Five *hộ* have one child:

- one *hộ* has one daughter (see case example 29 *Phông* above);
- four *hộ* have one son (case examples 15, 39, 43 and 45).

It is interesting to observe that four *hộ* have one son. It is likely that they would have opted for a second child if the first was a girl. All these *hộ* comply with the “two-child policy” whereby one or two children are fine, and all except one *hộ* comply with the ideal of “filial duty”.

The majority of *hộ*, namely 32 of the 48, have two children and thereby comply with the “two-child policy”. I further divided this group as follows:

- twelve *hộ* that have a boy and a girl without a hint of female feticide;⁹⁵
- ten *hộ* that have two sons without a hint of female feticide;⁹⁶
- eight *hộ* that have two girls;⁹⁷
- two *hộ* that have a boy and a girl with hints of female feticide (case examples 31 and 46).

⁹⁵ This corresponds to the following twelve case examples: 1, 7, 13, 14, 18, 23, 25, 27, 28, 32, 35 and 37.

⁹⁶ This corresponds to the following ten case examples: 2, 3, 6, 9, 20, 21, 30, 34, 38 and 44.

⁹⁷ This corresponds to the following eight case examples: 4, 11, 17, 33, 40, 42, 47 and 48.

Of interest is the fact that ten *hộ* have boys and eight have girls. If we review the statements of the eight *hộ* that have two girls, two of the young *hộ* couples – both are entrepreneurs – have noted that they do not opt for a third child and are on principle against female feticide (case examples 11 and 49). They correspond to those entrepreneurs who, like *Phông*, believe that daughters can also perform ancestor worship.

Another *hộ* with two daughters and no son also never thought about female feticide. Although this is in large part due to the personal conviction of the parents, it is also clear that these parents are “freed” from their “obligation” because the husband is co-residing in a multi-generation *hộ* with both his older brother, who fulfills the expectations of “filial duty”, and his parents. It is noteworthy that the parents of the remaining five *hộ* are or have been state employees of low- or middle-ranking status.⁹⁸

The two *hộ* with a child composition that clearly points to female feticide show an age difference between the first-born daughters and later-born sons of fifteen years (case example 46 described above) or of nine years (case example 31). The parents of the latter case example engage in a small *hộ* business and sell clothes in a small stable marketplace after having lost their state employment.

Five *hộ* have three children:

- One *hộ* has three boys, a “coincidence” reflecting the strong Catholic conviction of the parents who oppose any kind of abortion (case example 10);
- One *hộ* shows a random age composition of the children (case example 22);
- Three *hộ* have two daughters and later a boy, a pattern reflecting compliance with “filial duty” and the undertaking of female feticide (case examples 12, 26 and 36).

Two *hộ* have four or more children:

- These correspond to *hộ* that were not under the regulation of the “two-child policy” (case examples 5 and 24).

⁹⁸ The case example described above of *Hung* further highlights a *hộ* that is happy with two daughters.

In the next step, I combined the demographic composition of the *hộ* with their employment situations and their religious convictions.

Results and analysis

As discussed in Chapter Six under Diagram 1, most of the *hộ* in Nam Định City display the peculiarity that their members either work for the state or are self-employed entrepreneurs.⁹⁹ The work as a farmer or fisher are clear exceptions.

The broad research data that I conducted in Hà Nội on female feticide, the work engagement of the different *hộ* members and their religious affiliation will be presented in a separate article.

First: The majority of all the *hộ* interviewed have children (43 out of 48) and are likely to have some (45 out of 48) in the future.

Second, state employees respect the “two-child policy”. The analysis of the research data demonstrates that current and former state employees comply in most cases with the state policy. The three exceptions are two women who were born before the implementation of the “two-child policy” and one who became accidentally pregnant at the age of forty-three. At that time, the former textile worker was already retired and faced no sanctions by the state. Hence, with respect to the sample of the 48 *hộ*, no state employee disregarded the “two-child policy”.

Third, two *hộ* committed female feticide in order to comply with the “two-child policy” and because they wanted to fulfill their “filial duty”.

Fourth, five *hộ* did not respect the “two-child policy” and have three children.

Fifth, out of these five *hộ* three did not respect the “two-child policy” due to a desire to fulfill “filial duty” and they also committed female feticide. They first had two girls and then committed female feticide until they had a

⁹⁹ In Hà Nội, only 65 percent of all *hộ* members worked either as state employees or as self-employed entrepreneurs. Hence, it would not make sense for the combination of employment forms and the number of children to be similar to Nam Định City.

son. Two other entrepreneurs did not care about the “two-child policy” and hence opted for a third child despite already having one or more sons.

Sixth, in total five *hộ* committed female feticide.

Seventh, three *hộ* that have one or two daughters are against female feticide and believe that a daughter can also perform ancestor worship rituals. All of them are Catholics and entrepreneurs.

This was the moment when I realized that the so-called “importance of having at least one son” was the prime reason for the occurrence of female feticide in five of the forty-eight randomly researched *hộ* in Nam Định City. The three *hộ* that have more than two children and committed female feticide are “non-Catholic entrepreneurs” and share the characteristic of having two girls who were born close together, followed by a longer time span before the birth of the third child: a son. In one case the daughters at the time of the interview were twenty-three and twenty-one years old while the son was seventeen years old (case example 12). Asked about the time span of the children’s births, the interviewee (case example 12) smiled and said:

“if you live long enough in Vietnam, you will understand why we had to wait for a son and kept on trying” (information received in April 2006).

When I double-checked with colleagues and friends about how they interpreted such a statement, they all replied that this statement was obviously referring to female feticide. In the other two examples, the differences between the lastborn daughter and the son are eight (case example 36) and thirteen years (case example 26) respectively. In the latter example, the daughters are sixteen and fourteen years old, followed by a one-year-old son. The parents of this *hộ* both worked in a textile factory when they got married. In 2001 both lost their jobs and were forced to work independently. Ever since the husband has worked as a self-employed driver and the wife as a housewife. Despite their tight economic situation, it was their goal to “comply with their filial obligation”. The third example (case example 46) was described at the beginning of this chapter. One might argue that divorce, illness, financial difficulties or some other factor can explain this time span. However plausible and appropriate this might be for some *hộ*, it was not the case for the examples mentioned here.

Seven years after the completion of my data sample the Vietnamese authorities decided to revise the “two-child policy”. In October 2017, the Communist Party General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng issued a resolution on population and family planning in which families would no longer be encouraged to have only two children and couples with three children or more will no longer be fined. The goal therefore consists among others to:

“lower the gender imbalance between boys and girls at birth to the natural level of 105.”¹⁰⁰

This official statement shows that the phenomenon of female feticide and its socio-political, demographic and economic consequences are recognized by the state. I therefore take this statement as a confirmation of my data and its analysis.

Conclusion

Female feticide is widespread within Vietnam and yet it remains a taboo topic. Various people pretend that this gender imbalance corresponds to a passing tendency that will be reversed in the future, or they suggest the reason for its existence as belonging to the domain of the supernatural. I have shown that individual decisions of *hộ* members are always embedded in broader social networks that in turn exert pressure on and aim at obligating persons to respect social rules.

The Vietnamese authorities demanded until 2017 that the “two-child policy” must be followed. The basic moral values of Confucianism state that one son per *hộ* is essential to guarantee the continuity of the ancestral line. Social and political relations between men and women are thus confronted with two requirements that must be met in order to comply with state guidelines regarding the “two-child policy” and “filial duty”, as demanded in Confucianism and supported by the Vietnamese authorities. Female feticide is thus unmistakably linked to demographic, political and economic aspects. *Demographic*, in the sense that the probability of female

¹⁰⁰ Vietnamnet Bridge 2017: Vietnam revises two-child policy. <<http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/society/189374/vietnam-revises-two-child-policy.html>>, last accessed 2 August 2018.

feticide is higher for the second and the third child than for the first one. *Political*, since the “two-child policy” urged parents not to have more than two children. And, *economic* because state employees could not afford to face a job loss if they failed to respect the “two-child policy”, whereas well-off entrepreneurs could afford to pay substantial fines if they had more than two children.

I have not only explained why some aborted their fetuses but also why others refrained from abortion. The older generation, for example, who had children before the implementation of the “two-child policy” faced no sanctions if they had more than two children (see case examples above). Married couples who have one or two sons, or one daughter and one son, do not violate this socio-political ideal. Married couples, however, who have more than two children or no son violate either the ideal of the “two-child policy”, or that of “filial duty”. Both violations can lead to sanctions – in the social sense in the form of gossip or social isolation (as described in the case examples of Phòng N., or Truyền T.) – and in the economic and/or political sense with a job loss or a demotion to a low paid, non-prestigious activity as in the case example of some interviewees.¹⁰¹ Some couples endure the sanctions mentioned above and do not commit female feticide, while others decide to abort a female fetus as soon as the ultrasound shows that the second child is also female. With respect to my sample, this corresponds to five *hộ*. In other words, female feticide is carried out in statistically significant cases to meet socio-political ideals.

My broad data sample in Nam Định City makes clear that five *hộ* committed female feticide in order to reach the goal of having “at least one son”. These cases are evidence of the high rate of female feticide, which is also manifest in national statistics. However, an important result is to be found among the entrepreneurs. Three *hộ* were not concerned about having a son because they believe that this is not necessary with respect to the requirements of ancestor worship. And five *hộ* have more than two children. I interpret this as strong evidence of a disregard for both norms: the “two-

¹⁰¹ Such a demotion is common and happened to some of my interviewees including B.N., who became a parking guard after his wife gave birth to their third child. His earlier successful career in the Communist Party came to an abrupt end (information collected during 2006).

child policy” and the filial obligation to “have at least one son”. Those eight entrepreneurs who refrained from female feticide and/or had more than two children were motivated by the following reasons: *First*, they had economic capital. Entrepreneurs are not directly dependent on a state salary but earn their living on their own. They enjoy a certain independence vis-à-vis state regulations in the sense that they cannot lose their job on the basis of having more than two children. In addition some of these entrepreneurs earn enough to pay or circumvent the fines incurred for having more than two children. In other cases their economic capital grants them a certain independence, which makes them less vulnerable to social forms of sanctions. Therefore, some accept a life without a male heir and hence have no son but one or more daughters (see the example of Phong). *Second*, some of these entrepreneurs believe that a daughter can also perform ancestor worship. *Third*, some agents – more Catholics than non-Catholics – believe that abortion in general is not acceptable. The second point above, that women are equally capable of performing ancestor worship, is especially interesting since it seems to be a solution for preserving an aspect of “tradition” – namely, ancestor worship – while at the same time making female feticide unnecessary. The ideological conviction that daughters likewise can perform ancestor worship, was also found in two cases in Hà Nội of *hộ* members who work as state employees who oppose female feticide but agree with the “two-child policy”.

A further result shows that among entrepreneurs, a majority of the non-Catholics and a minority of Catholics believe that the continuity of ancestor worship depends on a male heir. In contrast, a majority of the Catholics and a minority of the non-Catholics are convinced that women can also perform ancestor worship. They often stated that it was baseless to believe that only men had received this so-called “specific spiritual capacity”. Agents who oppose the predominant ideas and norms are integrated into social networks that support their corresponding decisions. These agents also believe that equality between men and women is a matter that does not need further discussion but can be taken for granted. According to these persons, female feticide is simply unnecessary and unjust. If the Vietnamese Communist Party decides to abandon the “two-child policy”, it will be interesting to research if parents will nevertheless prefer two children and eventually de-

cide on female feticide. Conversely, family size may increase as parents wait until a boy is born while female feticide decreases.

In this respect further research in other countries with Confucian structures, beliefs, “norms” and “values” – such as Taiwan or South Korea – would be relevant to finding out if and how social pressure continues to persist despite economic autonomy. If future research in Taiwan and South Korea affirms that social networks remain extremely relevant to achieving a higher position, such research would probably allude to reasons for why the preference for a son continues to be so popular. Considering the fact that Confucianism is prevalent throughout the Sinosphere, I believe that not only the obligation of having a son but also the circle of dependences, as described above, persists and undeniably influences social and symbolic domains as well as economic ones.

I find it striking to observe the emerging trend among entrepreneurs of deciding to oppose female feticide, despite their resulting obligation to compensate authorities either in monetary ways or by a variety of gifts that are equivalent to corruption. This trend has also been observed in some parts of China (see e.g. Querrien and Selim 2010: 7). In contrast to this economic aspect that motivates some people to refrain from female feticide, other people characterize themselves as having a less rigid practice of worship.

Pressure to conform to the Confucian ideal is highest among those who identify themselves most closely with these “norms” either because they are employed by the state and have to respect the “two-child policy” or because of their belief that only sons are capable of performing ancestor worship. This fact also becomes apparent in emic discourses that distinguish between “true and respectful persons” and those who apparently do not live up to such ideals. As Bourdieu has demonstrated (1980), distinction is another means for aiming at the reassertion of the socioeconomic position of individuals in their corresponding fields. It is also actively used by the actors themselves in order to highlight their own positions within society. Women and their husbands who oppose female feticide – based either on ethical considerations or because they believe that a girl can also perform ancestor worship and thus obviates the need for a boy – perceive themselves as being confronted with the pressure exerted by social networks and the state.

This pressure often leads to an agreement to reproduce the cycle of aborting girls – especially if the first child is already of the female sex – until the ultrasound proves that the child is no longer of the female sex.

My analysis of a broad data sample confirms that the probability of committing female feticide is less likely among entrepreneurs. As demonstrated scholars have debated the reasons for female feticide as well as possible means of prevention (e.g. punishments or adjustments to the law). To my knowledge research has so far been unable to identify common characteristics of those who refuse to engage in female feticide. Knowledge of such characteristics would ideally provide a means to encourage other people to refrain from female feticide and to break the cycle that reproduces this inequality. Numerous entrepreneurs share the characteristic of being hesitant about or rejecting female feticide completely. These entrepreneurs are predominantly to be found in the emerging middle and upper middle classes or among the “nouveau riche” class.

With respect to Vietnam, it will be crucial to find out if the coming year’s prosperity, based on economic growth and the revised “two-child policy” will break the parental and social pressure that requires such mutual obligations and privileges. In theory this process will demand fewer selective abortions and a more egalitarian society: a fact that depends not only on men but also on women.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

The overall goal of this research has been to demonstrate how the quest for wealth and belief manifests itself at the beginning of the twenty-first century in northern Vietnam. I have shown how the ongoing processes of “modernization” have altered some aspects of contemporary Vietnamese life while others have remained stable. The title of this research, “Vanishing Rice Fields: The Quest for Wealth and Belief in (Post-)Socialist Vietnam”, symbolically refers to ongoing changes, such as the rice fields that are increasingly being replaced by industrial parks, highways and skyscrapers. On a more subtle level, “Vanishing Rice Fields” refers both to new employment and income that generate opportunities, and to the emergence of new social positions, such as the one’s of the entrepreneur. Exemplary of this shift is the following quote, which crystallizes sentiments that I heard from time to time while conducting field research:

“Why should one continue to plant rice in the fields, if one can instead plant bonsai and earn ten times more with less strenuous work? Or why should one plant and raise bonsai in order to resell them to well-off countrymen and women or to rich foreigners, if the same land can be rented out to an industrial park and one can become a respected entrepreneur with high prestige?” (Truyện N., Nam Định City, September 2010).

In my chapters, I have demonstrated how the quest for wealth and belief is pursued by the interviewees. A variety of income-generating possibilities as well as the emergence of the entrepreneur is characteristic with respect to the quest for wealth among the *hộ* I studied. The quest for belief, in contrast, becomes evident from the various decision-making processes that lay the ground for *hộ* building. I depicted how entrepreneurs are sometimes emboldened to pursue their distinct way with respect to their *hộ* building. It is predominantly among these entrepreneurs that some *hộ* members critically refrain from reproducing prevalent ideals such as the so-called importance of “having at least one son” or of complying with the state doctrine of the

“two-child policy”. Some *hộ* members also refrain from female feticide, regardless of whether this leads to the fulfillment of “filial duty” or not.

The relevance of the position of actors within a given social field

By paying close attention to different fields within society, shifts in the economic, political and social dimension within a given society can be observed. With respect to this research, the most relevant social field is the economy. Earlier I described various positions within this field of the economy such as entrepreneurs, farmers or lower- and higher-ranking state employees (such as factory workers or civil servants). Bourdieu highlighted the fact that every field has a political dimension and that agents who do not share this ideology (Bourdieu 2000 [1972]) can challenge this. Over the course of my study, I have demonstrated how within Vietnamese society the social field of the economy has become more and more important. The starting point therefore was the launching of the processes of *Đổi mới*. On an international level, Vietnam resumed diplomatic relationships after decades of war. Foreign direct investment was possible after Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995 and was incorporated into the global economy. On a national level, the socialist state allowed individual *hộ* businesses to operate.

Thus, the social position of entrepreneurs is becoming more significant, and moving them to the center of the economic field, while before the opening-up of *Đổi mới* their existence was marginal. Depending on the place and time, to be an entrepreneur was even forbidden. This was perceived as a relic of the bourgeoisie and against the ideals of socialism and communism. In that time, the “heroes of the nation” were confined to the “heroes of the war”. However, since the Vietnamese government has not only allowed but also even encouraged people to “enrich themselves” (see e.g. Hours and Selim 2003: 624; Wehrli 2012b), the new Vietnamese heroes are successful entrepreneurs. Their wealth allows them to pay the fine required by the local authorities. This reinforces their social and economic status and legitimizes decisions to pursue their own ideals. Ironically, some entrepreneurs oppose one state doctrine – the “two-child policy” – but fulfill

another official ideal: the “Vietnamese hero” as a successful businessman, and in some cases, businesswoman.

I have demonstrated that the society has not become less patriarchal in the last decades despite the officially proclaimed, socialist egalitarian ideology of the Communist government. Yet my analysis shows that within the rapidly growing entrepreneurial sector, it is becoming less patriarchal. Ironically, it is thus within the capitalist domain of the entrepreneurs where the break with patriarchal tradition becomes evident. I am confident that the foregoing analysis of the position of actors within a given social field will prove to be valuable for social anthropology in particular, and for other research in general.

Data, methods and theories

One significance of this research lies in its methodological and theoretical approach and the fact that repeated research over a period of seven years allowed me to track and compare changes on the micro-level. The majority of scholars have not conducted such projects due to time constraints and the difficulties in obtaining regular access in the field. A further research gap consists in the scant availability of multi-local ethnographic research that follows individuals or members of *hộ* over a period of time. The data sample in this study addresses both the limitations of smaller interview numbers and the danger of superficiality inherent in quantitative surveys. The data sample was intentionally broad and diverse to reflect the heterogeneity of northern Vietnamese society. The data itself comprises the translation and transcription of 15 focus group discussions and 127 qualitative interviews. These translated and transcribed interviews were extracted from a total of 253 recorded interviews and focus group discussions. The sample includes men and women, different age and income groups, diverse forms of income generation and a variety of professions and educational backgrounds. This “cultural” and “economic” capital, in the sense of Bourdieu (e.g. 1980), provides the context for understanding how the interviewees pursued wealth. To learn about their quest for belief, I included different beliefs and religious affiliations as well as membership in organizations such as the Vietnamese Communist Party and informal networks.

The *hộ* as the ethnographic unit

The choice of the *hộ* as the ethnographic unit for this study provides a research unit that is readily identifiable, quantifiable and comparable; this is of great importance for social science. My research on the *hộ* avoids exclusive concentration on either the individual or society, instead acknowledging the interdependence that exists between the two. The analysis of the data shows how the household in general and the *hộ* in particular form a link between society and the individual. I have elaborated my theoretical and methodological contribution to social anthropology about the conceptual use of the household, the *hộ khẩu* and the *hộ* and offered six points to advocate for the study of households. I argue that social anthropological research ought to include not only the living but also the deceased members of a *hộ*. These “invisible *hộ* members” in the form of ghosts, spirits and ancestors form part of every *hộ* in northern Vietnam and are regularly attended to. Numerous interviewees claimed that it was essential to respect the will of the deceased *hộ* members to ensure the well-being of the living and of future generations. The fact that the deceased are also perceived as *hộ* members, and the mutual rights and duties with which *hộ* members are confronted, have been the primary reasons why I use the Vietnamese term *hộ* instead of the English term household to distinguish these concepts. The conceptual use of a household perspective gives insights into correlations between economic developments and changes of “norms” and “values”. It also makes clear how and why certain “values” inhibit expected developments.

The quest for wealth

My research findings exemplify the change in policy that was set in motion with the processes of *Đổi mới* that sought to restructure the state sector and to foster “household business”. The market-driven, household-based production has increased the importance of the *hộ*. My analysis makes clear that the majority of my interlocutors in Nam Định City and Hà Nội worked at the time as self-employed entrepreneurs (see e.g. the case examples of Quang N, Tuấn N, Thảo N and Lán N). This finding parallels other studies that postulate that the private sector created three times as many jobs as the

state sector in the post-1975 period (e.g. Le Hong Ha 1995). I have shown that official statistics and numerous studies exclusively refer to salary. My findings also include other sources that are of relevance in the Vietnamese context such as “incentives”, “stimulations” and “envelopes”. These are often used in local discourses as a euphemism for bribery. Income includes earnings in the informal sector that are not represented in official statistics. Therefore, the income strata of the middle-income city Nam Định consists of *hộ* income ranging from less than USD 25 per month to far more than USD 5,000 per month. The results of this longitudinal study prove that the majority of the *hộ* developed as they had hoped and anticipated in previous years. As such the overall net income of the majority of my interlocutors was higher in 2010 and 2009 compared with 2006 – evidence that parallels statistics on the national level (GOS 2009a, 2009b).

The quest for wealth is highly valued and has opened up possibilities for self-determined choices and new employment and business opportunities for women and men. I find it striking that despite decades of socialism and the substantial economic contribution of women to the *hộ* income, husbands – and in multi-generational *hộ*, the oldest men – still hold the most important position in the decision-making processes within the *hộ*. The “traditional” belief system of Confucian values, which specifies gender-related roles and duties, has not been suspended. I opine that the explanation therefore consists in a combination of various factors that each support the patriarchal system: *First*, property and inheritance rights on land and the house are, in the majority of the cases researched, attributed to the oldest man or the oldest son. By this, the property remains in the patrilineal line. In a multi-generation *hộ*, the property belongs predominantly to the oldest man and in a *hộ* that consists of the nuclear family to the husband. This also becomes evident if one consults and compares the data of the *hộ khẩu* (household registration system). Although Vietnamese law advocates gender equality, land and housing rights in northern Vietnam are attributed in favor of male heirs. This doubtlessly strengthens the position of married men within the *hộ*. *Second*, core values inherent in Confucianism remain predominant in the places researched and strengthen the position of men in decision-making processes within the *hộ*. As demonstrated, and unlike in other countries, these ideals are more important than differences in income

or education. The few *hộ* where wives and husbands are equally responsible in decision-making processes are predominantly found in the high-income strata and to a lesser extent in the middle- and low-income strata. Yet, I posit that further in-depth research, especially among entrepreneurs, would be promising for finding out whether an increase in wealth can be linked with an increase of equality among couples with respect to decision-making processes. For now, my results confirm the data of other researchers (e.g. McHale 2004) who claim that the father and, after his death, the oldest son have the most powerful position in *hộ* that strictly follow Confucian values. *Third*, the widespread belief is perpetuated in the ancestor-worship conviction that the male deceased have the highest social position in the patrilineal hierarchy (see e.g. Rydström 2010: 77). *Fourth*, Confucian ideals refer not only to the local level of the *hộ* but also to the national level, where a strong (Communist) leader, or in ancient times a king, is desirable. The wished-for parallel between a strong authoritarian state and an authoritarian-ruled *hộ* are obvious.

The quest for belief

During socialism, equality between the genders was promoted. Numerous scholars believe that this goal has been reached in reality. I have shown that the situation is complex and that the socio-political and economic position between the genders cannot yet be described as equal. Therefore, one of the goals of the socialist regime has not yet been reached. Vietnam entered a process of “modernization” and industrialization that led to a diversification of work opportunities. Nevertheless, social relations – especially those based on kinship – remain of utmost relevance for obtaining a work assignment or becoming a party member (see e.g. Selim 2006). Economic dependence thus exerts considerable pressure that manifests itself in the integration of the individual into numerous social networks that imply mutual obligations and privileges. This decisive aspect reinforces conformity and reproduces so-called traditional values. The case examples described above show how the economic activities of farmers, civil servants or emergent entrepreneurs are framed, enabled and even encouraged by the politico-economic system of today’s (post-)socialist Vietnam. At the same time, nu-

merous traditional aspects such as the “filial duty of having at least one son” as characterized by the socio-cultural and social-moral orientation of the kin- and *hộ*-oriented social system remain influential.

Female feticide as a mirror of the socio-political relationships between genders

When I began this project, female feticide was not on my “research agenda”. However, once I got past my initial disbelief about the credibility of my own data, I had to concede that there was no denying the reality when I found out that the *hộ* composition of five out of forty-eight randomly researched *hộ* in Nam Định City reflected female feticide for the purpose of adhering to the so-called “importance of having at least one son”. Confucian beliefs that attribute a higher value to a boy than a girl does continue to be widespread despite policies of “gender equality” promoted by the Vietnamese government and various international and non-governmental organizations that also advocate a “gender equality”. As demonstrated, female feticide is committed due to demographic, socio-political and economic reasons and not only because of socio-cultural beliefs.

Asked about the importance of a son, the large majority of my interviewees responded that the lack of a son is seen as a rejection of a “core Vietnamese value”. Evidence from my research makes clear that since *Đổi mới*, it has been difficult and in many cases impossible to make a career in the Vietnamese Communist Party or in the Vietnamese government without having a son. This finding can be understood if one considers that “Confucian inspired neo-conservative campaigns on family life form part of a search for ‘indigenous’ and ‘authentic’ Asian values” (see e.g. Helliwell 1993). Malarney (2003) notes a revitalization of patrilineal principles throughout the 1990s. In this respect it would be very important to further research whether the strong promotion of Confucian values and the so-called importance of “having at least one son” not only in Vietnam but also in other Southeast Asian countries might be camouflaging the state’s ambition to have enough young men in case of future wars. My two case examples of Dũng N. and Truyền T. make clear that social pressure to commit female feticide was strong before *Đổi mới* and remains so after *Đổi*

mới. This underlines the fact that aspirations for gender equality – one of the goals of socialism – have not been realized. My research results demonstrate that the pressure to abort in order to achieve the “lucky number” (“*số may mắn*”) of a daughter and son is influenced not only by the immediate family but also by distant relatives. I do not agree with scholars who claim an increase in female feticide only because of the formal introduction of the “two-child policy”. I believe that the statistically significant rate of female feticide reflects the internalization of “values” that are attributed to the feminine as well as the masculine body. What we recognize as female feticide in these days reflects – like a mirror – inequalities that were always present but not so visible. It is in the domain of the *hộ* where I see the most likely and the most powerful possibilities for ideological change that can reverse this system. In the future and in view of the revision of the “two-child policy” by the Vietnamese government, it will be important to do an in-depth analysis of whether female feticide continues to be rampant.

The relevance of entrepreneurs: the link between wealth and belief

I have elaborated how and why some entrepreneurs come to question the “filial duty” of couples, otherwise known as their “civic duty”, to fulfill the double obligation of having a son and no more than two children. This shows that individuals are by no means passive as they act upon these processes (see e.g. Bourdieu 2001; 1980; Giddens 1984; Ortner 2006). The motivations of the *hộ* members who do not comply with the “two-child policy” can be divided into several categories. *First* is the freedom from state regulation that comes with economic capital. Since the agents in this field are not directly dependent on a state salary but earn their livings on their own, they enjoy a certain independence vis-à-vis state regulations; their jobs are not jeopardized if they have more than two children. *Second*, economic capital allows them a certain independence and status which makes them less vulnerable to social forms of sanctions. *Third*, some believe a daughter can perform the duties of ancestor worship as well as a son. *Fourth*, some believe that abortion is generally not acceptable. The conviction that women are equally capable of performing ancestor worship is especially interesting because it offers a solution that preserves an as-

pect of tradition – namely, ancestor worship – but makes female feticide unnecessary.

These entrepreneurs correspond to the emerging middle and upper middle classes as well as the “nouveau riche” class. Their economic capital allows for some independence in the economic sense and their social networks give them support, which is needed if parents choose not to have at least one son. Since the state actively encourages self-employment – a fact that is also in accordance with the neoliberal ideals of the “market economy with a socialist direction” – I see this group of the entrepreneurs as promising. This is because the *hộ* belonging to this field within the economy dare to oppose these obligations and refrain in many cases from female feticide. I argue that the combination of economic and social capital creates symbolic capital: even if parents do not comply with the expectation of having a son or two children, they fulfill the value of being a “successful hero” and hence receive symbolic capital, which blunts the criticism experienced due to non-fulfillment of the other requests.

I have elaborated on the relevance of the position of agents within the social fields. This also becomes manifest if one looks at the randomly collected data in Nam Định City between 2005 and 2010 since some entrepreneurs share the characteristic of being hesitant about or refusing female feticide. This holds true for both Catholic and non-Catholic *hộ*. Hence, I believe that the discovery of the position of entrepreneurs within Vietnamese society is promising.

The actions of some entrepreneurs reflect the inherent and paradoxical ambiguity between, on the one hand, respect for “traditional” and collective norms, which stipulate that the son’s destiny is to maintain continuity with the ancestral line and, on the other, their clear indifference towards the governmental norm of the “two-child-policy”. Although this latter norm is officially compulsory for all ethnic Vietnamese, their refusal to comply with it incontestably distinguishes them from others and reinforces their exceptional status as heroic entrepreneurs. Interestingly, those who intentionally refrain from female feticide do so with a certain pride by pointing to their distinctiveness – either because they are economically independent from the state or because they do not share the conviction that only men can fulfill the *hộ* responsibility to their ancestors. I hope that – despite so-

cial sanctions and various mechanisms of exclusion directed towards these entrepreneurs – their taste for distinction will increase and the popularity of female feticide decrease.

This research on the quest for wealth and belief was undertaken in the hope of contributing methodologically and theoretically to social anthropology and Vietnamese studies in particular and to the social sciences and (Post-)Socialist and Southeast Asian studies in general. Ideally, this research will serve as the basis for further studies on the quest for wealth and belief.

Over the course of this project, the majority of the interviewees expressed optimism about their future and the future of their cities. This was true regardless of age, gender, *hộ* or the position of actors within the social field. Personally, I hope that despite challenges that still await a solution, this often-heard optimism will become a reality. In the opinion of the interviewees, the hardest times in Vietnamese modernity were marked by the numerous wars and now belong to history; they hope that in the decades to come, their children and their country will have more opportunities for wealth and individual choice with respect to beliefs.

Outlook

In Vietnam as in many parts of the world, the social perception is that women are by their “biological nature” the guarantors of the reproduction of “culture”. Ironically, this reproduction (re)legitimizes masculine domination. Within Vietnam, the beginning of the twenty-first century led to a renaissance of “traditional” values. These are values that had not changed in their nature but were renamed; what had previously been called “modern” has now become “traditional” (e.g. Nguyen-vo 2008). This phenomenon is not limited to Vietnam or other “Confucian countries” but has taken place in other (post-)socialist countries such as Uzbekistan (Querrien and Selim 2010: 6). “Global norms” based on the ideals of “progress and equality of conditions for everyone enter into conflict with endogenous logic based on ‘cultural legitimation’” (e.g. Querrien and Selim 2010: 2). Selim posits that “culture” as a social, political and ideological product is generally an instrument for legitimizing dominant orders, and that it is in the name of culture that one asks people to remain in their designated places within society¹⁰² (Douville and Selim 2011: 1).

Instead of “nature” or “bad fate” in these days, the individual revolts against “culture”. Social sanctions consequently are more severe. The female feticides described in the previous chapter reflect gender inequalities that are deeply rooted within society and that were not so visible before *Đổi mới*. It would be far too simple to attribute these prenatal regulations exclusively to the recent availability of prenatal reproductive techniques. As my research data demonstrate, it was common for people to aspire to influence and determine the sex of the future child by relying on special dietary supplements, sexual positions and calendar dates well before the economic reforms of *Đổi mới*. The ultrasound of today finds its equivalent in the “ultrasound of the past”, where diviners sought to identify the sex of the future child and were, according to the beliefs of numerous Vietnamese,

¹⁰² “C’est au nom de la culture que l’on demande aux gens de rester à leur place dans une société donnée” (Douville and Selim 2011: 1).

frequently successful in doing so.¹⁰³ However, one relevant distinction between the pre- and post-*Đổi mới* eras can be identified. Previously one's "inability" to achieve the "lucky number" was primarily seen as a failure of the parents (and especially of the wife) or identified as "bad fate" transmitted from previous lives. Now reproductive techniques redirect responsibility away from the "capacity" to the "willingness" of the parents to achieve the "lucky number". It is striking how these efforts reinforce the importance and the obligations of individual power and responsibility that seemingly rest on the parents' shoulders. Ironically, the goal of conforming to collective Confucian aims is thus in accordance with neo-liberal discourses that highlight individual responsibility.

Based on numerous conversations with Vietnamese in general and with Vietnam scholars in particular, these rules are less rigidly interpreted in southern Vietnam. It is not uncommon there for women to perform funeral rituals and to maintain the ancestral worship (Information collected between 2004 and 2011). It would be interesting to examine, based on extensive research in southern Vietnam, whether these ideological or religious convictions are responsible for the comparatively lower rate of female feticide there. Despite prevailing "traditions" and their influence in society, it is essential to analyze changes occurring at the micro-level such as the emerging of the entrepreneurs. This is because these changes anticipate new forms of living that become evident at the level of society. Ortner pertinently stated "what social transformation in a deep sense means is not only the rearrangement of institutions. It involves the transformation of 'culture,' in both its new-old and its newer senses. (...) Social transformation must also be cultural transformation or it will be nothing." (Ortner 2006: 18).

I believe that it will be crucial to research whether or not the people of (post-)socialist Vietnam will be able to transform the traditional "cultural" value of "having at least one son" to "having at least one child". If they succeed in doing so, I anticipate that ancestor worship would continue – although in a new form – and female feticide would lose legitimacy.

¹⁰³ Foucault (1976-2003) convincingly demonstrated in *The History of Sexuality* that humans have tried since ancient times to identify the causes and mechanisms that connect food and reproduction. The phenomenon practiced in Vietnam is not unique despite local discourses to the contrary.

Appendix

Appendix One

Abbreviations for religious affiliation(s)

- A Ancestor worship
- B Vietnamese forms of Buddhism
- C Roman Catholics
- N None

Semi-structured interviews with primary interviewees of each participating *hộ* in Nam Định City in 2006 (1-48)

Num- ber	Age	Gen- der	Number of <i>hộ</i> mem- bers	Job(s)	Ward	Salary/income Interviewee Per month	Total in- come <i>hộ</i>	Religious affiliation
1	49	F	Three (parents and son), daughter married in Hà Nội	Retired Husband works as a manager in the de- partment of electricity	Cửa Bắc	840,000 VND re- tirement 1.8 million VND (fixed salary)	2.64 mil- lion VND	A, B

Appendix One

2	69	M	Three (parents and son), The younger son moved out and the older son has a mental disability	Retired	Cửa Bắc	700,000 VND from his wife's retirement salary 150,000 VND/per month as a contribution from his son 300,000-400,000 VND/every three months from raising pigs	1.15-1.25 million VND	A, B
3	43	M	Four (parents, two sons)	Owner of a shutter shop	Cửa Bắc	800,000-900,000 VND 25,000-30,000 VND/ per day from selling rice	1.8 million VND	A
4	60	F	Two (interviewee, daughter); one daughter lives in Hà Nội	Retired	Cửa Bắc	600,000 VND retirement salary She sells sweets at her house (no information on amount earned) Former head of "hui-system"	Estimated 1.6 million VND	A

Appendix One

5	60	F	Two (husband and wife)	Retired and owner of a jewelry shop	Bà Triệu	More than 10 million VND (refused to give detailed account but stated that it was far more than 10 million VND)	More than 10 million VND	A, B
6 (172)	33	F	Four (parents and two sons); four workers during the day	Owner of an electronic shop	Bà Triệu	More than 3,000 USD	More than 3,000 USD	A, C
7	54	M	Five (parents, older son and his wife and their child)	Retired (former ship-builder)	Trần Quang Khải	1,13 million VND retirement salary 10,000 VND / per day from running small shop 300,000-500,000 VND from raising pigs 300,000-500,000 VND from two sons/per month	2.03-2.43 million VND	A
8	51	F	Two (interviewee and her mother)	Retired	Cửa Bắc	600,000 VND retirement salary	600,000 VND	A, B

Appendix One

9 (173)	53	F	Two (parents), Their two sons live in Hà Nội	Owner of a motorbike shop Her husband works in the same business	Bà Triệu	100,000 VND per motorbike	10-15 mil- lion VND	A, B
10 (174)	33	F	Four (parents, two sons)	Co-owner of a shop that sells parts of bicycles	Bà Triệu	No exact informa- tion provided	Estimation of about 5 million VND	A, C
11	30	F	Five (parents, mother of the interviewee, two daughters)	Hairdresser	Trần Quang Khải	600,000 VND (hair- dresser) 550,000 VND hus- bands salary 700,000 VND mother's pension	1.85 mil- lion VND	A, C
12	48	F	Three (parents, son age 17); Two daughters, ages 23 and 21, have moved out	Owner of a mechanical shop	Trần Quang Khải	2 million VND	2 million VND	A

Appendix One

13 (175)	34	F	Four (parents, son, daughter)	Builder	Trần Quang Khải	30,000 VND working day Husband works as cyclo driver (weak health) 400,000 VND	Maximum of 1.3 million VND (in rainy season, fewer working days) about 600,000 VND as a total income	A
14	44	M	Four (parents, daughter seventeen, son thirteen years old)	Retired, he sells “break-fast” and snacks, Sometimes he works in the countryside as a farmer His wife works in the textile factory	Trần Quang Khải	700,000 VND from his shop About 1 million VND per 3 months in the form of farm products 600,000 salary of his wife 850,000 VND incentives received by the wife twice a year	About 1.5 million VND	A
15 (176)	21	F	Two (Interviewee with her mother)	Sells vegetables without a license	Trần Quang Khải	260,000 VND 700,000 VND mother's retirement salary	960,000 VND	A, B

Appendix One

16	20	F	One (she rents a room in the house of a host <i>hộ</i>)	Student She pays 75,000 VND for the rent 30,000 VND for water & electricity	Bà Triệu	No income, 400,000 VND support from her bother Her parents earn about 700,000 VND-800,000 VND	(400,000 VND)	A
17	57	M	Four (parents, two daughters)	No official job wounded in the American war, does not receive compensation One daughter has a mental disability	Bà Triệu	10,000 VND from selling vegetables 300,000 VND per three months for selling pigs	300,000 VND	A, B
18	66	M	Two (parents)	Retired The interviewee served sixteen years in the army Then he worked as a director of a mechanical factory	Trần Quang Khải	700,000 VND wife's retirement salary Husband earns more than 800,000 VND as a retirement salary	2 million VND	A, B

Appendix One

19	50	M	One (a single man)	Repairing bicycles	Trần Quang Khải	300,000 VND	300,000 VND	A
20 (177)	36	F	Four (parents, two sons)	Worker of a garment factory	Bà Triệu	1.03 million VND (income of the wife) Husband earns about 1 Million VND as a self-employed barber	2 million VND	A, C
21	37	M	Four (parents, two sons)	“Businessman” (e.g. trade of land, and illegal gambling activities)	Bà Triệu	More than 3,000 USD	More than 3,000 USD	A
22	48	F	Three (parents, one son) The older son and daughter moved out	Dog meat producer and seller	Bà Triệu	2 million VND	2 million VND	A, B
23	41	F	Three (interviewee, son and daughter), husband works in Russia	Housewife Son works as a hairdresser Daughter is an accountant	Bà Triệu	Income provided by the children; husband does not yet earn enough to send remittances	1.2 million VND	A, B, C

Appendix One

24 (178)	76	F	One (widow) Her five adult children live separately	Retired, former textile worker Retired former textile worker (oldest man), His wife retired early due to health problems from her work (textile factory) His son works in the textile factory	Trần Quang Khải	Retirement salary 600,000 VND	600,000 VND	A, B
25	51	M	Six (parents, their oldest son, his wife, daughter, son)	Retired former textile worker (oldest man), His wife retired early due to health problems from her work (textile factory) His son works in the textile factory	Trần Quang Khải	Retirement salary of the interviewee 600,000 VND His wife does not yet receive a retirement salary His son's income supports the son's wife and their children	600,000 VND	A, B
26	44	M	Five (parents, two girls ages 16 and 14, one son age 1)!	Driver (self-employed) former textile worker like his wife who works now as a housewife	Trần Quang Khải	1.2 million VND	1.2 million VND	A, B

Appendix One

27	21	F	Four (parents, son, daughter)	Student and accountant Her father works as an inspector for river safety (husband and wife served in the army during the Chinese and Cambodian wars)	Trần Quang Khải	500,000 VND (for her personal use) Parents each earn 5 million VND	10.5 million VND	A, B
28	60	M	Four (parents, boy and girl)	Retired and landlord of a shop	Bà Triệu	400,000 VND rent of wife 800,000 VND (lease of the shop) 400,000 VND selling clothes	1.6 million VND	A, B
29 (184)	39	F	Three (parents, one girl)!	Owner of a clothes shop	Bà Triệu	5-7 million VND net income	5-7 million VND net income	A, C

Appendix One

30 (185)	57	F	Two (widow, son) One older son lives separately	Retired, owner of a shop to sell DVD's	Bà Triệu	500-600,000 VND from selling DVD's Income from savings Her life style makes clear that she belongs to the "rich income strata"	More than 10 million VND	A, B
31	38	F	Four (parents, daughter is age 10, son is age 1)!	Selling clothes (self-employed)	Bà Triệu	3 million VND	3 million VND	A, B
32	50	M	Two (parents); daughter and son live in Hà Nội	Preparing and selling traditional Chinese medicine	Bà Triệu	4 million VND	4 million VND	A, B
33	17	F	Four (parents, two girls)	High school student (she studies a lot and dreams of becoming the general director of her own large enterprise)	Trần Quang Khải	Retirement salary of her father (early retirement due to health problems) 400,000 VND He now repairs bicycles: 500,000 VND Mother sells fruits without a license in the market 500,000 VND	1.4 million VND	A, C

Appendix One

34	47	F	Four (parents, two sons)	Taylor (self-employed) In the past she worked for the army as a parachute maker	Trần Quang Khải	900,000 VND (husband repairs ships, self-employed) 900,000 VND husband's retirement salary 800,000 VND wife's retirement salary about 400,000 VND income as a tailor	About 3 million VND	A
35	27	M	Three (parents, son) younger sister is married	Mechanic	Trần Quang Khải	Income as a mechanic 900,000 VND Receives 100,000-200,000 VND as pocket money 500,000 mother's retirement salary His father has no income	1.4 million VND	A, B

Appendix One

36	44	M	Five (parents, two girls ages 15 and 9, one boy age 1)! The man lived in Russia when his first daughter was born and returned five years later)	Selling candles, incense and other material for rituals	Bà Triệu	2 million VND	2 million VND	A, B
37	50	M	Three (the interviewee is divorced and lives again with his parents) The interviewee worked in Russia, fell in love with a Russian woman and got divorced from his Vietnamese wife	He sells wooden furniture at his sister's shop	Bà Triệu	–	No information received	A, B
38	46	F	Four (parents, two sons)	Owens a car and rents it out to a driver Husband is a manager of a state-owned electric company	Cửa Bắc	More than 15 million VND	5-6 million VND (from renting out the car) Husband earns more than 10 million VND	A

Appendix One

39	50	M	Two (parents); their son works in Hà Nội	Retired	Cửa Bắc	10,000 VND/per day from selling green tea 300,000 VND for protecting a private company at night 262,000 VND government support for wounded soldiers	About 800,000 VND	A, B
40 (189)	33	M	Three (parents, one daughter)	Pawnbroker Interest rate 70%! For e.g. jewelry or mobile phones	Cửa Bắc	2-3 million VND	2-3 million VND	A, C
41	60	M	Three (parents with their adopted daughter who has a mental disability)	Repairing bicycles (self-employed) Small shop to sell sweets	Cửa Bắc	They refused to give information on their income. Obviously a very poor hộ	About 600,000 VND	A

Appendix One

42 (192)	30	M	Ten (interviewee's parents, his wife and the two daughters, his older brother, his wife and their two sons)	Works in the beer factory Income from the "zoo"	Trần Quang Khải	1-1,5 million VND (depending on whether he works one or two shifts) 5 million VND from his "zoo" Interviewee's brothers income from the beer factory (1 million VND) Interviewee's wife: 870,000 VND Interviewee's mother retirement salary 620,000 VND Interviewee's father compensation from exposure to "Agent Orange": 374,000 VND	Around 9-10 million VND (large hộ!)	A, B
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Appendix One

43	16	M	Two (father and son)	Unemployed, plays video games and has not yet shown interest in a job Father wants him to join the army and works as a <i>xe-ôm</i> driver	Cửa Bắc	About 600,000 VND	About 600,000 VND	A, C
44 (195)	49	M	Four (parents and two sons)	Policeman (like his older son and his wife)	Cửa Bắc	2.8 million income of husband 2.8 million income of wife Son receives 1.3 million VND	About 7 million VND	A
45	51	M	Two (father and son); he divorced his wife ten years ago	Carpenter (like his son), self-employed	Cửa Bắc	2 million VND (both of them)	2 million	A, C

Appendix One

46	68	F	Seven (interviewee and her husband, the mother of her husband, their oldest son, his wife and their daughter age 16 and their son age 1)!	Retired	Cửa Bắc	700,000 VND retirement salary 2 million VND retirement salary of her husband (son works as a bus driver and does not share the income)	2.7 million VND	A
47	58	F	Four (parents, two daughters)	Retired	Cửa Bắc	400,000 VND wife's retirement salary 880,000 VND husband's retirement salary	1.28 million VND	A
48	18	M	Three (parents, one daughter) An older daughter lives in Hà Nội	Student, no income	Cửa Bắc	The interviewee did not want to reveal the income of her parents. Her mother sells lottery tickets, her father is retired and worked in marine transportation "Low income" <i>hộ</i>	–	A

Appendix Two

Semi-structured interviews conducted in 2010 in Nam Định City with primary interviewees of twelve *hộ* from the above sample

Num- ber	Age	Gen- der	Number of <i>hộ</i> mem- bers	Job(s)	Ward	Salary/income Interviewee Per month	Total in- come <i>hộ</i>	Religious affiliation
172 (6)	37	F	Four (parents, two sons)	Owner of a shop that sells electronics Remark: she bought two houses in Hà Nội for her sons	Bà Triệu	Her net income im- proved considerably	More than 5,000 USD →Consider- able economic improve- ment	A, C

Appendix Two

173 (9)	57	F	Two (parents); their two sons live in Hà Nội	Higher eco- nomic support from children Older son owns a secu- rity business with more than 500 em- ployees in Hà Nội He hires each employee for 3 million VND/month and receives 4 million VND	Bà Triệu	Considerable eco- nomic improvement	More than 15 million VND Con- siderable economic improve- ment	A, B
174 (10)	37	F	Four (parents, three* sons) *Due to his “unwill- ingness to study”, the oldest son was sent to relatives who live in HCM	Co-owner of a shop that sells bicycle parts New: Buying and selling of land with considerable profit	Bà Triệu	More than 5 million VND	→ Better economic situation	A, C

Appendix Two

175 (13)	38	F	Four (parents, son and daughter)	Works now as a cleaner Husband works as a xe ôm driver Thanks to savings they could afford a motorbike	Trần Quang Khải	65,000 VND per working day Bonus of 150,000 VND if she works more than 26 days per month	Slightly higher income of 1.5-2 million VND → Worse economic situation due to inflation	A
176 (15)	25	F	Three (interviewee, her son and her mother) The father of the child “lives separately.”	Selling vegetables that she grows in a rented field	Trần Quang Khải	450,000 VND from selling vegetables 700,000 VND from her mother’s retirement salary	→ Worse economic situation	A, B
177 (20)	40	F	Four (parents, two sons)	Retired worker of a textile factory, she is self-employed as a tailor Husband self-employed as a hairdresser	Bà Triệu	Around 1.8 VND (wife) 2 mMillion VND (husband) Note: She has enough working years and will receive a retirement salary of 1.2 million VND at the age of 45	Around 4 million VND → Better economic situation	A, C

Appendix Two

178 (24)	80	F	Two (interviewee and grandson)	Retired, former textile worker	Trần Quang Khải	800,000 VND retirement salary 2 million VND support of her children	2.8 Million VND →better economic situation	A, B
184 (29)	43	F	Three (parents, one girl)	Owner of a clothing shop New income due to interest rate from savings	Bà Triệu	10 million VND (income from the shop) 10 million VND (interest rate from savings)	→Better economic situation 20 million VND	A, C
185 (30)	61	F	Two (widow, son)	Still retired, higher business income	Bà Triệu	Economic situation improved considerably	→Economic situation improved considerably	A, B

Appendix Two

189 (40)	37	M	Four (parents, two daughters)	Former shop is rented out – income of 500,000 VND He opened a domestic tourist agency with ten employee's. He built a new house His wife owns and operates her own restaurant	Trần Quang Khải	Total income of 6 million VND	→Economic situation improved considerably	A, C
192 (42)	34	M	Ten (interviewee's parents, his wife and the two daughters, his older brother, his wife and their two sons)	Works in the beer factory He has bought and sold land for profit	Trần Quang Khải	Income as before but also a football sized field to plant and sell bonsai He renovated and enlarged the house, bought and resold land	→Economic situation improved considerably	A, B

Appendix Two

195 (44)	53	M	Four (parents, two sons) Note: The younger son got married and has a son He is supposed to move out as soon as the older son gets married (older son seems to have become a heroin junkie)	Policeman (like before) Wife has retired and sells water bottles He receives money from various other (illegal) sources	Cửa Bắc	Income as before, 1,000-2,000 US\$ from reselling water bottles (organized with large trucks)	→Economic situation improved considerably	A
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Appendix Three

Table from the “Municipal Statistical Office of Nam Định City”

Note:

The following table is from the “Municipal Statistical Office of Nam Định City” and was received in 2010. Section A 5 shows how many women have three or more children in the corresponding wards in Nam Định City. Such statistics are conducted every year (see Chapter 9).

BÁO CÁO TÌNH HÌNH DAN SƠ BIẾN ĐỘNG
NAM 2005

Từ ngày/1/.... đến 31/12..... Năm 2005

S T T	Tên xã, phường thị trấn	Số nhân khẩu có đến ngày đầu kỳ báo cáo		Những biến động nhân khẩu kỳ báo cáo										Số hộ khẩu có đến ngày cuối kỳ báo cáo				Số người trong độ tuổi LĐ có đến ngày cuối kỳ		Số đôi kết hôn
		Tổng số	Trong đó: nữ	Sinh			Chuyển đến			Chuyển đi			Chết	Tổng số hộ khẩu	Tổng số nữ	TD nữ				
				Tổng số	Nữ	Con thứ 3 trở lên	Tổng số	TD nữ	TD Sống	Tổng số	TD nữ	Tổng số					TD nữ			
A	B	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17		
1	Hà Long	14.150	7.259	224	107	6	187	94	880	412	67	21	3.894	13.614	7.027	7.100	3.744	133		
2	Vị Hoàng	8.655	4.715	80	37	1	21	11	30	15	45	23	2.005	8.681	4.725	5.122	3.124	67		
3	Nguyễn Du	9.031	4.650	109	53	0	27	13	41	23	51	19	5.140	9.075	4.674	4.878	2.672	72		
4	Vân Miếu	13.026	6.494	169	90	3	107	73	152	97	64	37	3.252	13.086	6.523	6.674	3.403	114		
5	Trưởng Thi	14.531	7.651	251	113	4	309	250	250	90	73	25	3.989	14.768	7.899	7.955	5.400	153		
6	Ngô Quyền	7.430	3.880	83	42	2	62	30	173	67	50	19	1.502	7.352	3.866	3.821	2.034	46		
7	Phan Đình Phùng	8.116	4.531	100	44	0	296	70	253	75	56	25	2.220	8.203	4.545	4.930	2.465	66		
8	Trần Đăng Ninh	9.065	4.789	82	46	2	101	61	152	98	56	31	2.713	9.040	4.767	5.116	2.433	95		
9	Cửa Bắc	13.890	7.034	190	98	0	109	38	116	52	81	29	3.563	13.992	7.089	8.138	3.707	130		
10	Quang Trung	11.562	5.777	145	66	9	52	24	54	32	80	43	2.692	11.625	5.792	5.800	2.800	88		
11	Bà Triệu	7.526	3.822	84	46	0	32	16	62	29	66	27	1.872	7.514	3.828	4.056	2.305	63		
12	Trần Tế Xương	12.086	6.086	190	93	1	118	53	207	105	90	36	3.252	12.097	6.091	6.290	3.331	118		
13	Vị Xuyên	10.172	5.134	145	71	2	77	42	23	0	50	22	2.615	10.321	5.225	5.215	2.868	78		
14	Năng Tĩnh	11.739	6.491	164	85	9	79	37	34	11	69	33	3.028	11.879	6.569	6.599	3.959	116		
15	Trần Hưng Đạo	7.621	4.067	55	26	1	39	17	53	28	35	11	1.806	7.627	4.071	4.266	2.290	60		
16	Cửa Nam	6.091	3.024	95	50	0	56	31	31	10	33	15	1.360	6.178	3.080	3.600	1.750	38		
17	Trần Quang Khải	7.445	4.034	85	39	2	48	27	26	10	45	25	1.848	7.507	4.065	4.587	2.743	69		
18	Thống Nhất	7.531	3.829	99	44	1	107	55	161	100	24	7	1.979	7.552	3.821	4.261	2.223	50		
19	Lộc Vượng	8.892	4.505	132	54	1	77	35	240	86	31	12	2.407	8.830	4.496	6.207	3.220	70		
20	Lộc Hà	9.443	4.616	91	42	4	958	478	299	101	41	19	2.016	10.152	5.016	5.887	2.810	80		
CỘNG PHUẾNG		198.002	102.388	2.573	1.246	48	2.862	1.455	3.237	1.441	1.107	479	53.153	199.093	103.169	110.502	59.281	1.706		

Appendix Three

STT	Tên xã, phường thị trấn	Số nhân khẩu có đến ngày đầu kỳ báo cáo		Những biến động nhân khẩu kỳ báo cáo										Số hộ khẩu có đến ngày cuối kỳ báo cáo				Số người ương đó tuổi LD có đến ngày cuối kỳ		Số đôi kết hôn
		Tổng số	Trong đó: nữ	Sinh		Chuyển đến		Chuyển đi		Chết		Tổng số hộ	Tổng số khẩu	TD nữ	Tổng Số	TD nữ				
				Tổng số	Nữ	Con thứ 3 trở lên	Tổng số	TD nữ	Tổng số	TD nữ										
A	B	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17		
1	Xã Lộc An	6.069	3.165	73	32	1	65	30	26	15	29	20	1.253	6.152	3.192	3.572	1.929	42		
2	Xã Lộc Hoà	8.894	4.664	97	20	2	12	9	0	0	33	9	2.137	8.970	4.684	5.085	2.800	92		
3	Xã Mỹ Xá	11.161	5.896	156	62	7	164	100	87	62	57	24	3.027	11.337	5.972	6.031	3.226	85		
4	Xã Nam Phong	11.021	5.077	131	62	5	50	26	38	26	35	17	1.980	11.129	5.122	5.900	2.920	78		
5	Xã Nam Văn	7.533	3.659	55	27	0	48	23	36	16	36	17	1.661	7.564	3.676	4.000	2.014	64		
	CỘNG XÃ	44.678	22.461	512	203	15	339	188	187	119	190	87	10.058	45.152	22.646	24.588	12.889	361		
	TỔNG CHUNG	242.680	124.849	3.085	1.449	63	3.201	1.643	3.424	1.560	1.297	566	63.211	244.245	125.815	135.090	72.170	2.067		

NGƯỜI LẬP BIỂU
Đặng Thị Nga

Ngày 04/Tháng 1 Năm 2006
PHÒNG THỐNG KÊ THÀNH PHỐ

(Ký tên, đóng dấu)



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