RENOVATING MASCULINITY
URBAN MEN’S EXPERIENCES AND EMERGENT MASCULINITY MODELS
IN Đbeeld Mół VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I provide an in-depth ethnographic case study of the ways in which a small group of young, urban, educated, heterosexual Vietnamese men have made sense of themselves ‘as men’ in relation to cultural, economic and social change in Vietnam over the past twenty-five years. I do this by exploring intensively the life narratives of seventeen men aged nineteen to twenty-nine, collected over thirteen months of fieldwork (July 2005 to November 2006) in Hanoi, Vietnam’s capital and second largest city. I analyse these men’s memories, expectations and imaginings about a period of actual and perceived change in their families, society and the economy, in young women’s attitudes and practises, in ideas about romance, relationships and sexuality, and in opportunities for education, career development and self-making. I focus on these men because they were born in the years immediately before and after the Sixth (Vietnam Communist) Party Congress in December 1986—a congress popularly understood to mark the beginning of widespread and ongoing ‘renovation’ in Vietnamese social and economic structures and systems.

I argue that these men considered ‘traditional’ male-oriented kinship and social systems to have been radically destabilized by social and economic transformations in Vietnam since the mid-1980s. Rapidly changing conditions for the maintenance of social and economic systems have previously been identified in research as leading to feelings among people of anxiety and dislocation, or to a conservative backlash from men interested in quarantining the impacts of women’s changing status from the social order. In studies of Vietnam such ideas about the disruptive affects/effects of ‘modernisation’ appear to be commonly understood in relation to ideas that Vietnamese men are somehow inside the structures and mechanisms recreating male-friendly social systems and interested in defending those conditions against ‘change’. Drawing on my informants’ life histories, I challenge and extend these scholarly understandings of young Vietnamese men during transition.

I argue that my informants dealt with the significant change in gender relations, masculinist ideologies and signifying practises of ‘being a man’ while growing up during Đổi mới not by considering their interests and defending themselves qua men, but through critical and
self-reflective attitudes toward social, political and economic change per se. Over four empirical chapters I draw attention to instances where my informants’ attachments to mechanisms of both gender replication and modification appeared crucially to depend on the ways in which they responded to others within everyday spaces of inhabitance, constructed their own histories through memory, affect and emotions, and positioned themselves within wider, more public histories. I conclude that these men managed conflict about ideas and contradictory practises of masculinity during Đổi mới through a deep, mediating and under-theorised ambivalence about ‘being a man’ in Vietnam.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

1. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD;
2. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used; and
3. The thesis is less than 100,000 words in length exclusive of tables, figures, bibliography and appendices.

Philip Martin
DEDICATION

In loving memory of my grandfather, Frank Simpson.
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

- AUD: Australian Dollar
- CSW: Commercial Sex Worker
- DVD: Digital Video Disk
- GAD: Gender and Development
- GDP: Gross Domestic Product
- GSO: General Statistics Office
- IT: Information Technology
- MOH: Ministry of Health
- MSM: Men who have sex with men
- NCFAW: National Committee for the Advancement of Women
- NGO: Non Government Organisation
- POW: Prisoner of War
- SAVY: Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth
- SOE: State-Owned Enterprise
- UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund
- VCD: Video Compact Disk
- VCP: Communist Party of Vietnam
- VME: Vietnam Museum of Ethnology
- VND: Vietnam Dong
- WAD: Women and Development
- WTO: World Trade Organisation
PROLOGUE

[The] Subsidy Economy (Bao cấp) was a period when courage and the intelligence of millions of people were suppressed and [they] were anxious about liberation. Đổi mới (Renovation) policies were finally applied, then the energy of the people virtually exploded creating a boom in socioeconomic development.

Sign at the ‘Hanoi Life Under the Subsidy Economy 1975–1986’ exhibition,
Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, 2006

In late June, 2006, I went with a twenty-seven-year-old male social worker called Thanh to see the ‘Hanoi Life under the Subsidy Economy 1975–1986’ exhibition at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME). Thanh and I had been working together part-time over a period of five months at a reproductive health non-government organisation (NGO) in Dong Da District, Hanoi, and had developed a firm friendship through our shared professional and social activities. Thanh had suggested that we attend this exhibition in order for me to become educated about the ‘realities’ of life before wide-scale economic reforms were commenced in Vietnam in the mid-1980s. As if to warn me of the grim scenario that I was about to witness, Thanh told me prior to our visit to the museum that ‘before Đổi mới was a miserable time ... My mother said it made her a mean person—very frugal, counting every penny—and mean to other people too’.

The exhibition documented the daily lives of Hanoi’s residents during the ‘subsidy’ years of central economic planning and distribution. It was filled with dioramas of rice distribution units; short films and art installations on the period; and glass cases containing books of old food stamps, remittance rosters and regulations, and personal effects. These artefacts were framed by signs and descriptions that offered an unusually high level of criticism of the earlier Vietnamese Communist

1. The exhibition title in Vietnamese was ‘Cuộc sống ở Hà Nội thời bao cấp (1975–1986)’. The English title that I use is the one specified by the VME and is not an exact translation of the Vietnamese.
Party (VCP) policies. Such unexpected candour about the VCP’s previous failures was extensively commented on in the international press. For example, an article in the *Boston Review* stated:

> The Ethnology Museum’s exhibit demonstrates that, while the government may retain ownership of certain strategic industries, there is now a broad consensus in the [Communist] Party on the general value of market economics—so much so that it can serve as the basis of pro-government propaganda.

> Previous Vietnamese accounts of the 1970s and 1980s ascribed material hardships to the legacy of war; this exhibit squarely blames an ‘inappropriate’ method of socioeconomic management and a ‘sluggish and inefficient production system’, which ‘stifled’ initiative. One display charts the discriminatory rice quotas that gave Party bureaucrats more and peasants less—the first time this information has ever been published in Vietnam. (Steinglass 2006)

In the Vietnamese national press the exhibition was more often discussed in terms of providing a good way to show the younger generation the hardships their elders had experienced. In both domains, however, the emphasis was on the material difference between the low quality of life available to most Vietnamese people under the subsidy economy through the late 1970s and early 1980s, and that achieved as a result of trade liberalisation and the opening up of the culture and economy beginning with Đổi mới in 1986. More than a few stories commented on the endemic corruption in the subsidy system, the preferential treatment given to Communist Party cadres and the demoralising effects on people of lining up for twelve hours or more to receive their rice allocations.

After making our way through the displays, Thanh and I reflected on the exhibition in the museum’s coffee shop. In contrast to the austerity of the Bảo cấp artefacts, the coffee shop contained shelves full of cheap sugary cakes, a Coca Cola fridge and an ice-cream freezer. Thanh said that it was all evidence that Đổi mới had ‘worked’.

I still remember the renovation in 1986; at the time I was six or seven years old. I still remember the stamp process, when we had to borrow rice for each meal ... The quality of rice then was terrible. We were eating rice mixed with cassava or cereals; there was hardly any meat in meals ... But with Đổi mới things changed; there were more shops, and more people had their own businesses. Some families got rich ...
I knew from an earlier conversation, however, that Thanh’s family was not one of them. In the early 1990s Thanh’s mother fell to ‘regulation 176’—a regulation in force between October 1989 and December 1991 that allowed state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to shed workers by offering them lump-sum payments (Liljeström et al. 1998, 245). Along with many other women, Thanh’s mother lost her job at the Department of Transportation amid broader state sector downsizing. Thanh’s father, however, kept his job at the same department, in the railways section. Thanh said: ‘After renovation, I knew that my family was very poor ... We had a hard life but things eventually started getting better; there were changing ideals and ways of living.’

While the Bảo cấp exhibition reminded Thanh of the material deprivations of the time, talk of Đổi mới prompted him to recount the improvements that he saw in the ways that people subsequently approached their lives. He said that after his mother lost her job she was constantly seeking new opportunities as well as ‘always working for the family’. His mother started a business selling textiles, cooked and cleaned for the extended family, and helped her children with schoolwork. Thanh said that he remembered his mother during the early 1990s as dynamic (năng động). His father, on the other hand, ‘remained rather conservative and inflexible’ (hơi bảo thủ và cứng nhắc).

Thanh suggested that his father was not at all suited to the new commercial opportunities available during Đổi mới. He took ‘very few risks’ and ‘hasn’t moved beyond the mentality of the subsidy economy’. Thanh regarded his mother as the family’s ‘primary economic supporter’ (là người chủ cấp kinh phí) and his father as a kind of symbolic family manager: ‘After Đổi mới, in my family, my mother controlled and arranged the house better than my father’. He paused, before adding ‘I want my father to return to his position where he should have been’:

In life, even though change can be very fast when it happens, the home (nhà) must be kept stable ... And in the family (gia đình) there must be a hierarchy: the husband is the backbone—he must work and earn a living for the family, and the wife takes care of the children and the family ... the younger [child] must respect the older one and the older gives up his due to the younger one; the culture must be maintained even during change.

An article about the Bảo cấp exhibition in the June 2006 Vietnam Investment Review stated that the displays demonstrated that ‘Vietnam has experienced many important changes, and [that] life has improved vastly’. Such themes of development and improvement recur in much of the contemporary popular writing on Vietnam, and often trace the reasons for development to the
processes of economic liberalisation accompanying Đổi mới (Dollar et al. 1998; Rama 2002, 2008). And yet, after considering the exhibition and reflecting on the material improvements experienced in his family during his lifetime, Thanh remained equivocal about change in Vietnam per se.

Thanh remembered the beginnings of Đổi mới as a time of social upheaval that produced positive economic outcomes for Vietnam but uncertain results within his family. He was concerned that new economic conditions had left his father ‘behind’ and that Vietnamese ‘family culture’ had been weakened by the changing social and economic roles of women and men. I asked Thanh whether in the future, with a wife and children of his own, he would expect to recreate a type of ‘more traditional’ family structure.

No … It is very different now. My father has a lot of preconceived ideas, as I told you before. He is slow to change … He is not objective, which you need to be these days … Vietnamese men now have to learn and develop faster. In business they must be decisive and have foresight (biết việc gì nó phải xảy ra). Before [Đổi mới] they were slower; but now if I cannot work then I get sacked.

The changing practices and responsibilities of Thanh’s family members during Đổi mới were simultaneously reiterated and rejected as fundamental elements in Thanh’s processes for (re) defining himself. He considered a type of Confucian family structure fundamental to the ‘culture’ of Vietnam and regretted the way his father’s authority within the family had diminished as a result of his mother’s increased responsibilities. But he did not necessarily see his own future as implicated in the traditions he championed. Nor did he appear very interested in his father’s opinion of that future. Thanh had previously described his family to me in terms of ‘Oriental’ tradition, and he cited his father’s reading of Chinese books as exemplary forms of behaviour within that tradition. And yet after mulling over our conversation at the Museum of Ethnology he seemed compelled to defend his father to me: ‘My father is not a bad man, or a lazy man, just typical of a normal man (người bình thường).’ I asked Thanh what he meant when he said ‘normal’; he replied, ‘They are not particularly skilful in life. They earn enough to live and feed their family. I guess this is a normal man today.’
INTRODUCTION

Is it possible that today’s youth are disadvantaged
Being learned yet living timidly,
Humbled for the sake of keeping
‘The Peace ...’
Does anyone notice?
Does anyone change?¹

Excerpt from poem ‘Remembering Uncle Ho in Spring’ by Pham Thi Xuan Khai, in Tieng Phong Newspaper, 25 March 1986

Thesis overview

This thesis examines the processes through which young men in Vietnam negotiate their experiences of and expectations about ‘being men.’ At least since 1986, shifts in economic policy, division of labour, social relations, and modes of thinking and living have changed gender practices and attitudes. Previously, Confucian moral codes, patrilineal kinship systems, ‘the family’, and state institutions were posited in research as the reasonably stable organizing principles of meaning in Vietnamese social life (Werner and Bélanger 2002, 16; Efroymson et al. 1997; Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong 1998, 1999; Gammeltoft 2002a, 2002b; Mensch et al. 2003). These systems, structures and institutions were understood to consistently disadvantage women and benefit men across time and generation—for example, in education (Glewwe and Jacoby 1998), employment (Korinek 2004) and social mobility (Beresford 1988, 1989; Chu Van Lam 1991; Kruks and Young 1990; Liljeström and Tuong Lai 1991). But scholarship on women’s experiences during Vietnam’s transition towards a market economy has argued that gender relations and practices have been

¹ Lẽ nào tuổi trẻ hôm nay thua thiệt / Có học hành lại phải sống cầu an / Phải thu mình xin hai chữ / ‘Bình yên ... ’ / Có ai thấy chăng / Và ai phải sửa?

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changing recently, and that intersexual relationships are often negotiated outside the ‘normative’ gender practices those idealised versions describe (Pettus 2003; Trang Quoc 2008; Vu Song Ha 2008). Young urban women in particular have been prominent in the literature for the new ways in which they accommodate and translate global youth cultures (Nguyen Phuong An 2005), blend longstanding Vietnamese forms into new youth-based styles and practices (Gammeltoft 2006), and employ the latest technologies to generate possibilities for cultural production (Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas 2004). Such scholarship raises questions about the stability of men’s situations and identities over time, their individual experiences of social change during Đổi mới, and how to represent and understand those experiences. At present, however, there are no book-length studies that explore in detail the strategies that young, urban, educated, heterosexual Vietnamese men have used to understand their self-image at a time when conditions for the maintenance of masculinist ideologies and identities have been changing.

My aim in this thesis is thus to explore the ways in which young urban Vietnamese men describe and understand their experiences, expectations and memories about ‘being men’ in relation to recent cultural, economic and social change. I attempt this by examining the life narratives of seventeen educated and/or professional, heterosexual, urban men aged eighteen to thirty, collected over thirteen months of fieldwork (July 2005 to November 2006) in Hanoi, Vietnam’s capital and second largest city. I focus on these men because they were born in the years immediately before and after the Sixth (Vietnam Communist) Party Congress in December 1986. The Congress is popularly understood to have ushered in a period of economic liberalisation in Vietnam known as Đổi mới, which translates literally into English as ‘changing for the new’ but is more generally translated as ‘renovation’ or ‘renewal’. The policies announced at this Congress are often considered to be historically important in Vietnam for signalling the formal commencement of widespread transition from a centrally planned, subsidised economy to a multisector commodity-based economy. Some of the key aims of the Đổi mới reforms were to

2. There is significant scholarly debate about the timing of Đổi mới. Arguments exist that it began at the highest levels of politics at the Sixth Party Congress in 1986 (Ha Dang 2007); that it emerged during the sixth plenum of the Fourth Party Central Committee in 1979 only in response to province-level experiments in trading based on market prices (not on state-fixed prices) (Fforde 2002); and that it spontaneously emerged at the grass-roots level through household-based contract mechanisms in agriculture initiated in Vinh Phuc during the war (Thanh Long and Que Duong n.d.). Unlike those studies, in this thesis I am not interested in trying to figure out what is and is not ‘new’ in Đổi mới in the fields of development, economics or politics. I am, instead, interested in the ways that Đổi mới is remembered by the young men who grew up during the period.
dismantle the command economy, decollectivise agriculture, prioritise export-led growth and allow foreign investment, reduce the role of the state enterprises and expand the private sector, and shift production from heavy to light industry (Werner 2002, 30; Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001). This marked a significant move away from the state’s central role in the management of service, labour and food distribution characteristic of the preceding Bao cấp years (1975–86).

While a number of the men I discuss in this thesis were too young to remember the early years of Đổi mới, and indeed two had not even been born by the time of the Sixth Party Congress, all of my informants’ lives were profoundly shaped by its effects. After an immediate post-war period of deep economic stagnation, spiralling inflation, food shortages that in the early 1980s almost resulted in famine, and income per capita that in the early 1990s was among the lowest in the world, Vietnam has entered the ranks of middle-income countries (Fforde 2012).

The economic reforms associated with Đổi mới have been accompanied by one of the fastest reductions in poverty ever documented for a country (Rama 2008, 9; AusAID 2010): from 58 per cent in 1993 to 14 per cent in 2010 (GSO 2010). Some of the most notable changes in the Vietnamese economy during Đổi mới have been increased international market integration, market liberalisation and job creation in the private sector (AusAID 2010; Knodel et al. 2005), and increasingly competitive and professionalised workforces (Turner and Nguyen 2005; King et al. 2007).

My informants thus came of age in a dramatically more peaceful, politically stable and economically prosperous period in Vietnam than did any of the preceding generations of the twentieth century. But understanding transition in Vietnam in terms of macro-, systemic and economic processes is to ignore the meanings and experiences of Đổi mới at the micro, personal level. Along with the process of economic reform, the Vietnamese government’s mở cửa (‘open door’) policy through the late 1980s and 1990s resulted in an extensive opening to the outside world, especially to the non-communist bloc, exposing Vietnamese society to the forces of economic and cultural globalisation (Ha Dang 2007; Knodel et al. 2005). Some of the most notable changes in Vietnamese social life during this time included shifting family practices and pressures (Santillan et al. 2004; Nguyen Huu Minh 2006), the easing of political controls on citizens (Nguyen Phoung An 2007, 287; Le Long 2009, 43), new cultural and material influences (King et al. 2007), and changing attitudes and practices among young urban women (Nguyen Bich

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3. From 1990 to 1997 the Vietnamese economy averaged around 8 per cent annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth, and 6.5 per cent growth from 1998 to 2003. From 2004 to 2007, GDP again grew over 8 per cent annually (CIA 2010).
Tuan and Thomas 2004; Gammeltoft 2002). This study focuses ethnographic attention on the ways in which a small group of young, urban, heterosexual, professional men made sense of their experiences growing up ‘as men’ in relation to these and other changes in their personal, familial, social and professional lives. In so doing, it offers a phenomenological view of the processes and ‘logic’ of masculine practices through which my informants and their social worlds were intersubjectively constituted during Đổi mới, demonstrating their meaningfulness and relevance to specific men within specific social settings (Desjarlais and Throop 2011; Gammeltoft 2002; Merleau-Ponty 1995). The research is intended to augment the rich body of feminist work on Vietnam (Eisen-Bergman 1974; Werner 1981; Quinn-Judge 1983; Pelzer-White 1987, 1989, 1990; Kruks and Young 1990; Werner and Bélanger 2002) by identifying young urban Vietnamese men’s social imaginings of masculinity—what individual men consider to be important in defining what it means to be a man amid change in ‘male-friendly’ social policy and familial traditions.

My thesis focuses on several key issues: my informants’ descriptions of their personal well-being and affective ties; their memories and descriptions of growing up during Đổi mới; sibling relationships and friendships; adolescence; university education and the job market; romantic relationships; and sex and sexuality. My secondary focus is on the ways in which my informants negotiated gendered social pressures and ideas of masculine power. These two areas of focus have been motivated by three related contentions drawn from the wider literature on Vietnam, that:

1. people’s experiences of recent social change are gendered,
2. young people’s experiences of social change are distinct, and
3. Vietnamese men are reluctant, or find it difficult, to ‘modernise’ their relations with women.

I explore these three assumptions at length in the literature review in chapter 3. In doing so I will justify the focus of this thesis and provide the context for developing my guiding question, which is:

In what ways have urban Vietnamese men’s perceptions of gender while growing up during Đổi mới intersected with their experiences, memories and understandings of processes of cultural, economic and social change?
Thesis problem

I placed Thanh’s story in the prologue because it highlights a theme which lies at the heart of the study and is of increasing importance in the study of masculinities in Asia. In Thanh’s reflection on his life he spoke approvingly about men’s primacy within the social relations and institutions that he believed were characteristic of Vietnamese tradition. But he also indicated that his own relationships— with his family, peer groups, women and the labour market—were best worked out through day-to-day, week-to-week negotiations rather than by ‘tradition’ or lineage. While Thanh considered that a Confucian family structure was fundamental to the ‘culture’ of Vietnam, he also suggested that growing up amid new choices in education, physical appearance and personal expression had afforded him attitudes and practices superior to the limited and limiting traditions embodied by his father. Thanh said that he lamented his father’s loss of masculine prestige in his household, but suggested pragmatically that to secure his own economic future he would try to follow the example of his mother.

Thanh’s ambivalence about the recent changes in his family and society appears noteworthy in relation to some of the ways in which scholars commonly write about the lives of individuals undergoing dramatic social and economic transition. Some of the theoretical frameworks used for understanding processes of modernisation, globalisation, industrialisation and socioeconomic ‘development’ depict such processes as dismantling social orders and ‘traditions’ that provide relatively fixed values and identities (Giddens 1991, 1992; Chong 2005; Eisenstadt 1964, 1966, 1970; George 2004; King 2008; Ong 2006; Yao 2001). Rapid socioeconomic and technological changes have often been thought to accompany changes in people’s ways of being and understanding away from personal status determined by kinship or other ascribed corporate membership to more contractual, reflexive and individualised practices (Hilsdon 2007, 130; O’Connor 2006; Weedon 1987; Littlewood 1995; Hall and Jarvie 1992; Morris 1991; Turner 1992). ‘Post-traditional’ individuals have thus been said to face urgent questions about ‘the self’ (Giddens 1991, 70; Featherstone 1992), ‘discontinuities’ in their everyday life experiences (Beck 1992, 12; Lash and Wynne 1992, 2) and ‘fractures’ in their personalities (Lee 2001, 95–116; Kiasian 2001, 153–65). Such tensions are believed to also give rise to particular types of psychological stress among young people undergoing ‘transition’ (Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Liechty 1995; Bauman 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002): these include ‘identity crises’ in trying to resolve psychic conflicts within their adult roles (Erikson 1968) and between ‘tradition and innovation’ (Bucholtz 2002, 529).
There are, of course, a number of problems in suggesting that such general ideas about (the loss of) stability and structure during periods of socioeconomic transition are relevant to Thanh’s memories of growing up during Đổi mới. This is not least because scholars using modernisation frameworks have rarely agreed on definitions (King 2008; Ong and Zhang 2008; Wittrock 2000; Jamieson 1999; Chen 1980; Evers 1973; Eisenstadt 1964, 1973). Other concepts have also long jostled with modernisation, globalisation and development for priority in explaining processes of socioeconomic and cultural change in Southeast Asia—westernisation, urbanisation, economic growth, progress (see, for example, Jacobs 1971; Alatas 1972; Cohen 1991). Additionally, the condition of being ‘modern’ (broadly denoting a phase in societal development as well as the expression of a critical and self reflexive attitude toward social, political, and economic modernisation) has been criticised for being Eurocentric, ethnocentric, neo-evolutionary and structural-functional (Hewison 1989, 9; Dussel 2000, 2002; Bhabha 1994), and for systematically excluding females (Marshall 1994; Felski 1995; Stivens 1994, 1998a, 2010). There have also been attempts to conceptualise alternative or multiple modernities (Appadurai 1996; Chakrabarty 2000). Other scholars have argued, however, that any ‘modernity’ is always embedded in particular social and cultural forms (in the first place) (Sakai 1997), and that different actors inevitably localise, interrogate and contest modernisation in different ways anyway (Kahn 2001; Englund and Leach 2000; Stivens 2005, 2010).

But such criticisms and modifications appear to have had limited effect on some assumptions about the meaning and affect of social change in three areas of scholarship that matter for understanding Thanh’s narrative and the study of the lives of young Vietnamese men in

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5. Kahn (2001) argues that ethnographies of alternative modernities (with hybrid, multiple, local, etc. as other qualifiers) tend to still posit dynamic encounter between dominant (usually Western) and non-dominant (for example, local, non-Western, regional) practices, knowledges or rationalities, and end up reflecting the ethnographer’s own assumptions (e.g., Gupta 1998; Arce and Long 2000). Englund and Leach (2000) make a related argument in their critique of the ethnographic accounts of multiple modernities; they argue that these works reintroduce a (intra-European) metanarrative of modernity in the analysis. For other recent discussions of the status of ‘modernity’ in the scholarship of globalisation, see Escobar (2003) and Yehia (2006).
First, despite the ‘vagueness and elasticity’ of the term (King 2008, 37), ideas consistent with the ‘trajectory’ of modernity (Wee 1996) are considered to hold explanatory power in a range of contemporary Southeast and East Asian studies (Oosterhoff et al. 2011; Jackson and Parker 2008; Tanabe and Keys 2002; Taylor 2004b, 16; Barbieri and Bélanger 2009; Teerawichitchai 2009). There has certainly been significant attention paid to the struggles and anxieties thought to characterise rapidly changing social conditions in twentieth century Vietnam. For example, Bradley (2004) described the emergence in twentieth-century Vietnam of a ‘contemporary search, with (its) generational tensions and increasingly uneasy relationship with the local presences of the global economy’ (2004, 78). This ‘search’ is said to be characterised by tensions between the ‘transformative re-articulations of individual agency and the proper relations between self and society’ (2004, 65). Jamieson (1995, 18) similarly described ‘a grating disjuncture’ between normally defined ideological ideals and the sociological reality of men’s and women’s lives in Vietnam.

Similar ideas can also be seen clearly in the scholarship on emerging middle classes in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, where ‘common characteristics of modernisation’ (King et al. 2007, 1) are assumed to include increasing social stratification expressed in terms of changing consumption practices (Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas 2004; Rappa 2002, 2, 38, 196; Mulder 1998; 6.

In this thesis I use the word ‘affect’ both as a verb, to act on, and a noun, emotion. While my use of ‘affect’ as a verb and a noun is awkward at times, it is also grammatically correct. To clarify, however, when I use affect as a verb, it is generally to refer to the ways in which an informant was ‘moved’ by affective discourses or affected by others—to be shaped by the contact with others. When I use affect as a noun, however, it is generally to refer to social passion, affect as pathos, sympathy and empathy. Both uses cannot be thought outside the complexities, reconfigurations and inter-articulations of power. Ambiguity about, and awkwardness around, the use of affect as a word and concept has been common in the increasing theoretical engagement with emotions and affectivity since the mid-1990s—what Patricia Clough (2007) identified as an “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences (see, for example, Negri 1999; Rosenwein 2002; Sedgwick 2003). According to Clough (2007), the semantic multiplicity of the notion of affects require us, as the term suggests, to enter the realm of causality, but they offer a complex view of causality because the affects belong simultaneously to both sides of the causal relationship. They illuminate, in other words, both our power to affect the world around us and our power to be affected by it, along with the relationship between these two powers. The multiplicity of meaning for affect is distinct to ‘effect’, however, which I use in the conventional sense of something that is produced by an agency or cause; result; consequence.

7. Scholars have recently used ideas about modernisation to explain changes in Southeast and East Asian economic organisation (Rigg 2002), political institutions (Yao 2001), social structures (Chang Kyung-Sup 2010), urban heritage (Logan et al. 2002), ‘values’ and attitudes (Clammer 1985, 1996; Rofel 2007), theory and policy (Chong 2005), and gendered economic practices in households (Bélanger and Pendakis 2009).
Young 1999), pursuit of new knowledge, skills, expertise and qualifications (Trinh Duy Luan 1993; Abdul Rahman Embong 2002, 13), and changing notions of political and human capital (Koh 2004; Kim 2004; Hewison 1996, 137–138; Bresnan 1997, 77). While embracing a range of different emphases and interests, the accounts listed here appear to retain some ideas about ‘modernity as an ethic of how one should live’ (Ong and Zhang 2008, 16), people as products rather than agents of social and economic dynamics (Robison 1998, 73), and socioeconomic change as a source of disturbance within processes of social and psychological differentiation rather than an integral process within such systems (cf. King 2008, 40; Wee 2002, cf. Dussel 2002). Öjendal (2005, 346), for example, argues that ongoing processes of modernisation and globalisation have produced for the people and states of Southeast Asia uncertainty, complexity, diversity, fragmentation, paradoxes and ambiguities. In Vietnam, Werner (2002:31) argues that Đổi mới provides ‘the basis for the reprise of modernization via marketization’. Bélanger et al. (2012) similarly argue that the transition to the market economy has led those in the middle class to experience ‘dislocation’ (10), to ‘struggle to maintain themselves in relation to other groups through historical periods’ (11) and to suffer ‘anxiety’ while ‘trying to embrace new lifestyles’ (12).

Second, similar ideas (and vocabularies) about modernisation and change as a disturbance of or threat to apparently stable social systems are commonly used to frame studies of men and masculinities (see, for example, Aboim 2010; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Petersen 2003; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Wetherell and Edly 1999). That is, scholarship dealing with men and masculinities often focuses on the ways in which specific psychic, physical and social practices and attitudes sustain or shift men’s sense of themselves during actual or imagined periods of change in (unequal) gender relations—what Connell (1995, 77) describes as ‘threats’ to the ‘legitimacy of patriarchy’ (see, for example, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Kann 1986; Craib 1987; 8.

The middle class is, of course, a ‘highly contested concept’ in studies of Southeast Asia (Abdul Rahman Embong 2002, 7; Kessler 2001, 31–45; Robison and Goodman 1996a, 1996b) and Vietnam (King et al. 2007; Gainsborough 2002, Koh 2001a). There is the problem of the internal diversity of the middle class (or classes) (Kahn 1991, 50–56; 1988b, 89; Rodan et al. 2001) and the distinction between the owners of capital (bourgeoisie) and the professional middle classes as possessors of managerial and technical skills (Robison and Goodman 1996b). Other scholars have argued that that the notion of ‘middle class’ is itself based on European or North American examples, and thus cannot shed any light on social transformations and class structures observed in societies with different legacies, such as colonialism and socialism (Geciene 2005). I discuss my own reasons for not emphasising this category of analysis in in this thesis in the chapter on methods.
Some popular analytical frameworks and accounts depicting masculinities as empirically plural indeed retain a singular assumption that most heterosexual men are likely to try to defend structures (of gender inequality) in the face of change in gender relations (see, for example, Buchbinder 1998; Bourdieu 2001; Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In some instances, phrases such as ‘masculinities in crisis’ have been used to describe individual men’s efforts to legitimise and reproduce their hegemony over women through participation in hierarchical power structures amongst different groups of men (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 848; Tosh 2004, 46; Dudnik et al. 2004), a process Aboim (2010, 4) calls the ‘plural dynamics of “complicit masculinities”’. At other times, terms such as ‘role conflict’ have been used to describe situations where men are frustrated with their inability to achieve ‘proper’ masculine identities due to changing family practices, difficult work conditions or other issues, and are thus ‘behaving badly’ (Ouzgane 2006; Garrap, 1999)—what Jolly (2000, 312) describes as ‘embattled masculinity confronting modernity’. Such narratives appear to rest on presumptions that men in general experience anxiety trying to emulate particular styles of being a man or, typically, seeking to maintain their privileges over women.

This is not to suggest, however, that scholars of masculinities have maintained any notion of (the ideological singularity of) a universalistic ‘male way of being’. For more than thirty years

9. Critics of the concept of ‘patriarchy’ have focused on historical and cross-cultural variation in gender inequality and argued that broad explanations of universal features of patriarchy ignore differences between men, and between women, especially in relation to ethnicity and class (Barrett 1980; Hooks 1984; Sargent 1981; Segal 1987). Walby (1989, 230), however, argues that a flexible concept of patriarchy can still be analytically useful for dealing with the continuities as well as historical and cross-cultural forms of gender inequality. Accordingly, she theorises patriarchy at three main levels of abstraction: the ‘system’ of patriarchy, the patriarchal structures (namely: patriarchal modes of production in which women’s labour is expropriated by their husbands; patriarchal relations within waged labour; the patriarchal state; male violence; patriarchal relations in sexuality; and patriarchal culture), and patriarchal practises. In this thesis I adopt Walby’s (1989) working definition of patriarchy as a system of social structures and practises in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women, and I focus on the discursive practises around ‘normative male heterosexuality’ that are considered by my informants to support and rebuild gender inequality anew for each successive generation (cf. Grosz 1990, 68).

10. Connell’s (1995, 2005) concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, with its accompanying concepts of subordinate, marginalised and complicit masculinities (Connell 1995) has been the central framework for much of the masculinities scholarship of the last two decades (Caputi 2004). Critics of Connell’s formulation have suggested, however, that her model of hegemonic masculinity relies on an ahistorical separation of the sexes, and that such an organisation has been under significant challenge, most notably from the feminist and gay/lesbian movements since the 1960s (Duane and Dowsett 2010).
masculinities researchers have argued for the highly contested nature of gender identities and the inter-relationships between men’s public roles and their private negotiations with women and other men (Goldberg 1976; Cardigan and Connell 1985; Connell 1995; Pleck 1981; Zemon Davis 1975). During this time, men’s studies (or ‘masculinities studies’), along with the second-wave feminist and queer critical assessments of masculinist cultures and practices, has destabilised dominant analytic constructions of men and manhood by revealing men and masculinities as historically and culturally variable (Duane and Dowsett 2010; Flood et al. 2007; Hearn and Collinson 1994; Hearn and Morgan 1990). These studies have explored the ways in which masculine privilege is constructed (Cardigan and Connell 1985; Herdt 1981) and the price men pay for that privilege (Dowd 2008); the ways in which dominant gender systems subordinate and differentiate among men (Connell 1995); and the ways in which contradictions emerge between men’s lives and hegemonic discourses of masculinity (Beasley 2008; Gaudio 2009; Howson 2005; Demetriou 2001; Donaldson 1993; Hearn 2004). Further, Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) have noted that more critically inclined gender scholars have urged a shift from the cataloguing of (multiple) masculinities to examine the ways in which particular masculine practices operate and are viewed as signifying manhood acts (see, for example, Kimmel et al. 2012).

My purpose in introducing some of the analytic frames and theories in critical studies of men and masculinities is to draw attention to the ways in which the privileges that are in many cultures associated with males and masculinities are commonly considered in scholarship to inculcate among men resistance to changing social contexts, where those privileges and traditions may no longer be secure. Such ideas about men have been discussed extensively with respect to increases in young men’s violence, substance abuse and suicidal acts (Baobaid 2006; Brown and Campbell 1992; Liechty 1995; O’Neil and Nadeau 1999). There are, for example, alarmingly high rates of suicide and suicide attempts by young men in some Pacific societies (Booth 1999; Hezel 1984; Hezel et al. 1985; Reser 1990; Robinson 1990) and Native American societies (Johnson and Tomren 1999; Novins et al. 1999), as well as in parts of Sri Lanka (Kearney and Miller 1985). These rates have been attributed to cultural changes that disrupt traditional social practices and socialisation processes around ‘being a man’ (Bucholtz 2002, 529–30). While

11. Recent attempts to describe and understand men’s contradictory experiences of power have been accompanied by the sense that being a ‘complicit’ man in relations of gender inequality is less than ideal though still advantageous in immediate, concrete ways (Connell 1995; Duane and Dowsett 2010). For example, Aboim (2010, 3) argues that ‘the costs of being on top’ are not so high that ‘most’ men will explicitly defy the dominant codes of masculinity.
adolescent suicides are often at least partly ascribed to cultural practices that may indirectly reinforce suicidal behavior, such as subordination of youth to elders and taboos against overt expressions of anger (Brown 1986; Minore et al. 1991), most studies emphasise the ways that men try to resist, or are destabilised by, cultural contact, conflict and changing gender relations.

Further, men have been considered much more likely to commit violence against women amid changing social and economic configurations (Messerschmidt 2004; Pease 2000), particularly when the situation of women is changing (Barnett et al. 1997, 197; Cox and Aitsi 1988, 34–5). Such violence is seen as more likely when men sense a loss or lessening of control over women (Josephides 1994, 194), or when women are perceived by men to have breached certain expectations of conduct (Rydstrøm 2003b; Heise and Garcia-Moreno 2002, 89–99). In Josephides (2001, 566–7) review of Dinnen and Ley’s (2000) Reflections on Violence in Melanesia, for example, rape is reported to be a form of sport for bored men amid disjunctures between ‘traditional culture, which informs acts of sexual violence and local response(s) to them, and western culture on which national legislation is based’. Jenkins (1995) argues that sexual violence against women serves as a reassertion of men’s core (identity) constructions of hegemonic, martial masculinities (cf. Josephides 2001; Langness 1974, 1981). Garup (1999, 10) sees the high levels of rape in some Pacific societies as a reaction to paranoia emerging from men’s fear of change and ‘modernity’.

In this literature, disenfranchisement amid changing cultural configurations—transformations in women’s practices, and cultural and socioeconomic change, among other things—appear to undermine men’s sense of themselves ‘as men’ and exacerbate both their emotional restrictiveness and their capacity for harm in their own lives and the lives of women (cf. Jansz 2000; Levant and Brooks 1997; Levant et al. 2009).

Third, ideas that rapid socioeconomic and technological changes disturb or disrupt powerful (masculinist) forces of cultural reproduction intersect in recent studies of Vietnamese youth with apparently foundational ways of thinking about the nature and practices of Vietnamese men and women. As a sizeable proportion of the population and also the group considered most susceptible to socioeconomic changes, young Vietnamese have attracted a great deal of

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12. There remains no consistent theoretical basis in wider youth studies to categorise ‘youth’ based on age or cultural position (Wyn and White 1997). In this thesis, however, I consider it practical to accept Phuong an Nguyen’s (2005) argument that in both daily life and in sociological research within Vietnam, thanh niên (usually translated as ‘youth’) has often been perceived as comprising people of fifteen to thirty years of age (cf. Nguyen Van Trung 1996, 8; Thai Duy Tuyen 1995).
scholarly attention in relation to their ‘changing and new rites of passage in this modern, urban world’ (Drummond 2004, 173; Nguyen Phuong An 2007), their reckless or selfish living (ăn chơi) (Marr and Rosen 1999, 200), their use of new technologies (MoH 2005) and their willingness to seek out new experiences (Mensch et al. 2003; Earl 2004). But ideas about the disruptive effects of these ‘modern’ practices on young Vietnamese appear to be commonly understood in scholarship in relation to ideas that Vietnamese men and women are distinct groups that gain and lose in different ways through change in gendered social orders and ‘traditions’. For example, O’Harrow (1995, 175–6) describes in Vietnam the ‘layering of various cultural and ideological traditions upon one another to form a composite “society” which operationalises these traditions in disparate ways’. O’Harrow argues that this layering allows ‘women to find their own level of accommodation which is personally and socially satisfactory’ (1995, 176). But, for men, contradictions ‘between what they believe their relationships to the women in their families ought to be and what those relationships really are, between what the rightful place of the male should be in their eyes and what it is’ (1995, 161) are ‘one of the most persistent areas of discontent’ (1995, 176).

For young urban women, the movement away from personal status determined by kinship to more contractual and individualised practices during Đổi mới has allegedly enabled them to make additional decisions about how they wish to behave in relation to cultural expectations (Leshkowich 2000; Constable 1997; Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas 2004; Gammeltoft 2003; Ungar 2000; Earl 2004; Nghiem 2004). Vietnamese men, on the other hand, have been considered eager to defend, legitimise and reproduce ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ advantages (over women), or endure less suffering in life because of inherited ‘masculinist’ advantages (Gammeltoft 2002b, 2003; Nguyen Phuong An 2007; Phinney 2008; Glewwe and Jacoby 1998). They are also sometimes presumed to strive to retain ‘traditional’ gender certainties while keeping up with change (Le Thi Nam Tuyet 1996, 1999; Nguyen Phuong An 2005).

13. More than 65 per cent of the Vietnam’s 86 million citizens are under thirty years of age (Le 2009, 43). This means that about 56 million Vietnamese—about 22 million under the age of fourteen, and 34 million from fifteen to thirty years old—came of age well after the Vietnam War ended in 1975. According to Phuong An Nguyen’s (2005) definition, then, the ‘youth’ currently constitute about 40 per cent of Vietnam’s population.

14. This scholarship follows a long history of research in Vietnam documenting manifold ways in which women adapt and resist social and bodily expectations of male-oriented policy or belief systems in their daily lives (Pham Van Bich 1997; Lowe 1996; Werner 1981; Eisen-Bergman 1974; Cong Huyen 1973; Coughlin 1950).
this literature, young Vietnamese men are depicted as somehow inside the structures and mechanisms recreating male-friendly social systems which are, in turn, said to be in men’s interests to defend against change.

These depictions of Vietnamese men struggling with or resisting change in gender relations are radically inconsistent with some recent trends in scholarship on heterosexual men or masculinity in Southeast Asia (Ford and Lyons 2012), East Asia (Taga 2012), China (Zhong 2000; Louie 2012; 2003), China and Japan (Louie and Low 2002), Japan (Hidaka 2010; Robertson and Suzuki 2003; Taga 2001) South Korea (Sun Jung 2010), Malaysia (Mellstrom 2003), Indonesia (Clark 2010) and India (Chopra, Osella and Osella, 2004). These works posit men and masculinities as significant dimensions of the ‘concrete practices’ (Arnason 1997) and ‘gendered processes’ (Ford and Lyons 2012; Stivens 1998a) of modernising and modern social orders in Asia, rather than subjects to whom ‘modernisation happens’. For example, Louie (2003, 12) argues that Japanese and urban Chinese women’s increasing levels of economic independence and education have been accompanied by young men demonstrating more varied and ‘democratic’ behaviours around work, study and intimacy, and that young men increasingly are diverging away from the hegemonic canons of the ‘male proper’. In China, Yan (2003, 218) argues that the waning of the patriarchal order through the near universality of primary education, electronic media, and dominance of the non-agricultural job market, among other social transformations over the last thirty years, has ‘opened up for both men and women new horizons for the individual-centered development of romantic love, intimacy, conjugality, and the pursuit of personal space and privacy’. Taga (2003, 137, 150) argues that young Japanese men are specifically redefining their self-image against the hegemonic ‘salaryman’ model of masculinity and developing ‘anti-sexist’ views to fit the rapid changes in Japanese society. Iida (2005, 66) states that assertions of new identities by young Japanese men ‘constitute destabilizing forces to the hegemonic/patriarchal order as they aim to cross-cut conventional notions of polarised genders’.¹⁶

¹⁵. There is also a growing literature on male homosexuality in Southeast Asia. See, for example, Boellstorff’s work (2005) on gay men in Indonesia, Jackson’s (2006) work on Thailand and edited collections by Jackson and Sullivan (1991; 2001).

¹⁶. Shifts in young men’s attitudes and behaviours are, however, far from consistent across Asia, and certainly do not appear to be uniformly ‘democratic’. In South Asia, Osella and Osella (2006, 3) discern among men there a ‘more structured and rigidly policed self living within the confines of a family structured by a neo-traditional hegemony’ (cf. Vijayan 2004). In the Chinese community in Penang, Malaysia, Mellstrom (2003) has argued that the legitimacy of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity have been sustained during recent periods of social transition by men drawing heavily upon
The broader ideas about the disruptive affects on men of ‘modernisation’ and social change, and the effects of such modernism, are also inconsistent with the example of Thanh, whom I discussed in the prologue, and the empirical evidence that I collected in Hanoi during my preliminary fieldwork (July to August 2005). Many of the men to whom I first explained my PhD research questions pointed to the lack of continuity between men’s ‘traditional roles’ of their father’s generation and the gender practices of their own generation. They also appeared, however, to consider such change in men’s practices in terms of broader patterns of cultural continuity. Accordingly, my informants acknowledged the social and cultural change as dramatic but did not consider it to be disruptive of what it meant to be a man.

One informant, Diem (a twenty-seven-year-old salesman), encapsulated the theme when he said,

My father complains that I don’t know how to organise my family according to Vietnamese tradition, because my wife is always working [at a foreign accounting firm] and makes more money than I do. I say that I agree with him, but then laugh about it with my wife; my father’s dream is a Confucian family, but mine is having a wife that earns 10 million VND a month … I think that all men will organise their families, but this doesn’t mean that [the families] will look the same.

As I will show, in the countless subsequent discussions that I had with young men during 2006 that inform this thesis, my informants seemed to consider themselves as active agents in shaping and resisting the processes of radical change that framed their lives. They also often saw their fathers as immune to some of the recent processes of change by virtue of their age, generation and experience. As with Thanh, many of my informants had memories of households, labour relations, finance and paternal authority as contested fields for the ongoing negotiation of gender relations and identities or as domains of harmonious cooperation between genders, or even of female dominance. These memories of changing conditions for the negotiation of gender relations typically did not appear to provoke among the young men with whom I spoke the crisis qualities connected to machinery and technology. Mellstrom (2003, 166) argues that the embodiment of tools, machines and technology is an emerging strategy among working class men designed to constitute ‘patriarchal privileges and masculine homo-social bonds’. Providing stark contrast to the ways young Japanese men resist hegemonic discourses of masculinity and the dehumanizing scripts that accompany ‘the salaryman’ in Taga’s (2003) study, a man of ‘good standing’ in Mellstrom’s (2003, 166) study might consider himself ‘hard as steel, enduring as a machine, and fast as a racing car’.
tendencies sometimes thought to accompany modernising social orders (Giddens 1990, 1992) or the interest in quarantining the impacts of women’s changing status elsewhere associated with young men undergoing change (Connell 1995). Instead, my informants’ ambivalence suggested to me the possibility that they might have neither a strong interest in ‘traditions’ involving the (patriarchal) domination of women, nor retain many of the gender sureties of those ‘traditional’ masculine practices and identities.

As the following empirical chapters demonstrate, my informants appeared to perceive disjunctures in their lives as elements of a kind of permanent and ordinary existential condition. Scholars have previously emphasised in their historical scholarship the role among Vietnamese of thought and critical self-reflection in the formation and pursuit of an autonomous life while absorbing or accommodating significant social and economic change. Woodside (2006, 3) developed the term ‘normative ambivalence’ to describe the ways that the Vietnamese negotiated the different values and institutions that characterised daily life from as early as early as the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE)—during which parts of modern Vietnam were under Chinese rule.

[On the one hand,] there was the stress upon administrative utility, and trust in invisible, nonfamilial authority [such as that of examiners]. On the other hand, there was the faith in Confucian virtue, not utility, and the ethical supremacy not of invisible authority but of kinship hierarchies, or simulations of kinship relations. Multiple value systems, varying from individual to individual in degrees of acceptance, must have created a certain amount of normative ambivalence. (Woodside 2008, 3)

Woodside (2006, 9) argues that multiple traditions of discursive rationality have indeed characterised Vietnam’s history, and there has long existed a competitive coexistence of different values and institutions. More recently, Marr (2003, 796) suggests that in the 1990s social trends in Vietnam were increasingly about ‘diversity and freedom of choice … young men and women departed the village, loosened family ties, chose their own occupations, and joined voluntary associations to a degree that would have been ‘unthinkable only ten years prior’. But residual ideas around the power of formal education to enhance personal prospects, as well as ‘the belief that weaknesses can be minimised and strengths enhanced through processes of ‘rethinking and reorganizing oneself internally’ remained ‘deeply engrained’ in people (Marr 2003, 796; cf. Mendus 2000). Marr (2003) surmises that while the idea of self-cultivation (tu thân) is
very much alive in contemporary Vietnam, it is also very old, though the techniques have not remained static.

The processes of ‘normative ambivalence’ that Marr (2000, 2003), Woodside (2006) and Zinoman (2002) have identified in the history and literature of Vietnam have not previously emerged in anthropological studies of men and masculinity, however. One key contribution from this thesis to the wider literature on young men and change, then, is that what appears new or ‘modern’ in my informants’ behaviours or attitudes ought not to be assumed to mimic either the modernisation processes or masculinity crises previously thought to characterise men living through transition. I conclude, instead, that informants managed the obvious conflict about ideas and contradictory practices of masculinity during Đổi mới through a deep, mediating, and previously unrecognised ambivalence about ‘being a man’ in Vietnam.

In the context of global masculinities research, the notion seems mundane that Thanh—or any of my informants—might neither simply adopt the masculine style of his father nor perform hegemonic or ‘cultural’ ideals of male identity (Aboim 2010; Louie and Low 2002; Chopra, Osella and Osella 2004). The possibility that my informants’ identities ‘as men’ are fluid, inventive and transformational might also seem banal to some sociologists and anthropologists of Southeast Asia—those who have directed attention away from ‘the political economy of change’ and emphasised the ways in which people’s identities are ‘disembedded’, ‘re-embedded’ and ‘relocalised’ in the formation of changing local ‘cultural identities’ in Southeast Asia (Kahn 1998a, 2, 15; 2001; Yao 2001, 15; Hitchcock et al. 2008; Pels and Salemink 1999)—and also to researchers of ‘ordinary’ women’s microprocesses of cultural production and change (Marecek 2004; Freeman 2000; Gamburd 2000; Lamphere et al. 1997). And, subjective changes in the assumptions of a small group of young men about what it means to be and behave as a man are, of course, not synonymous with empirically quantifiable changes in social practice.

But such changes nonetheless pose questions about whether, and in what ways, the (possibility of) transformation of gender structures and forms of masculine power during Đổi mới changed for young Vietnamese men the appeal and legitimacy of an existing gender order where men dominate women. They also raise related questions about the meanings and power attributed to men and masculinity in gender scholarship, the usefulness of assumptions about stability and structure amid processes of ‘modernisation’ and markers of new cultural practices and ideologies, and the significance of the rise in Vietnam of the private family and the changing practices of women within and beyond the family. I try to deal with these and other issues that emerge from
my guiding question in the ensuing empirical chapters using a social constructionist perspective. Instead of focusing on an individual idea or theory of ‘the subject’ or gendered subjectivity, I argue that there is value in looking at my informants’ decisions and behaviours in their relationships with others, and what certain individuals imagined, claimed, practiced or felt (or, more accurately, on my interpretation of such thought and action) under specific circumstances. In the next section, I argue that such an approach is both reasonable and innovative given the practical complexities in applying some of the key concepts and terms popular in the literature on gender, modernisation, the emerging middle classes in Southeast Asia, kinship and family studies to the rich and contradictory life experiences of my informants.

Framing the discussion: addressing ideas about gender, class and kinship

In this thesis I argue that it is impossible to fully understand young Vietnamese men during Đổi mới without looking into their intersection with changes in the society, family and women. I also argue, however, that some of the common analytic frames concerning gendered subjectivity, changing class conditions and kinship and household dynamics include assumptions that were antithetical to the self-perceptions of the men whom I interviewed. In this section I briefly flag more substantive discussions elsewhere in the thesis in which I discuss the ways I try to navigate the gaps between some of those common analytic frames and my informants’ stories (and language).

In the Methods section, I acknowledge that the differences in the ways that gendered subjectivities, and thus gender relations, are theorised are important in understanding the social practices of men and women. But they also raise questions about the value of choosing one or another theory of subjectivity to form the basis of an analysis of empirically existing men. For example, one informant, Tùng (twenty-eight years old), told me that his hard work in ‘international finance’ had enabled him to buy a car six months earlier and, in turn, ‘get’ a ‘very beautiful’ girlfriend. In our conversations Tùng often appeared to take great pleasure contrasting what he viewed as his own life-enhancing practices—his studies toward an MBA, schemes for making money, fashion sense and gym-toned body—with the sacrifices and obligations he described as having dominated his parents’ lives. But despite his stated autonomy, and although he was very much in love, Tùng said that he would break up soon with his girlfriend because he expected that his parents would disapprove of her ‘very superficial’ (nông can) and ‘modern’ (hiện đại) characteristics. He explained:
The successful man still must have a happy family, right? He can earn money and have a stable job, and improve his position with the company, and improve his capacity, but in doing all this he will suffer from many pressures. The family provides support. My father told me that by creating a stable family, [Vietnamese] women help their husbands to earn money. I know that a stable family will be impossible if there is any conflict between my mother and my future wife.

More than a year after this conversation, Tung was still with his girlfriend. In the meantime he had taken great precautions to ensure that his parents and sister remained unaware of the relationship, and put his own marriage plans on hold. He stated, sardonically, ‘this way no one suffers’. Tung’s discussion of his romantic and professional situations could be read in a number of ways. The apparent influence on his narrative of the dominant (market-oriented) politics and ideas of the time (and Tung’s questioning of their parameters) suggest that he is perhaps constituted by and constitutive of the Foucauldian (1984) notion of discourse. At the same time, the importance he placed on reproducing ‘the family’ in apparently similar forms across generations appear to echo Bourdieu’s (1984, 1989, 2002) arguments concerning the embedded resistance to change of the gender system (cf. George 1996; Pemberton 1994; Steedly 1993). Tung’s narrative also suggested that his (gym-toned, carefully presented) body was itself an important locus of his ‘being a man’, which seems explicable through Butler’s (2004) idea that the performative possibilities of the body underpin the changing nature of gender.

Like Tung, each of my informants might be understandable through a variety of modes of analysis and theories of gendered subjectivity. But to me such an approach seems arbitrary and potentially coercive; after all, as Evans (2008, 23) argues, Bourdieu’s (2002) emphasis on the deep assumptions and gendered dispositions that resist change across generations is grounded in a very different notion of the subject than Foucault’s (1974) conception of the subject as a productive and singular agent of change, or Butler’s (1990) conception of the body as the locus of performative possibilities for gender. Put otherwise, qualitative attention to the breadth and depth of my informants’ narratives indicated that some common ideas about gendered subjectivity may be too particular or confused to be analytically useful for the thesis.

Similar problems arose when I tried to conceptualise my (educated, professional) informants’ experiences in terms of emerging ideas and analytic frames about ‘middle-classness’ in Asia (Stivens 1998a, 15–17; 1998b, 94–95). Changing class conditions are commonly thought in
scholarship to be important for understanding contemporary gender relations and experiences (Zhang 2010; Ganguly-Scrase 2003). As I discuss in the literature review, however, recent scholarly attention to intersections of youth, class and gender in Southeast Asia have recognised the problems of defining and delimiting the ‘middle orders of society’ (King 2008a, 77; Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012) and pointed out inconsistent and sometimes contradictory arguments about the ways in which ‘middle-classness’, or the ‘new rich’, or ‘urban professionalism’, is constituted (Stivens 1998a, 15–17; 1998b, 94–95; Young 1999, King 2008, 95-106; Taylor 2004b). According to the broad definitions offered in this scholarship, each of my informants could be described as ‘middle class’ because of their interest in ‘consumption, leisure activities, and the maintenance and achievement of social status’ (King 2008, 98–9), and their experiences analysed in this thesis in relation to (expectations about) changing or emerging concepts of market capacity, prestige and status gradations. Like my argument about some common theories of gendered subjectivity, however, I contend that framing my informants in the ideas about middle-classness may obfuscate the ways in which they understood their lives through processes and language unconnected or ambivalent to such categories and definitions. For example, as I will show in the ensuing empirical chapters, Binh had a tertiary degree in chemical engineering but considered that he had no employable skills. He also could not find a job and had little confidence that he could develop in personal or career terms. Duc had a reasonably high income and a stable job, but believed that his lack of appropriate qualifications meant that he could not keep up with the consumption practices and leisure activities of his friends, and he appeared to have no real interest in them anyway. Huy possessed knowledge, skills, experience and social connections, but turned down a lucrative job opportunity and remained ‘poor’ because it was offered to him by a former female student. Such anecdotes may reveal something about young urban men’s class experiences and changing ideas about symbolic capital in contemporary urban Vietnam. But it is worth remembering that they were discussed by my informants—and so appeared to be most meaningful—almost exclusively in terms of intersecting processes of and changing pressures on ‘being a man’ during Đổi mới. Informants emphasised, in particular, the changing family dynamics, ideas about male privilege, sex, sexuality and bodies, and changing strategies of self-hood.

In chapter 3, I suggest that we also may have to remain agnostic over the relevance and utility of categories of kinship in this thesis. I foreground the argument in this section by briefly pointing to the ways some technical distinctions in kinship studies may lessen our alertness and sensitivity to the myriad forms which social organisation and hierarchy may take and result in
extracting men and women as social categories from the contexts in which they are embedded. In particular, I argue that some of the conventional kinship terms and ideas, such as the foundational separation of ‘family’ and ‘household’, are made problematical by the ways in which they are conflated in my informants’ narratives. At least since Rapp (1982), there has been a significant analytic division drawn between the family as an ideological construct—an idea—and the household as a concrete social group (cf. Carsten 1995; Hardy 2001; Hy Van Luong 2003a; Stone 2006). In the empirical chapters that follow, however, I point to the ways in which categories of the household and family overlap and elide in my informants’ narratives. Such elision is particularly evident in instances when informants cited ideas about patrilineal kinship practices to make claims about the ways that patriarchy functions in their households. As I show, family functions often appeared ‘given’, and male and female roles predetermined and asymmetrical. This rhetorical inelasticity about the roles available to both women and men within families contrasted sharply, however, with informants’ descriptions of actual day-to-day gender practices and relations in their households. Informants typically recognised these contradictions between the ideas of what a family should be and the ways the members of their household actually interacted. Informants nonetheless described, and appeared to understand, the practices of the members of their households as (already) subject to the familial structures and logics they contradicted.17

I argue in chapter 4 that informants’ rhetorical vagueness and slippage about practices within the household and ideas about the family alerts us to the intersections and interdependence of these categories, at least in informants’ understandings. It is also worth pointing out that there is no great semantic distinction in Vietnamese between categories of ‘household’ and ‘family’. The etymology of both nhà (house, home, abode, domicile) and gia [đình] (family, household) reveals them as the same Chinese character, imported differently into Vietnamese and so pronounced differently (Fforde, pers. comm.).18 Table 1 outlines the ways in which particular

17. Elshtain (1982) argues this was long a problem in ‘family studies’ because the fundamental division between what Parsons called the instrumentive, adaptive male role and a nurturant, expressive female role was seen as necessary to the ends of system-adaptivity, goal gratification, integration and pattern maintenance, went, for a time without serious challenge (cf. Parsons 1953, 330–45).

18. Kinship terminology in addressing family varies within regions in Vietnam, however. Werner and Bélanger (2002) argue that while there is little agreement between theorists on how to frame the issue, preliminary findings from the works of Spencer (1945), Hickey (1964), Haines (1986), Jamieson (1986) and Hy Van Luong (1989)
Vietnamese terms have been translated in scholarship to describe overlapping aspects or organisation and administration related to families and households.

**Table 1. Translations and meanings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>Dictionary translation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples in scholarship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>gia đình</td>
<td>family/house/home</td>
<td>A social unit and solidarity system influenced by Confucian precepts (typically interlinking units of income and expenditure) and relations of production and reproduction (covering the needs of those who are not economically active, and often including small children, schoolchildren, students, nonworking adults and the elderly). (Werner 2003).</td>
<td>The image of the ‘happy small family’ (gia đình) defines the national subject under Đổi mới. It is remarkable to see the proliferation of family-planning billboards and public signs picturing a nuclear family—with Husband and Wife, Son and Daughter—all over Vietnam (Werner 2003, 40). The ‘traditional-Confucian’ Vietnamese family structure is characterised by a strictly defined hierarchy among family members (Oudin 2009, 366; cf. Haines 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nhà</td>
<td>house/household/home/family</td>
<td>A social unit living in a single house with significant budgetary sharing. A household includes anyone considered an integral part of the unit by other members and who normally contribute to the household budget (Hy Van Luong 2009, 397).</td>
<td>According to Confucianism, nhà (household/family), nước (country) and thiên hạ (world) do not differ in essence; they only differ in dimension. This is especially true for nhà and nước (Liljeström and Tuong Lai 1991, 5; cf. Nguyen Tu Chi 1991; Mai Huy Bich 1991; Tran Dinh Huou 1991).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bộ gia đình</td>
<td>organisation of the family/household</td>
<td>As above.</td>
<td>The Đổi mới state used the ‘economic unit’ of ‘the household’ to tie its members to the market, to reformulate new subjects of rule, and to restructure its role in the provision of social, medical, and educational services (Hy Van Luong 2003, 212; cf. Werner 2003, 25; Chu Van Lam 1991).</td>
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suggest that kinship in Vietnam may vary from region to region, and implies that the North has been more influenced than the South by the Chinese system of patrilineality. The overlap of Chinese terms in northern Vietnamese kinship systems is further explored by Rydström (2004). But other work suggests that we should be cautious about such findings. Krowolski (1993), for example, argues that the usage of kinship terms in the southern portion of Vietnam appears to be closer to Chinese kinship terminology, while Chinese-inspired legal codes also appear to have had more of an impact in the South and the central region over the past two to three centuries.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIETNAMESE</th>
<th>TRANSLATION</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>EXAMPLES IN SCHOLARSHIP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>kinh tế hộ gia đình</strong></td>
<td>'household sector', or 'family economy'</td>
<td>An officially recognised economic unit of production, with the authority to operate alone or in conjunction with the private sector (Werner 2002:31).</td>
<td>The emergence of the 'family economy', or 'household sector' (kinh tế hộ gia đình), as an officially recognised 'economic unit of production' with 'the authority to operate alone or in conjunction with the private sector' is generally considered a key outcome of the Sixth Party Congress in 1986 (Le Thi 1999, 151; cf. Werner 2004, 116).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>hộ khẩu</strong></td>
<td>household registration</td>
<td>Household registration system introduced in Vietnam by the socialist regime in 1954 following the hukou system in China.(^a)</td>
<td>Werner 2004, 116; Le Thang Sang 2004; Hardy 2001; Teerawichitchainan 2009, 336.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>chủ hộ</strong></td>
<td>household head, houseowner</td>
<td>Attributed to an adult whose duties include making major decisions, representing the family in the outside world and supporting other members morally and financially.</td>
<td>Ideally, household headship is a position reserved for the eldest man in the family (typically the husband or father) and is usually transferred from a man to his eldest son, who inherits the land after his father dies. In a very strict sense, the traditional model offers Vietnamese women very few opportunities to become household heads (Teerawichitchainan 2009, 333; cf. Tran Dinh Huou 1991).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>An chung</strong></td>
<td>(to) live in the same house / eat at the same table</td>
<td>Conceived as the basic unit of income and expenditure within families, in which most relations of solidarity and dependence operate, thus constituting the 'family nucleus'.</td>
<td>An chung is the basic economic unit: a unit of income and expenditure, a unit of commensality (Oudin 2009, 374; cf. Bélanger 1997).</td>
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\(^a\) A. Teerawichitchainan (2009, 337) explains that here are two types of hộ khẩu: family and collective (cf. Hardy 2001). A member of the family hộ khẩu is designated as the household head with the civil duty to represent the household in external relations, such as declaring the household members’ births and deaths to local authorities and attending commune meetings (Vu Manh Loi 1994). A family hộ khẩu is closely tied to residential location. Families in urban areas keep their own registration books (so hukou tich), while the registration books of rural families are maintained by village authorities. Examples of collective hộ khẩu include state factories and other enterprises, hospitals, military units, and forestry enterprises. Each of these collective hộ khẩu maintains a single registration book for its member workers. Vietnamese who work for these sectors commonly register in their collective hộ khẩu, instead of in their family hộ khẩu, where their parents, husbands, wives, or children reside.

\(^b\) B. Nonetheless, Teerawichitchainan (2009, 332) notes that a cross-national survey ranks Vietnam as potentially having a 'high-medium' level of female-headed households among seventy-three 'less developed' countries. Further, unlike most other societies where female heads are usually divorced, widowed, or deserted by their husbands, a substantial number of Vietnamese female heads are actually married and reportedly living in the same household as their spouse.
Vietnamese kinship systems also make distinctions between paternal and maternal lineages through the terms nội (inside) and ngoại (outside). As I discuss in the literature review, being ‘inside lineage’—with attendant ‘rights and obligations in matters such as worshipping ancestors, inheriting lineage property and contributing to building, maintaining the property of the patrilineage such as ancestral house and graves’ (Nguyen Tuan Anh 2010, 14)—has long been considered central to men’s ability to achieve and maintain social dominance over women (Spencer 1945; Hy Van Luong 1989; Barbieri and Bélanger 2009; Nguyen Tuan Anh 2010). Rydstrom argues that this is because the nội/ngoại distinction establishes a gender boundary in which

‘males are defined as ‘inside lineage’ (họ nội) and a son is recognised as guaranteeing the connection between the deceased and future members of his patrilineage. Females, on the other hand, are classified as ‘outside lineage’ (họ ngoại), and a daughter is not assumed to be able to connect the past with the future of her father’s patrilineage’. (Rydstrøm 2004, 75)

It is often not clear from such scholarship, however, whether family institutions and kinship networks are as central both to individuals’ understandings and experiences of day to day gender relations and the foundation for gender inequality in society as has been claimed (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009). Nor is it clear whether historical modification of mechanisms that link conjugal families (and individuals not living in families)’ (Farber 2000, 1501) have affected men’s and women’s use of the language and ideas about kinship.

The elision between informants’ ideas of the family, practices of kinship and descriptions of activities in their households remind us that activities of social agents cannot be easily subsumed under their supposed function in maintaining the continued existence of some unified and homogenous domain (such as ‘gender’, ‘class’, ‘family’ or ‘household’). As Felski (1989, 56) argues, such terms are analytical concepts applied to the analysis of the social world in order to elucidate aspects of its operation, not transcendental structures whose logic determines all aspects of human activity. As the following empirical chapters demonstrate, my informants almost always described their immediate and extended familial relations, as well as the context(s) in which related issues of authority, division of labour and economic and affective relations were negotiated, simply by using the Vietnamese term for family (gia đình), or occasionally the term for
house or home (*nhà*). Only once in my notes and transcripts did I record an informant using the more formal term *hộ gia đình* when discussing his household. Further, while my informants regularly brought up issues of seniority or authority between their parents, they never used the administrative term for ‘household head’ (*chủ hộ*). And, while some informants acknowledged the importance of sons in extending the family’s patriline, none of the informants suggested that they felt being ‘inside lineage’ to influence or shape their mundane day-to-day relations with other people, including their sisters.

In this section I have indicated some of the practical limitations for this thesis of common theoretical entities and analytic frames for understanding (local) matrices of gender practices, middle-classness in Southeast Asia, and ideas about kinship and household practices. A number of these theoretical entities and analytic frames have been successfully applied in other studies of gender and change in Asia (for example, Rofel 1999, 2007). I argue in the chapters that follow, however, that whatever else Đổi mới may have meant for the economic, political and cultural practices of the Vietnamese, its processes and other changes over the past twenty-five years have also been distilled through aspects of my informants’ sociability and language that are personal, emotional and changeable, and ambivalent to some of the analytic frames commonly used to analyse matrices of gender practices, discussions, exchanges and rituals.

The chapters

In this thesis I explore concepts of masculinities, masculine subjectivities and change in perceptions of masculinities through four key themes that emerged (and overlapped) in my informant’s stories about growing up during Đổi mới:

1. the changing family,
2. discourses of male privilege,
3. sex, sexuality and bodies, and
4. strategies of self-hood.

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19. This is understandable in relation to the Vietnamese language, which describes both ‘household’ and ‘family’ most commonly as either ‘nhà’ or (*hộ*) *gia đình*. While *nhà* is most commonly translated as house or household, and (*hộ*) *gia đình* as (the organisation of the) family, the etymology of both *nhà* and *gia đình* reveals them as the same Chinese character, imported differently into Vietnamese and so pronounced differently (Förde, personal correspondence 2007).
I emphasise these four themes because of their repeated and prominent appearance in my informants’ accounts. Some of these themes are also present in the cross-cultural and theoretical literature on changing gender identities and masculinities in East and Southeast Asia (Louie 2003; Vervoorn 2002). They additionally are discussed in some anthropological and historical work on women, kinship and family in Vietnamese culture and society (Korinek 2002, 98; Pham Van Bich 1999; Hirschman and Vu 1996; Werner 1981; Le Thi Nham-Tuyet 1973). But it has been the relative absence of discussion about these themes in relation to young urban Vietnamese men’s experiences that has motivated my own research.

This thesis itself is developed over seven chapters, followed by a conclusion and notes toward future research. The first three chapters introduce my thesis, discuss my methods and contextualise my research in relation to a few particular literatures. In the prologue I briefly discussed an informant’s reflections on the ‘Hanoi Life Under the Subsidy Economy 1975–1986’ exhibition at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. As will become apparent in the ensuing empirical chapters, Thanh’s reflections on the Bao cấp exhibition serve as an ‘ideal type’, an ethnographic vignette that exhibits to some degree each of the four dominant themes I discuss in the thesis.

In this introduction I have suggested that young urban Vietnamese men who grew up during Đổi mới came of age during rapidly changing social conditions that may have affected the appeal, context and meanings of ‘traditional’ masculinities and gender relations. In so doing I have indicated the focus of the thesis and outlined the central question that I hope to answer, which is ‘in what ways have urban Vietnamese men’s perceptions of gender while growing up during Đổi mới intersected with their experiences, memories and understandings of processes of cultural, economic and social change?’ As background I have emphasised that some modernisation frameworks make predictions about the emergence of personality fractures and individual/psychic anxiety in people undergoing social and economic transition. I have suggested that some scholarship on men and masculinities appears to contain similar themes, stressing that men are prone to experience crises of masculinity and role conflicts when they face changing sociocultural situations. Taken together, such scholarship suggests that many people are unable to deal very well with changing socioeconomic or cultural conditions, and that young men will resist or struggle most with the changes. Pointing to my literature review in chapter 3, I have also suggested that scholarship on young Vietnamese men and women during Đổi mới presents processes of modernisation as disrupting social systems in which men are presumed to see their interests and defend themselves qua men. I note, however, that practically all of the dramatic effects of change
described as existing in these frameworks failed to materialise either in my museum visit with Thanh or in my preliminary discussions with young Vietnamese men about their experiences of growing up during Đổi mới. Accordingly, I have argued that there is value in peering beneath some of the other common analytic frames and theoretical matrices thought to shape young Vietnamese lives, including gender, kin and family relations, and emerging class stratification.

In chapter 2 I propose that the task of adhering to academic convention while seeking to represent and interpret the voices of informants in a project such as this is ultimately a political undertaking. Accordingly, I reflect on the politics of conducting research on men, and the methods and insights developed within feminist scholarship that I consider are especially helpful to the task. I suggest that these methods for data collection and analysis are highly appropriate for understanding ongoing relations of gender and power in Vietnam, and that they will yield insights into the lives of Vietnamese men that I hope will complement the valuable feminist scholarship on Vietnamese women.

In chapter 3 I review literature dealing with Vietnamese gender relations from the (often overlapping) fields of anthropology, sociology, history, economics, development studies and gender studies. I argue that attempts in some of this research to connect Confucian, State, economic and family structures and discourses with attributes or behavioural propensities that Vietnamese men or women supposedly share often rely on unsupportable generalisations about men and women in general. Accordingly, I suggest that accounts of masculinity in Vietnam often leap too quickly from an account of the traits of institutional structures and collective ideologies to individual persons (and vice versa). I also argue that recent feminist scholarship on Vietnamese women helps in understanding ways in which ideas about men and masculinity might productively be reconsidered.

The headings that I give to the four empirical chapters are derived from the dominant themes that emerged in my informants’ narratives. Chapter 4, ‘The Family Man Unfamiliar’, reflects on the ways in which my informants’ memories of their homes were often at odds with dominant scholarly understandings of ‘the household’ within the early 1990s Đổi mới reforms in Vietnam (Hy Van Luong 2003a, 212; Werner 2003, 25; Chu Van Lam 1991; Kerkvliet 1990). I argue that informants’ experiences of growing up during dramatic social change appeared to indicate to them that ‘traditional’ Confucian ideas about masculinity were dominant for as long as people conformed to them, which at least during Đổi mới they often didn’t. These young men thus appeared ambivalent about the usefulness of discourses explicitly privileging men over women,
even though in their narratives they often adopted such essentialising formulations of Vietnamese masculinity.

Chapter 5, ‘The Impression of Power’, further explores the contrast between young men’s imaginings about the masculine advantages they inherited under Confucianism and their everyday relationships with young women. I argue that my informants appeared to believe that ‘Confucian’, ‘Oriental’ or ‘Eastern’ models underpinned their identities as men, which enabled a sense of general masculine assertiveness or entitlement in their relationships with women ‘in general’. But when they reflected on their often messy relationships with young women, my informants argued that the power and effect of Confucianism was always situated in (abstract) cultural ‘traditions’, and was not manifest in daily interactions. In this way informants were able to retain ideas about the power of the Confucian system in structuring gender relations in Vietnam in general, even as they recognised that they had very little relevance to their contemporary relationships with young women.

Chapter 6, ‘Heterosexuality and Change’, explores the ways in which informants imagined ‘traditional’ expectations about women’s bodies, desires and sexuality to guide their own sexual attitudes and practices, and how at the same time they behaved in ways that indicated the irrelevance of those ‘traditional’ expectations. I draw particular attention to young men’s narratives about the changes in the ways they negotiated sexual relations with women in relation to the unreliability of physical evidence for female virginity resulting from hymen-reconstruction surgery; the emergence of the internet and pornography in young men’s lives; and the young men’s own feelings of sexual naïveté. I argue that the contradictory manner in which these issues were discussed indicate strong ambivalence among informants about the importance of gendered morality in contemporary life. I also argue that this ambivalence challenges the notion that Vietnamese men typically expect women to embody compliance and adaptation to overarching masculinist social policy and beliefs.

Chapter 7, ‘Considering the “Self” in Society’, reflects on the ways in which my informants redefined the relationship between ‘self’ and ‘society’ by emphasizing their ambivalence about both their actual families and, more abstractly, ‘traditional’ social structures. The men I discuss in this chapter drew attention to their ability to make choices they considered to be unimaginable to the generations that grew up prior to Đổi mới, as well as to rural men of their own age. I argue, however, that their claims of autonomy must not be necessarily understood as statements about individualism. Instead, the narratives of these young Vietnamese men reveal that they were aware that ‘traditional’ relations and individualistic practices were meaningful in relation to the interpersonal contexts in which they lived. Ultimately, this chapter argues
that informants appeared to understand the dramatic changes in practice of selfhood inspired by Đổi mới as only the latest in a long history of change in the ways of constituting the ‘self’ in Vietnam, and more or less unremarkable for that reason.

In summary, chapters 4 and 5 argue that young men who grew up during Đổi mới recognised that (masculinist) social and historical traditions provided important guiding principles for their public statements of themselves. But at the same time they achieved limited purchase in their changing relationships with women and each other. Chapters 6 and 7 explore how this tension was worked out by young men in relation to the ways that they negotiated sexual relations and apparently ‘new’ and different opportunities for self-making that accompanied the emergence of the market economy in Vietnam.

In chapter 8, ‘Conclusions and Notes Forward’, I reflect on my aims for this thesis and consider the ways in which my empirical data might contribute to the literature on men and masculinities in Vietnam. In reflecting on what is new in my data, I emphasise the mediating role of the very many gaps in and contradictions between young men’s historically and culturally specific imaginaries and the memories they had of their families during the early years of Đổi mới, their encounters with women and other men at school and in the workforce, and their anxieties about young women’s sexual desires and proclivities. I suggest that in the context of scholarly ideas about youth and masculinity during processes of globalisation or social change, these contradictions and paradoxes might be expected to produce significant social anxiety. But to the young men with whom I spent time, all this was very ‘normal’. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for some existing scholarship on Vietnam dealing with historical epistemologies, discourses of modernisation and development, and the ‘meanings’ of gender relations.

**Summary**

In this section I summarise the purpose of this study and explain the structural and thematic choices I made in preparing the thesis. In particular, I restate the study objectives and research question guiding this thesis. I also discuss the presentation and organization of key analytic concepts and themes. I suggest that three central analytic themes emerge over the course of my thesis and that these themes are elaborated as stand-alone findings in the conclusion. I then explain my reasons for including brief theoretical discussions at the start of each empirical chapter and provide a summary of the rationale for focusing my research on men alone.
Study objectives and research question

In this introduction I have argued that it may not be analytically sensitive or ethnographically correct to treat young Vietnamese men as gendered subjects per se who are then affected by the market, by shifts in female roles, by changes in work practices and employment patterns, and by challenges to traditional family and authority structures. To do so would risk methodological essentialism by assuming that my research subjects were ontologically stable. In particular, I have suggested that young Vietnamese men’s recent experiences of social disruption and changing familial and gender relations may not be fully explicable in terms often used in scholarship to describe processes of modernity and threats to masculinity. In introducing this argument I provided the examples of Thanh, discussed in the prologue, and Diem, discussed briefly in this introduction. These informants appeared to understand that traditional kinship and gender systems had been destabilized during Đổi mới, but they were not in any crisis over this.

Accordingly, my objective in this thesis is to examine the ways in which my informants’ gendered subjectivities are produced within social change and through everyday relationships, and do not stand outside of, or in resistance to, these processes. This objective guides my research question, which is: in what ways have young urban Vietnamese men’s perceptions of gender while growing up during Đổi mới intersected with their experiences, memories and understandings of processes of cultural, economic and social change?

Presentation and organization of key analytic concepts and themes

In the methods section I introduce the key analytic concepts that guide my reading of my informants’ narratives. In particular, I argue that the concepts of ‘transactionalism’ and ‘affect’ can be used to uncover some of the ways in which my informants participate in multiple, complex and changing social relationships and reveal the ways in which these relationships are affective. In the subsequent empirical chapters I employ these concepts to lay bare the social transactions that my informants remembered as significant during their childhood and adolescence, and imagined to be important in defining what it meant to be young men during a period of ongoing change in gender and familial relationships.

The four empirical chapters are arranged, for clarity, according to the dominant themes that emerged in my informants’ life narratives as presented to me. As we shall see, however, my
consistent use of ‘transactionalism’ and ‘affect’ exposes three analytic themes that run across and beyond these structural divisions; first, that gendered subjectivities themselves shift and are produced within the market, and do not stand alone or defend against it; second, that entanglements in actual relationships and everyday living allow my informants to work through and negotiate issues arising from structural demands; and third, that a longstanding cultural attachment to—and an understanding embrace of—ambivalence as a condition of daily life and a gendered positioning is a Vietnamese affective resource that confounds arguments commonly made in scholarship about the functions of ‘Confucian values’ and the ‘patriarchal family’ in determining gender relations and subjectivities. These central analytic themes emerge gradually—but perceptibly—from my informants’ reflections on their experiences and memories, and their impressions of the cultural texture of social relations, structural forces and power vectors that bear on them. Accordingly, the three analytic themes do not necessarily stand alone or appear self-evident in each chapter, but come into view through a close reading of the thesis. These themes are extrapolated and interpreted as three stand-alone findings in the conclusion.

**Rationale for theoretical discussion in empirical chapters**

In each of the empirical chapters I briefly reiterate and expand theoretical discussions flagged in the introduction and literature review. I do so in order to put key terms and concepts into conversation with the ethnographic material under attention. This structuring principle is intended to highlight some of the gaps that exist between particular claims made in scholarship about the dominant themes under review in the thesis and the memories, experiences and practices of the young men discussed in each chapter.

**Rationale for the focus on ‘men’ in the thesis**

In this thesis I focus exclusively on the narratives of young urban heterosexual men and do not seek to contextualize these in relation to the narratives of their families, friends, lovers, colleagues, peers or acquaintances. Such an approach has obvious drawbacks and limitations. For example, by not talking with my informants’ parents and siblings I was able to gain little sense of their home lives. And by not interviewing or spending extended time with my informants’ girlfriends, friends and acquaintances, I could gain only a particular, and thus necessarily limited, picture
of their material and social lives. There is, indeed, a considerable body of findings that I had to take on trust from my informants. As I explore in chapters 3 and 6, this caused me to make ongoing efforts during my research to clarify and validate the meanings of discussions and, less commonly, to have concerns about and confrontation over the accuracy and sincerity of informants’ narratives. As I will show, I addressed some of these concerns by employing particular methods and insights common within feminist scholarship, such as qualitative methods and repeat questioning. In general, however, I conclude that, as with all research, the accounts of the experiences related by the informants in this thesis are inherently partial, committed and incomplete—but that does not make the data unrevealing.

There are, indeed, important reasons for conducting research focusing exclusively on young urban Vietnamese men’s experiences and memories of, and expectations about, masculinity during Đổi mới. In the literature review I situate this study within the broader context of gender studies in Vietnam, and in so doing I point to the large volume of research on Vietnamese women’s lives that has emerged in recent years. I argue that the increasing government and academic interest in understanding Vietnamese women’s experiences as women and in relation to men under various government policies, economic conditions, development projects and global trends demonstrates particular feminist, anthropological, and gender and development (GAD) theoretical and methodological tendencies. I further argue that these tendencies—such as re-reading Vietnamese femininities from comparative perspectives—have underpinned important scholarly insights into the gendered nature of Đổi mới reforms and subsequent social change in a postcolonial, and in some cases postsocialist, context. I nonetheless suggest that such ‘readings from afar’ do, as would be expected, risk taking essentialist if not tautological positions.

I also argue, however, that while there have been many studies of women’s lives and family activities, Vietnamese men, their attitudes and behaviours, and the practical relations of their lives and identity to those of women have too often been left out of the data, except as allusions or abstractions. I am particularly critical of the manner in which some studies seem to posit men’s experiences as a mirror image of those of women, and of how some studies on Vietnamese women’s experiences appear to have extrapolated their findings rather too quickly to claim insight into men’s lives and thereby neglected the ambiguities within men’s experiences of and expectations about masculinity. To address these gaps and presumptions, then, it seems appropriate and legitimate to focus my attention in this thesis on the experiences of young men only. In so doing I aim to contribute to re-laying the groundwork for future scholarship about gender in Vietnam
by providing a resource that captures young men discussing, ‘as men’, their particular perspectives on masculinities and gender relations during social change. With this resource in place, subsequent work in this area will benefit from expanding my focus on young men to include interviews with their friends and families, and from further describing their homes, workplaces, leisure spaces and consumption areas. Expansion along these lines will enable a more nuanced interpretation of Vietnamese masculinities and provide a means of testing the statements made in young men’s narratives of their experiences and self-images.

Notes on the text

The average rate of currency exchange between the Vietnamese dong (VND) and the Australian dollar (AUD) during 2006 was 0.000083. Put another way, during my fieldwork ten thousand Vietnamese dong was equivalent to about eighty-five Australian cents, and one million Vietnamese dong was about eighty-five Australian dollars.

Regarding translation, Vietnamese features several vowels that are not used in English and uses diacritical marks to denote the tonal inflection of a syllable or word. Though this is an English-language thesis, I have chosen to retain these diacritical marks and vowels for words and phrases where I feel there either could be some slippage of meaning between Vietnamese and English, or possible confusion for the reader, or both. I do this in order to ensure that readers can easily look up the original Vietnamese word and scrutinise my translation in order to make clarifications, identify omissions or if necessary dispute my practice. I draw attention to these words in the text by italicising them.

I disregard both the diacritics and the monosyllabic word construction, however, for the names of my informants as well as those Vietnamese sources and words that are common in English language texts (such as placenames). For example, I write Vietnam instead of Việt Nam, Hanoi instead of Hà Nội, and so on. When writing Vietnamese names I also adopt the common practice of placing the given name last, after the surname and middle name. Due to inconsistent practices in literature referencing Vietnamese scholars, I have chosen to include the full names of the Vietnamese authors whom I cite. Finally, I refer to my informants only by their given names, which are pseudonyms.
METHODS

An introduction to fieldwork

Knowledge production in the social sciences involves the negotiation of complex relations, interests, situations, logistics and costs. Arguably, the complexity of these relations is increased when the research project involves fieldwork. There has been a massive increase in English language social science research in Vietnam since the early 1990s, but there are surprisingly few publications that examine the specific challenges associated with fieldwork practice in Vietnam. Since the socialist revolution, the country has posed significant difficulties for, and imposed limitations on, researchers. Scholars have pointed to the difficulty of obtaining access to informants, the general lack of information and reliability of published materials, the lack of transparency in government institutions and suspicion of foreigners (Lloyd et al. 2004; Ambler 1998; Kerkvliet 1997; Forbes 1996; Christoplos 1995; Marr 1993; Fahey 1994; Fforde 1996; Kerkvliet 1995, 1997; Marr 1996). Despite the challenges and complexity associated with field research in Vietnam, however, it is often not thoroughly documented within research reports and theses, and gets even less mention in published journals or books. Lloyd et al. (2004, 2) argue that, instead, the published research frequently represents the process as a ‘straightforward movement that originates from precise research questions, passing through an easy data and information collection stage before being finalised in an empirically and conceptually neat article or thesis’. Such representations do not accurately portray the complexities and ambiguities I experienced while undertaking this thesis.

1. There is, of course, a much larger literature on these themes that is not focused on Vietnam. For example, scholars have critiqued and reflected on the challenges associated with fieldwork and knowledge production in the social sciences from feminist (Alcoff 1992; Abu-Lughod 1990; Babcock 1993; Enslin 1994), Marxist (Gitlin et al. 1989, Binsbergen and Geschiere 1983), postcolonial and subaltern (Coronil 1996; Escobar 2004; Spivak 1994) and race-based (Bourne 1981) perspectives, and drawn attention to methodological questions about dialogics (Dwyer 1977, 1979; Erben 1993), hermeneutics (Michrina and Richards 1996) and phenomenology (Moustakas 1994).
Like many contemporary qualitative investigations, this thesis is strongly affected by fundamentally destabilising questions connected to the nature of knowledge and representation. These include questions about: concepts of the unified ‘self’ or stable subjectivity; the reliability of binary distinctions said to structure western/modernist thought (for example, true/false, subject/object, male/female, and so on); the conceptualisation of history as linear; the notion of an objective reality (Truth); the possibility of social critique and the idea of transcendental reason; questions of who speaks for whom and on what basis; and how to speak about people without speaking for them. In what follows I attempt to deal with a number of these and related issues. I do so in this chapter under the shared heading of ‘Methods’, without suggesting that these are simply technical issues. Instead, in this chapter I seek to add to literature on the messiness of fieldwork practice in Vietnam and about masculinities by reflecting on difficulties that I faced researching the lives of young Vietnamese men.

A brief overview

The primary research for this project was conducted over a period of sixteen months (July 2005 to November 2006). I was aided during some of this time through my professional affiliation with the Centre for Investment in Health Promotion (CIHP). In 2006 I worked part-time with CIHP while undertaking fieldwork. CIHP is a leading Vietnamese reproductive health NGO that works to strengthen and expand research, training and management of public health programs and community development. In exchange for the assistance that I could offer CIHP in developing training materials and editing English language documents, CIHP management allocated staff to help me conduct and manage my research. In this way, translation and research assistance activities connected with my project were completed by CIHP staff within their standard work-schedules, and no monetary payment was made for this work.

My main research instruments were semi-structured and in-depth interviews, and countless unstructured conversations, with seventeen young heterosexual Vietnamese men resident in Hanoi. I also practised a great deal of participant observation. Drawing upon the recorded interviews, a very basic demographic profile can be compiled. Table 2 identifies each of my informants by pseudonym, and provides data regarding their age, labour force status, monthly income, education, relationship status and number of children.
### Table 2. Profile of Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Labor Status</th>
<th>Monthly Income/Allowance (Est.)</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hieu</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Student—undergraduate</td>
<td>&lt; VND 300,000</td>
<td>Enrolled in Bachelors degree: Tourism</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minh</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Student—undergraduate</td>
<td>&lt; VND 300,000</td>
<td>Enrolled in Bachelors degree in France: Business/ economics</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binh</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>&lt; VND 300,000</td>
<td>Bachelors degree: Chemical Engineering</td>
<td>Girlfriend</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinh</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Employed—logistics officer</td>
<td>VND 2,000,000</td>
<td>Vocational training</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tho</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Student and Part-time job</td>
<td>VND 1,300,000</td>
<td>Enrolled in Bachelors degree: Architecture</td>
<td>Girlfriend</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anh</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Student—undergraduate</td>
<td>&lt; VND 300,000</td>
<td>Enrolled in Bachelors degree: Science</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuan</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Employed—interpreter</td>
<td>VND 1,500,000</td>
<td>Bachelors degree: English</td>
<td>Girlfriend</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phong</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Student—postgraduate</td>
<td>VND 800,000</td>
<td>Enrolled in MA: Korean studies</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nhung</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Student—postgraduate</td>
<td>VND 1,000,000</td>
<td>Bachelors degree: Law; enrolled in IT degree</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hai</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Employed—interior design</td>
<td>VND 2,000,000</td>
<td>Bachelors degree: Architecture</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truong</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Student—postgraduate</td>
<td>VND 500,000</td>
<td>Bachelors degree: Law</td>
<td>Girlfriend</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanh</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Employed—social worker</td>
<td>VND 1,500,000</td>
<td>Bachelors degree: Social Work</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phuc</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Employed—sales officer</td>
<td>&gt; VND 3,000,000</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huy</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Employed, English language training</td>
<td>VND 1,200,000</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree: English</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These figures indicate that most of my informants either possessed, or were working towards obtaining, advanced education or particular employment-related skills. They also indicate that my informants fell within a ten-year age range (nineteen to twenty-nine), that most classified themselves as single, that they had widely differing monthly incomes or allowances, that only one of my informants had fathered a child at the time of my research, and that only one of my informants considered himself unemployed.

This sort of limited overview may be useful for readers wishing to compare my very small group of informants with more statistically significant samples of young urban Vietnamese (e.g., SAVY 2005). As I discuss later in this chapter, however, qualitative methods were chosen for this research specifically in order to avoid some of the categorical rigidities common in such broad quantitative studies (Patton 1990; Denzin and Lincoln 2001, 2003). Qualitative methods are conventionally thought ideally suited to pay attention to the meanings and narratives through which individuals construct their lives, while locating these narratives in contexts of social and power relations in periods of change (Korinek 2002). Central to this approach, then, is the awareness that basic demographic data can conceal or misrepresent fundamental aspects of informants’ experiences, and reiterate sometimes unreflected-upon ideas around the ‘natural order of things’ (Parker and Gagnon 1995, 14). For example, the above table can tell us nothing about the arguments that Tho had with his father about his decision to study architecture, or that Truong’s girlfriend is only the ‘fourth most important person’ to him, or that Anh values his independence over income, and chose to forego significant financial support from his family in order to live away from home.

The use of qualitative methods, including semi-formal interviews and unstructured conversations, was intended to focus attention on the vagaries of my informants’ ‘contingent, emerging, fluctuating’ (Kessler 2002, 20) memories, experiences and constructions ‘as young men’ growing
up during. I wanted to comprehend the ways in which informants understood these experiences, and how these were framed by particular relationships and social contexts, rather than, for example, identifying common issues which are thought to be of concern to members of the ‘middle class’, or ‘Asian youth’, or so on. As I discuss later in this chapter, the recruitment strategies I used for this thesis meant that I was able to select informants from within relatively confined criteria of geography, age, education, sex and sexuality groupings who were nonetheless varied in their career positions and relationship status, among many other important and unexpected factors. Research participants were asked initially to reflect on their lives growing up, in relation to core themes of the changes they witnessed in their family and society. Early conversations often covered topics including my informants’ experiences of education and economic opportunities, men, women and relationships, and ideas of national character and their sense of personal identity. Subsequent informal conversations would often pick up and explore themes identified in these meetings and, as I explain later in this chapter, often provided for me both the richest and most unexpected insights into my informants’ lives. In brief, this approach assumes that it is local meanings that drive the process of the collection and management of data.

It is important to note at the outset that I also chose to take oral histories and use narrative analysis in this project in part to extend my personal and theoretical affinities with feminism. Prior to conceiving of this topic and research methodology I had completed an undergraduate Honours thesis (2002) on questions of masculinity in Robert Browning’s poetry, as well as a Master of Arts thesis (2005) on representations of male violence in Papua New Guinean myths. I had become aware of the relative dearth of feminist-informed research on heterosexual men in the broader academic canon. In this thesis I thus draw upon feminist discussions of methodology in crafting the research in an attempt to facilitate critical scholarship on Vietnamese men and masculinities which is located within feminist conceptualisations.²

In this section I have provided a very brief synopsis of the methods chosen for this thesis, the focus of the interviews and discussions, and my primary reasons for employing particular qualitative research techniques. In the following sections I discuss these and other issues at greater length. I start this process by briefly discussing some of the many factors complicating the research and writing processes which underpin this thesis.

The changing gendered subject

Theorising change in subjective understandings of gender is not easy. Myriad scholars have argued that gender meanings and dispositions are subject to permanent revision through their ‘cultural’ and ‘bodily’ representations (Evans 2008; Butler 1990, 1997; Moore 1994; Holloway 1984, 1989). The processes associated with subjects becoming invested in and attached to these and other forms of power are neither radical nor easily definable, however, because they are often considered to work at least partly on the basis of premises established ‘in the previous state’ (Bourdieu 2000, 160). But the meanings, effects and analytic demarcations of the ‘previous state’ are themselves in dispute. Different theorists have emphasised the interplay between subjective enactment and broad historical and social processes and discursive positioning (Foucault 1984), pre-existing family dynamics (Bourdieu 1972), ‘primal’ unconscious motivations (Freud 1912; Benjamin 1988) and the ‘effects’ of re-enacting gender (Butler 1990, 190), though in the case of Butler (1990, 34) ‘not by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed’.

Further, such arguments about the contingent nature of gender have been criticised for being inconsistent with the inertia of many gender attitudes and practices (MacKinnon 1989, 2010). There have been particular criticisms about how a focus in some feminist anthropology and wider scholarship on difference and complexity among actors’ strategies has emerged in abstraction from social relations and social structures, including political economy (see, for example, Ortner 1984, 150; Gross and Levitt 1998; Fraser 1997, 186). The arguments are also inconsistent with the emphasis in some masculinities scholarship on the specific psychic, physical and social investments that sustain men’s sense of themselves during periods of change (Jolly 2000, 312; Connell 1995). These views suggest that a focus on ‘performatives’ or ‘gender contingencies’ will contribute little to understanding larger biological claims of ‘natural’ difference, mechanisms of gender replication and the legal shaping of the family; neither do they contain any detailed focus on possibilities for legal change (see, for example, Nussbaum 1999).

As I suggested in the Introduction, it is impractical to try to extract a consistent or widely agreed upon set of definitions about ‘gendered subjectivities’ from the body of literature or examples that I have briefly discussed. It is necessary, nevertheless, to acknowledge that the approaches emphasised here, as well as the ways that I use the terms ‘male’, ‘men’ and ‘masculinity’ in this thesis, are anchored in a social constructionist perspective. Following Feuchtwang (2004), my starting point in this thesis is indeed that there is no ‘assumed self’ or particular kind of subject
that simply represents or misrepresents itself and its thoughts in communicable materialisations. But, following Schrock and Schwalbe (2009), I also acknowledge that humans are commonly sorted into categories of male and female according to differences in reproductive anatomy, reflecting a belief that males and females are or should become different kinds of people. This does not mean, however, that the category male is equivalent to the category men.

I consider that men are (usually) biological males presenting themselves to others as particular kinds of social being: ‘a man’ (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, 279; cf. Goffman 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987; Schwalbe 2005). ‘Being a man’ thus requires mastering a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity ‘man’ is established and upheld in interaction. In this view, as opposed to the commonsense view, a masculine self is neither a psychological entity nor a built-in feature of male bodies. It is instead, according to Schrock and Schwalbe (2009, 279), ‘a self imputed to an individual based on information given and given off in interaction’. I consider this concept of the ‘signifying masculine self’ useful in this thesis for drawing attention to the ‘identity work’ of my informants: the practices and processes that might be constitutive of the ‘manhood acts’ that both locate my individual informants within gender categories and reproduce the categories themselves through social interaction (2009, 289). I start from this point to try to avoid slippage between discussions of masculinity as an analytical concept and a discussion of empirically existing men. The ‘subject’ (of my study) thus emerges as an issue of the ways in which my individual informants engage with practices, materials and relationships to make sense of themselves, and how they are signified as ‘masculine’ in my informants’ narratives—an ontological subject.

Such an approach is consistent with, and supported by, a number of principles of phenomenology (Hicks 2004; Heidegger 1975; Desjarlais and Throop 2011) and of dialogical research methods (Attinasi and Friedrich 1995). For example, in Heidegger’s (1982) formulation of phenomenology, ‘previous states’—such as ‘states of consciousness’—are considered peripheral to the primacy of one’s existence (‘experience’), which can only be interpreted ‘in context’, especially social and linguistic context. From this angle, an individual’s state of mind (and body) is an effect of perceiving the world and its objects, rather than a determinant of existence (including aspects of existence of which one is not conscious).\(^3\) From this perspective, ‘experience’ and performance is not wholly voluntary and conscious (rationally chosen), but instead respects the social and historical traditions of dominant discourses of meaning, or vocabularies, or

\(^3\) From this perspective, ‘experience’ and performance is not wholly voluntary and conscious (rationally chosen), but instead respects the social and historical traditions of dominant discourses of meaning, or vocabularies, or
is to posit a connection between how one experiences the world in relation to what one is experiencing and the context in which it occurs (experience as experienced), rather than having them dictated to by a system (Moran 2000; Heidegger 1982). In this way, a phenomenological framework provides this thesis less of a philosophical or analytic direction (which I consider to inevitably make presumptions made about the significance or otherwise of ‘prior states’), and more of a possibility of comprehension (where the phenomenology reveals informants’ situations in a context of objects, ideas and language, and in being-with-others) (Heidegger 1962, 38).4

But experiences of such objects, ideas and language are nowhere obvious. To get reasonably full data (during fieldwork), I thus chose to initiate, entertain and draw on many kinds of dialogue (Attinasi and Friedrich 1995). The idea that the self is dialogical in nature and origin has been considered within a number of disciplines and, accordingly, a wide range of methodologies have been used.5 The term dialogic is frequently appropriated, however, to a modernist framework of assumptions. Due to the implicit assumption in the neo-Vygotskian (1978, 1986) or sociocultural tradition (Wegerif 2008, 347) that meaning is ultimately grounded in ‘identity’ rather than in (and through) difference, the dialogic perspective has sometimes been used to frame differences as contradictions that need to or can be overcome or transcended (Vygotsky 1986, 1987; Daniels 2001, 53–55; Hobson 1998, 2002). As with my discussion of modernity frameworks in chapter 1, such perspectives leave underlying philosophical assumptions relatively unexamined, and the result is a practice that implies a formal, abstract and universal image of

body comportment, and so on. Such a view has obvious implications for the study of gender. For example, in her work on ‘embodied morality’ in Thinh Tri, Vietnam, Rydstrøm (2003) adapted the ideas of phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1964, 1968), and posited the human body as an analytical category that substitutes for the notions of sex and gender. According to Rydstrøm (2001, 340; 2003), a boy’s body differs from a girl’s because a boy’s body ensures the continuation of his patrilineage. It is therefore seen as carrying history in it, and the phallus might be the symbol of this historicity. A daughter’s body carries no history; it appears as a ‘[snow]-white piece of paper’, which needs to be written on, socialised and transformed into a moral (female) being.

4. In this way, my approach mediates a tension between Heidegger (1962) and Husserl’s (2001) neo-Cartesian emphasis on consciousness and subjectivity, including how perception ‘presents’ things around us. Heidegger argued in Being and Time that people experience more basic ways of relating went and practical forms of comportment (Verhalten) in activities such as hammering a nail (as opposed to representational forms of intentionality as in seeing or thinking about a hammer).

5. Examples include: experiments (Hermans 1999; Stemplewska-Zakowicz et al. 2006), self-report questionnaires (Rowiński 2008), self-confrontation method (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen 1999), anthropological data (Gieser 2008), interview data (Aveling and Gillespie 2008) and textual analysis of biographical material (Gillespie 2005).
reason (as a kind of ‘prior state’) over an image of reason as situated in real dialogues and experiences (Wertsch 1996; Toulmin 1990).

I consider dialogics from a different perspective, however, and suggest that the difference between voices in my dialogue with my informants is constitutive of meaning in such a way that it makes no sense to imagine overcoming this difference (Wegerif 2008). From this perspective, meaning in this thesis is not grounded upon any fixed or stable (or rational) identities (neither my informants nor my own), but is the product of difference (between and within informants and myself) (Attinasi and Friedrich 1995, 36; Bakhtin 1981).

In summary, I consider phenomenological principles and dialogical approaches useful for avoiding some of the limitations inherent in framing the analysis of informants using one particular theory of gendered subjectivity over another, a process which potentially both privileges and renders invisible the researcher’s previous experiences, prejudices and conceits. I acknowledge, however, that grounding my thesis in a mainly phenomenological approach presents a number of other limitations. One criticism of Heidegger’s conception is that he confuses phenomenology and ontology, what Husserl dismissed as ‘merely abstract anthropology’. Central among feminist critiques of phenomenology have been issues of identity and of representation, and the gaps between the researchers’ and the participants’ perspectives (Bloom 1998; Behar 1990; Reinharz 1992; Leshkowich 2006). In what remains of this chapter, I discuss the ways in which I have tried to deal with some of these limitations and critiques.

In this section I have briefly discussed only a very few examples from the wealth of recent literature covering the complexity of the person, or individual, or subject. I inferred from these

6. A review by Alberti et al. (2001) shows that in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in academic labor concerned with ontology. They state that across the humanities and sciences this surge goes by many names: the (re)turn to things (Domanska 2006; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Latour 2004b; Olsen 2010; Preda 1999; Trentmann 2009), the ontological turn, the speculative turn (Bryant, Smicek, and Harman 2010), new material feminism (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2007), political ontology (Blaser 2009; Escobar 2008), and symmetrical anthropology and archaeology (Latour 1993, 2007; Olsen 2007; Viveiros de Castro 2003; Webmoor 2007; Witmore 2007; Shanks 2007), among others (Alberti et al. 2011, 896). Whereas the purpose of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation, an ontologically oriented anthropological inquiry is supposed to raise new questions about materiality, cosmology, the natural order” (Grosz 2005b:139) and can induce real change in the way we conceptualize the past Alberti et al. 2011, 901)

7. Other possible examples include: Hollway and Moore’s notion of intersubjectivity (Moore 1994), Marriott’s (1990) notion of the dividual (cf. Strathern 1988; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994), de Lauretis’s Lacanian notion of the I understood as ‘a complicated field of competing subjectivities and competing identities’ (cited in
different models and perspectives that the stability of gender forms and meanings over time is not something that just happens in the absence of change, but rather as something that emerges and is reproduced in the face of change (George 1996; Pemberton 1994; Steedly 1993; Bourdieu 1984, 1989). I drew, broadly, from this literature the notion that a comprehensive understanding of the processes and effects of change in gender subjectivities and hierarchies in general ought to take into account informants’ understanding of themselves as agents and recipients of choices and decisions, positioned within specific histories and social and cultural forces (Evans 2008, 16). I deferred trying to prioritise one or another kind of ‘gendered subject’ as the basis of my analytic framework, however, because the meanings, effects, analytic demarcations and (importance of the) ‘previous state(s)’ of the ‘subject’ are in ongoing dispute. I discussed an example of a ‘gender training workshop’ that I delivered in Danang to illustrate how gendered meanings appear to (also) be intersubjective and structured by local meanings or indigenous categories and systems of classification. Recognising the danger associated with choosing one ‘theory of gendered subjectivity’ over another, I proposed that the ‘subject’ of my thesis will emerge as an issue of what my informants (say that they) do ‘as men’ in their interactions with others, how they feel about them, and what meanings they infer from the process(es). As I shall now explain, I consider the concepts of ‘transactionalism’ and ‘affect’ especially useful for highlighting these elements in my ethnographic material.

Transactionalism, affect and memory

In this section I introduce the concepts that I use to develop a close reading of Vietnamese masculinities in this thesis. I suggest that it is important to pay close attention to the social transactions that my informants remembered as significant while growing up, and imagined to be important in defining what it meant to be young men during a period of ongoing change in gender and familial relations in Vietnam.

I apply the concept of transactionalism to my ethnographic material in order to shed light on some of the ways that my informants’ gendered self-identities ‘as men’ existed in the contexts of,

Moore 1994); Alcoff’s (1997) positionality, as well as Maclnnes’s (1998) and Butler’s (1990; 1997) critiques of gender and identity. Some anthropologists have also argued that people may not be whole self contained units, but may be broken down (divided), or may not even be a self-contained unit (see, for example, Ingold 1996, 55-98; Moore 1994, 54-63; Battaglia 1983; Overing and Passes 2000).
and intersected with, particular and named social relationships. These relationships were changing, of course, often in unpredictable ways. The concept of transactionalism focuses attention on the minimal units of social process, the mundane transactions and chains of transactions between actors, in an environment that is both cultural and historical (Mitchell 1969; Kapferer 1976). Transactionalism emerged within anthropology in the late 1950s as a response to the determinism and system or structure-centred orientations of structural functionalism and structuralism (Barth 1959; Bailey 1969). While arguments had been made by Durkheim (1893), Mauss (1925) and Malinowski (1913, 1922) more than fifty years earlier about the importance of exchange and transactions in the constitution of social organisation, Barth’s (1959) model argued that social organisation does not logically precede individual decisions about how to behave, but is made up of individuals interacting with others ‘so as to maximise personal rewards’.

The major utility of focusing on transactions among actors is thus that the emergent analysis is actor-centred, as opposed to an institution- or structure-centred approach (Mitchell, 1969). This seems useful for avoiding some of the disputes associated with identifying the ‘previous state’ that I discussed in the previous section. Such a focus also intersects with scholarship on ideas of moral credit and the moral order in Vietnam. For example, Jellema (2005) examined people’s public/social pronouncements about gender against the particular contexts in which they were able to ‘generate’ meaningful social relationships. She argues that in Vietnam each social relationship has its own ideal configuration or ‘ethical entailments’, distributed unequally among the involved parties and typically arrayed in hierarchical relationships modelled on the classic patriarchal dyads of Confucianism: king–minister, father–son, husband–wife. But in the common construction of có công với ai (where công means something similar to ‘moral credit’), công is possessed not in the abstract but only in the context of particular and named social relationships (2005, 238). In other words, the importance of the ‘ideal configuration’ gives way to the actual interpersonal encounters which generate relationships and everyday understandings of gender, virtue, morality and so forth.

An obvious critique of transactionalism, then, centres on the appropriateness of the assumption of maximisation of personal rewards. Kapferer (1976) poses the questions of when and under what conditions people act so as to maximise and just what it is they are maximising. A model that begins with an assumption that people act so as to maximise, indeed, cannot easily take into account cultural variations in the degree to which people actually behave in this fashion. For example, as I will show, a number of my informants expressed a deep fear that they would
be left behind by the fast-moving society in Vietnam. But they did not necessarily act in ways that I believed would resolve those anxieties. When one informant—Huy (aged twenty-seven), who was at the time a junior lecturer at a Hanoi University—was offered a coveted and well-paid job with a Korean-Vietnamese textiles joint-venture by one of his former (female) students, he told me that he had to turn it down. Though Huy constantly complained about not having enough money to take women on dates, and that he therefore could not get a girlfriend, he said that it would be inappropriate for him to go and work for an ex-student, especially a female. When after two weeks he phoned to accept the offer, he was told that the job had been given to another candidate. Huy nonetheless later left the university and began working in a poorly paid English language training position at a Vietnamese labour supply company, hoping to rise quickly. Over a lunch we shared some months later, Huy complained that this downgrading in the status of his employment was now the main cause of his ongoing singledom.

Arguing that Huy was trying simply to maximise his self-interest or returns in this process would be to overlook the ways in which his individual practices were situated within, and meaningful for Huy in terms of, larger structures of (masculine) power and domination—social, political, cultural and economic. It would also be to ignore the complexity of meanings and values that were evident in Huy’s narrative: the transaction between Huy and his former student was complicated because of Huy’s initial anxiety about the meanings it inferred about his success and autonomy ‘as a man’ and by the two weeks it took him to change his mind about those meanings.

The major drawback of transactionalism is indeed the lack of concern with the complexity of actors. The concept thus appears both useful and in need of some revision. I draw from it the notion that exchanges and transactions designate processes of (mutual) constitution which entail mutual transformation. From this perspective, actors and their various environments are understood as dynamic entities that are continually undergoing reconstitution through their inter-constitutive relations with others. It is also clear from the example of Huy, however, that focusing on strategies of maximalisation would be to ignore the complex and changing referents which qualify the meanings of exchanges and transactions within the quotidian, relational contexts. I thus here turn my attention to some of the ways that my informants participate in multiple, complex and changing emotive webs of power relations, and the ways in which they are affective.

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8. Similar ideas can be found in Barad’s (2003, 2012) discussions of ‘agential realism,’ ‘intra-action’ and ‘differentiated entanglements’ among men and women, as well as the work of Yuval-Davis (2006) and McCall (2005) on ‘intersectionality.’
The literature on affects suggests that the social organisation of life has ‘as much to do with the constitution and organisation of affectivity, memory and desire as it has with consciousness and resistance’ (Braidotti 2000). Studying affective encounters embroils the enquirer in asking how identities are ‘lived, felt and practised’ (Ahmed et al. 2000, 15). Scholars working in this area have investigated a multitude of issues: examining media forms (Valiaho 2011), representations and narratives (Rottenberg 2010), cultural framings and meaning-making processes (Tracy 1998). They have asked how encounters with different media engage senses and affects (emotions, feelings, passions) and have effects (Wirth and Schramm 2005). They have also inquired into the gendering, sexualising, classing and racialising of subjects (Proweller 1998; MacKinnon 1979; Dworkin 1983). Affects, in this sense, pose questions about the links between the subjective and the cultural, individual and social, self and other, inside and outside. Put another way, gender relations are not only about relations of power amid actual inequalities of opportunities but are also about how people feel about them.

My ‘turn to affect’ (Clough 2007) as a focus of analysis in this thesis emerged as a result of the limitations I recognised during my early field-work when applying some of the common analytic frames to my informants, as previously discussed (cf. Ahmed 2004; Massumi 2002; Probyn 2005; Riley 2005). Another advantage of focusing on affect, however, was the ways in which it allowed me to register the co-functioning of the political, economic and cultural in my informants’ lives, or what Massumi (1998) dubs the social. As we shall see, informants talked often of ‘cultural changes’ or ‘political changes’ or ‘economic changes’ without being clear about what they meant. These designations seemed to be used sometimes in interchangeable ways. At other times they were used in ways that suggested informants had thought carefully about how moral or cultural principles shaped economic and political practices, or how the changing economic or political exigencies transformed deeply held moral or cultural principles. I considered that it would be missing the point, however, to seek to try to unpack each time the complexity of informants’ ideas and memories about social, economic and political change, about whether or not they meant the specific or historical ways people organised and interacted, produced and consumed, and were governed. Instead, as Clough (2007, 3-4) argues, rendering such changing (ideas about the) co-functioning of the political, the economic and the cultural affectively, as change in the deployment of affective capacity, allows the researcher both to grasp the changes that constitute for informants ‘the social’ and to explore them as changes in subjectivities which are irreducible to the individual, the personal or the psychological.
To explore affective encounters, then, is to propose that my informants’ gendered self-identities exist not only in the context of particular and named social relationships and transactions, but also in the abstract. In particular, it is to suggest that what young men imagine as masculine affects/effects their experiences of gender categories and other differences in relation to the multiplicity of social relations (class, geographic and international) and structures (the state, the market) within which they live out their everyday lives.

The idea that people project emotions onto social life (and animals, and machines) is, of course, not new (Sedgwick and Franks 1995; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). But rather than understanding affectivity as, say, perverse or neurotic, I am interested in the ways that my informants constructed their own histories through memory and position themselves imaginatively within wider, more public, histories (Kuhn 1992, 243). A common theme running throughout much anthropological literature on historiography is on the divergence and discord between official representations of history and vernacular expressions of memory (Faubion 1993; Herzfield 1991; Verdery 1991; Cohen 1994; Connerton 1989). In Vietnam, Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001, 8) has further argued that this dichotomy between official history and personal memory overlooks the ways in which particular social contexts and historical conjunctures help shape memory and how often it aligns itself with the national narrative (cf. Spengemann and Lundquist 1965). Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001, 9) surmises that ‘depending on their age, sex, regional origins, political sympathies, and experiences, different Vietnamese have different versions of what happened over the last century and different ways of dealing with its legacy of memories’.

In this thesis I am interested in the imaginings that made it possible for my informants to speak of masculinity as having ‘accrued’ characteristics and meaning over time, and ‘prior’ to their memories of actual encounters and transactions with other men and women. I thus propose to focus on the ways in which my informants’ imaginings of masculinity contributed to the aesthetic, personal meanings and memories that they made of themselves and their social interactions. In this sense, I seek to shed light on the landscape of the ‘social imaginary of masculinity’ in Vietnam.

A similar approach has recently been developed in Vietnam by Truong Huyen Chi (2009), who explores some of the ways that work, bodies and emotions are experienced in the ‘post-’ family in terms of a ‘social imaginary of the family’. Truong Huyen Chi (2009, 299) argues that such an imaginary consists of a repertory of norms and values, images and stories, as well as implicit understanding of expectations of oneself and others that influence an individual’s interpretation, interactions and experience. Taylor defines the social imaginary as:
The ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.

(Taylor 2004, 23)

This focus on my informants’ ‘vague set of ideas and demands, images and stories that are defined as masculine’ (Beynon 2002, 12) does not ignore different levels of analysis regarding discriminatory practices which continue in Vietnam in apparently similar forms, across time and generation (Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas 2004; Gammeltoft 2002; O’Harrow 1995; Hy Van Luong 1989). Instead it provides a framework from which to understand the practical role(s) that relationships and emotions play in signifying and mystifying for my informants the ideals and practices of a ‘masculine self’ (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Truong Huyen Chi (2009, 302) indeed argues that there is nothing ‘unreal, illusionary, or theoretical’ about the concept of the social imaginary. On the contrary, for an anthropologist, the concept has the advantage of leading one to take into account ‘the common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy’ of the majority of ordinary people in their daily life (Taylor 2004, 23). Such an approach is clearly useful in making sense of Thanh’s narrative in the prologue to this thesis. In this example, Thanh’s imaginings of the ways in which gender relations in Vietnam were supposed to be appeared to intersect with and ‘affect’ his everyday encounters with others: paradoxically, ‘traditional’ masculinist ideologies remained ‘true’, even as Thanh recognised the absence of their material effects in his own life.

In this section I have introduced and revised the concepts of ‘transactionalism’ and ‘affect’, to lay emphasis on the ways in which my informants negotiated and transacted their mundane relationships with women and other men, and the ways those relationships were affected/effected by what my informants felt and imagined about masculinity and male privilege. I have also drawn attention to ways that informants’ narratives were articulated amid ever-shifting connections between past, present and future, and reflect the complex relationships between narrative, time and memory.

In the next section I discuss the ways in which particular qualitative methods helped me to elicit from my informants descriptions of some of the ways that they understood their experiences, and how their experiences were framed by particular relationships and social contexts. I argue that two methods often used by feminist scholars for the study of women’s experiences provide a useful approach to the study of young Vietnamese men.
Proposing methods: oral history and narrative analysis

The struggle for historical authority, self-representation, and subjecthood has been the focus of much important theoretical work by philosophers and historians (Alcoff 1991/2; Chakrabarty 1992; Chatterjee 1998; Paul 1984), feminist scholars (Scott 1988; Proweller 1998; Chadwick 1998; Robinson 1989; Stivens 1994; Rimstead 1995; Moore 1994; di Leonardo 1991), as well as anthropologists (Benedict 1934; Carrithers et al. 1985; Fortes 1973; Geertz 1966; Wolf 1982; Fabian 1983; Sökefeld 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003). In this section I discuss two strategies within qualitative methods that have been found by scholars working within these fields to be useful in exploring people’s life experiences, particularly in relation to gender: taking oral history and conducting narrative analysis. I then propose a rationale for studying young urban Vietnamese men using techniques that Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994) argue were developed ‘on, by and for’ [sic] a variety of women specifically in order to subvert masculinist constraints on the production of knowledge in the social sciences.

Oral history and narrative analysis have long been considered to be valuable qualitative research techniques (Brannen 1992; Connidis 1983; Denzin and Lincoln 2001). Narrative theory posits that it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities (Ochs and Capps 2001). Reformulated in the 1960s and 1970s from a discourse ostensibly concerned with textual representation only, narrative theory took on concepts from social epistemology and social ontology to posit that all of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making (Somors 1994, 606; Gammeltoft 2006). Since narratives are often conveyed by language, there is a substantial body of anthropological work that has examined tropes and metaphors, genres, plots, narrative structures, and classificatory forms and categories (Good 1994; Mattingly 1998; Ochs and Capps 2001; Rumsey and Weiner 2001; Wagner 1986, 2001; Fortes 1973; Geertz 1966), often drawing inspiration from literary theorists such as Iser (1978) or Bakhtin (1981). Somors (1994, 606) states that ‘everything we know, from making families, to coping with illness, to carrying out strikes and revolutions is at least in part a result of numerous cross-cutting relational story-lines in which social actors find or locate themselves’.

Gammeltoft (2006, 589) states that narrative is an important way of ordering experience and of weaving inchoate sense impressions and fragmentary episodes into a coherent conception.
of life (cf. Bruner 1987; Ricoeur 1991). Further, the study of narratives enables the study of trajectories of identity, storytelling and how people see the past, and the relationship between history and memory (Tiemey 2003, 306). Bertaux and Kohli (2001, 148) state that the value of the life story movement is that:

The perspective allows one to take a new look at old questions (for example, aging, social mobility, migration, elites, marginality, or social movements); to open new fields (especially at the level of symbolic processes, for example, life-long meaning construction); and to explore new approaches (for example, through the implementation of hermeneutics within a sociological, not a philosophical, framework or through the implementation of an ethnographic approach to the study of sociological, not anthropological, questions).

Behar (1990, 225) notes the advantages provided by a focus on an individual’s story: ‘A life history narrative should allow one to see the subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system that is often obscured in a typified account’. Other scholars have drawn attention to relations of intersubjectivity and dialogics between the interviewee and the world. Leshkowich (2006, 279), for example, argues that whilst on the one hand a life narrative attempts to order or at least rein in the open-endedness of one person’s experience, on the other the story simultaneously opens up new vistas: questions raised, connections suggested, opinions reconsidered and tantalising details implied but not revealed. A focus on the individual and the everyday thus ‘does not preclude an examination of (the) change in social organisation, social relations, culture, and social institutions’ (Luken and Vaughan 2001, 167).

Accordingly, the practices of taking oral histories and performing narrative analysis have been considered particularly useful by scholars and activists trying to understand and represent areas of life sometimes considered ‘natural’, like sex and gender (Ricoeur 1991, 29). For example, the practice of taking oral histories and documenting women telling their stories in their own words was viewed by feminist scholars in the 1970s as a strategy useful for countering ostensibly ‘ungendered’ research frameworks. Such frameworks were considered often to previously exclude women and develop universal conclusions allegedly valid for women from the experiences of men only (Scott 1988), treat the subject as a more or less passive object to be studied (Anderson et al. 1987; Maynard 1994) and remain immune to the complexities of (female and other) genders.
and identities (Smith 1979). A key element of the strategy was to have women research women, as women researchers were considered better able to elicit the lived experiences of women research participants through feminist methodological ideals of ‘sympathetic, egalitarian and empowering’ research techniques (Sherman and Beck 1979; Geiger 1985; Gluck 1979; Gluck and Patai 1991; Olesen 1994; Thompson 1992). The taking of oral histories was even considered as therapeutic and empowering for the women involved, in a liberal revision of the practice of consciousness-raising (Finch 1984; Oakley 1981; Harding 1987).

Notions that the taking of women’s oral histories by other women, or conducting narrative analysis, constitute a ‘feminist method’ or a ‘feminist act’ are complicated, however, not least through acknowledgment of the differences and power relations between women themselves, as well as the emergence of more complex understandings of research processes (Flood 2000, 24; Maynard and Purvis 1994; Reinharz 1992; Roberts 1990). Early feminist claims that women would automatically be more comfortable sharing their life stories openly with other women have been revealed, at times, as glib and simplistic in light of a lack of common perspectives and experiences, and the issue of domination/subordination relations between women (Phoenix 1994, 5; Kelly, Burton and Regan 1994; Flood 2000). Arguments on essentialism/cultural feminism reveal categories of ‘women’ as present in intricate, historically, ethnically, socially and physically contingent discourses, embodying a diversity of meanings, patterns of differentiation, and social arrangements (Bulbeck 1998; Garap 1999; Stanley and Wise 1990, 1993).

Such insights, however, may have confirmed rather than diminished the importance for the study of gender of narrative theory and the taking of oral histories. Sangster (1998, 87) summarises the view that ultimately ‘oral history not only redirects our gaze to overlooked topics’ but is also a method directly informed by interdisciplinary feminist debates about research objectives, questions and the use of interview material. It thus remains very useful for extracting data about research participants’ psychological understanding of both emotional and physical constructions of self. The taking of oral histories and the emphasis on the stories people tell seeks to recognise the fact that human life is, in one sense, ‘an activity and a passion in search of a narrative’ (Ricoeur 1991, 29; Gammeltoft 2006, 589).

In this literature it appears that oral histories and narrative analysis are useful for developing insights into the research process in general and into ways to develop forms of knowledge attending to why subjects might choose to represent themselves in particular (gendered) ways, and what insights these representations can yield (Leshkowich 2006, 279). I therefore assume
that narratives and oral histories are important methods in opening the opportunity to explore ‘lifelong meaning construction’ and to create a conception of the present that is situated within historical as well as relational contexts. In the next section, however, I acknowledge the critique in some feminist criticisms of phenomenological perspectives and dialogical methods of the ‘gendered’ nature of (processes of) research and knowledge production, and discuss my efforts to deal with researching ‘like a man’.

**Men and methods**

‘Putting oneself in the picture’ is an increasingly important methodological component of feminist-informed and dialogical research (Flood 2000; Cook 1971; Funder 1980; Hinton 1993; Kenny and DePaulo 1993; Stemplewska-Zakowicz et al. 2006; Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). Feminist methodological principles and broader qualitative social research methods prioritise a reflexive approach to data collection and analysis, acknowledging the ‘place’ of the researcher within its production. In general, reflexivity is an act of self-reference where examination or action ‘bends back on’, refers to and affects an entity instigating action or examination (Ashmore 1989; Bourdieu 1992). Feminist scholarship has argued that acknowledging that the observations or actions of observers in the social system or research situation influence the very situations they are observing. This is an important foil to positivist, ‘objective’, generalisable research traditions: the ‘view from nowhere’, or what Donna Haraway calls the ‘god trick’ (Haraway 1991, 189; Hartsock 1987; di Stefano; Harding 1991; Code 1996; Rose 1997). In this section I thus try to clarify some of my mediating role and presence in the direction of this thesis, and in so doing emphasise my belief that none of the observations and arguments that follow are independent of my presence in a particular place at a particular time.

Categorised as a white, heterosexual, middle-class man, I have learned to be especially conscious of the need to focus political and theoretical attention on privileged categories and subject positions. Men’s relations to questions of gender, and feminist knowledges in particular, have indeed, commonly and historically, been considered to be delicate and problematic (Schacht 1997; McKegany and Bloor 1991; Stanley and Wise 1990). Flood (2000, 18) has argued that ‘men’s studies’ globally has attracted a number of criticisms. These include failing to develop a feminist-informed and critical scholarship (Haraway 1988, 581; Morgan 1992, 171), relying on outdated sex-role theory (Connell 1987, 1995), using feminist rhetoric to secure ‘fair play’ for men
while disregarding wider questions of power and presenting masculinity as benign (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1993, 32; Maynard 1990, 284), ignoring questions of individual and collective political strategy (Canaan and Griffin 1990), focusing on white and privileged men (Brod 1987), giving an homogenising and essentialist treatment of the category ‘men’ (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1993), and failing to consider homosexual experience and to tackle contemporary issues of sexual politics (Dowsett 1993).

Flood’s (2000) critique raises the question of whether a man can adapt to the study of men research techniques adopted by feminist scholars specifically to try to subvert masculinist constraints on the production of knowledge in the social sciences (cf. Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994). Such a question might be read in a variety of ways, but it appears to me to contain three implicit assumptions, namely that:

1. feminist political projects might be somehow threatened, colonised or marginalised by expanding particular research methods and knowledges to men,
2. because of their (gendered) self-interest, men researching men might retain an uncritical approach to questions of masculinity, and
3. male informants are unlikely to respond well to male researchers.

In this section I will provide two brief arguments about men studying men while aspiring to broad feminist goals I argue that the methods themselves are likely to expose differences among men that challenge dominant definitions of masculinity. This might not only reveal a more complex portrait of men but also enhance the understanding of the construction of gender for women (Dowd 2008; Cornwall 2000).

First, I consider the methods that I use in this thesis useful for approaching questions of masculinity because they can potentially lay bare some of the ways in which men’s narratives of personal/gendered ‘power’ are both imagined and experienced within networks of actual relations and meaning that may shift over time and space (Somors 1994, 610). Oral life histories require the teller to offer the listener or listeners ad hoc, mediated, intersubjective interpretations on their lives, typically over a number of conversations (Luken and Vaughan 2001). By locating indeterminacy at the centre of social life, the method invites both the informant(s) and the researcher(s) to consider interpretative possibilities that might otherwise be overlooked, because of gendered assumptions, or prejudice, or otherwise (Hollway 1989, 40-43; Silverman 1993). The key effect of thinking and
talking about men and masculinities in this way is that any façade of naturalness that relations of gender inequality may have acquired over years of conventional reiteration is broken down in the course of the dialogue, and in relation to the (potential) plurality of meanings that emerge, and the arbitrariness of ordering systems. Put another way, informants’ ad hoc, mediated, intersubjective interpretations of their lives might critically undermine, and reveal to the informants and the researchers, (some of) the historical, culturally specific notions of the biological, social or phenomenological legitimacy of men’s situations and practices, and masculinist social forces.

Second, implicit in the question of whether a man can adapt to the study of men research techniques championed by some women for particular feminist goals is the significant issue about the sex of the interviewer. According to Scully (1990, 12), especially when the content of the interview is sexual or personal, it is common to find that male interviewers get fewer responses than female, especially with male subjects, and that male interviewers elicit more information-seeking responses while female interviewers elicit greater self-disclosure and emotional expressivity. Wight (1996, 2) suggests that young men also present starkly different accounts of masculinity and sexuality in same-sex groups, alone with a girlfriend or with their parents. Such results fit with allegedly general patterns of emotional disclosure among men: they are said to be more likely to confide in women, especially those with whom they are sexually involved, while emotional intimacy among men is proscribed (Scully 1990, 12). McKee and O’Brien (1983, 153) argue that female interviewers may thus have ‘a number of advantages over male ones and may be less subject to the frequently punitive, uninterested and jokey character of male-to-male talk’ (cf. Williams et al. 2008). These findings in the literature suggest that I was at a significant disadvantage as a male interviewer interviewing men.

As I discuss later in this chapter, the early interviews did not all go according to plan and often produced awkward pauses, short answers, and discomfort for both myself and my informants. Such outcomes initially appeared to conform to Scully’s (1990) analysis, as well as broader ideas that men are not ‘expressive’ about emotions or memories and are thus ‘bad’ interview subjects

9. There is a very large literature on the impact of things like sex, age, race and accent on both the interviewer and informant; the level of experience respondents have with interview situations; whether some cultural norms disqualify some people from speaking with strangers; and whether the issues being explored are controversial or neutral (see, for example, Zehner 1970; Rumenik, Capasso and Hendrick 1977; Cannell et al. 1981; Schuman and Presser 1981; Bradburn 1983). Opinions differ widely, however, on the response effects of male and female interviewers. For contrasting examples, see Axinn (1991) and Zehner (1970).
(see, for example, Davies 1992, 54; Jackson 1990, 271–73). Further, Lee (1993, 10) argues that researchers on human sexuality are often stigmatised, with their interest assumed to be the product of psychological disturbance, sexual ineptitude or lack of sexual prowess. My position as a man doing research on men through a discipline called gender studies has at times in Australia prompted confusion and surprise, if not derision, as well as regular assumptions that I might be gay. I note that in some of the conversations I had with Vietnamese men there were also difficult and embarrassing moments where my interest in the sexualities of Vietnamese men seemed to be considered unseemly or suggestive. At other times, however, my interest was seen as a form of heterosexual collaboration between men, which resulted in me quickly being invited to brothels by two informants and at other times being told about illegal or highly dubious behaviours. After being taken into confidence by informants, my disinclination and discomfort in such situations seemed to be considered as prudish, or a breach of goodwill.

Despite my very mixed and uncertain experiences in the initial weeks and months of fieldwork, the early interviews did elicit one consistent and unexpected reaction from the informants: ‘keep going!’ Although our discussions sometimes seemed forced, the young men with whom I spoke in late 2005 and early 2006 all expressed frustration about how little attention their perspectives ‘as men’ received in their families, jobs and in the media; they generally considered a research project on the experiences of young Vietnamese men to be long overdue. One comment from Hai (twenty-five years of age) was typical:

I think that [a project on young Vietnamese men] will be very interesting because there are issues that you will find out which men would never discuss with anyone. And [that project] would be great because sometimes men want to share their points of views but they do not know how, or even whom they can talk to.

10. Flood (2000, 25) draws attention to several interview-based studies which appear to bear out this idea. For example, he cites Brannen’s (1988, 556) study of marital troubles, which suggests that male respondents had not given or rehearsed their life histories before, were less practised in the art of being a respondent and were less co-operative than women. In addition, an examination of fatherhood established that the boundaries of masculine preoccupations and orientations produced ‘an inability to rehearse or anticipate what the interviewer might want to know or what they might want to tell’ (McKee and O’Brien 1983, 151). The men were unaccustomed to discussing family matters or feelings with an outsider, accustomed only to doing so with their wives (152).

11. Discussions of similar tensions and experiences among men researching men, about homophobia, heterosexism, male bonding, male ‘banter’ and ‘betrayal’ can be found in Schacht (1997), McKegany and Bloor (1991), and Flood (2000).
Without suggesting too strongly that the vignette above establishes a *raison d’être* for this thesis, the point made was, for me, a powerful one. I recognised that the difficulties assumed to limit men’s abilities to ask other men sensitive questions (Davies 1992, 54; Jackson 1990, 271–273) might also reflect some of the complexities that men encounter in negotiating those sensitivities in their broader lives, and discuss this issue later in the chapter.

Finally, it is worth recalling that the following account of my informants’ experiences, memories and expectations relied exclusively on a description of their lives, generated at a series of particular moments in time for a particular, immediate, fallible audience (myself). In the next section, I discuss the ways in which similar questions of reflexivity and dialogics are also important in dealing with a small sample.

**Reflections on a small sample**

In conducting the thirty-six in-depth interviews and countless unstructured conversations that form the empirical data for this thesis I had the privilege of being allowed into the lives of seventeen young men. The conversations variously were captivating, unexpected, tedious, and troubling, and sometimes all at once. Reflecting on the processes and timelines of my fieldwork and the subsequent act of writing up the results, I see two potentially problematic issues.

First, I am concerned about the small number of men whose narratives have come to underpin my central argument in a number of chapters in this thesis.

As I have argued, the qualitative research methods that I consider most useful for this undertaking emphasise the importance of small samples (Behar 1990; Harding 1987). An early ambition I had for this PhD was to explore and expose differences among young Vietnamese men that challenged or complicated dominant definitions of masculinity in Vietnam. I knew that the practical requirements of repeat interviewing and the use of open-ended interview schedules, along with the analytical obligations of reflexivity and reciprocity, would make a large sample impractical. It came as some surprise to me, however, that the process of reviewing and unpacking the narratives from that small sample resulted in the detailed elaboration of only a handful of case studies, with a ‘secondary’ role for the remainder.

Second, perhaps of greater relevance, this act of ‘unpacking’ and reviewing the many and convoluted conversations I had with my informants into a format suitable for analysis redacted the exchanges in a number of significant ways.
In the highly selective process of writing up, the narratives on which the researcher chooses to focus will almost inevitably come to function in the ensuing analysis as (a type of) heuristic device. I have indeed emphasised in each chapter the experiences of only a few young men, which allows me to discuss them at considerable length. By providing these ‘ethnographic vignettes’ instead of only ‘key quotes’ I am trying to communicate a sense of the ways in which my informants’ narratives characteristically emerged as ‘vague sets of ideas and demands, images and stories’ (Beynon 2002, 12). As I expect will become apparent in the empirical chapters, while the subjective mapping of my informants’ experiences was a lengthy and circuitous project that resulted in the elaboration of only a very small sample, it does not preclude reflecting on and theorising the nature of change in social organisation, social relations, culture and social institutions during (cf. Luken and Vaughan 2001, 167).

Related to this, I have gone into greatest detail about the informants who I think elaborated aspects of their life histories in ways that revealed some of the processes of ‘working out’ that they went through in describing their experiences, or specifically addressed issues commonly cited in the literature as important in the lives of young urban Vietnamese men, or did both. This of course is related to some of my notions and expectations about the ‘normal’ course of life and perhaps unconscious ideas about what makes a good story. It is also related to the ways I used my informants’ narratives about their lives as examples to underpin wider claims in scholarship, however, and the ways in which the internal consistency of interview accounts affected the way some informants came to occupy more important positions than others in the empirical chapters (Flood 2000).

I have also chosen to emphasise that, as with all research, the accounts of the experiences related by the informants in this thesis are inherently partial, committed and incomplete (Frankenberg 1993, 41). In so doing I seek to acknowledge, and confirm, the premise of narrative analysis that the stories my informants shared are ‘constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive (Riessman 1993, 5). This strategy follows the distinction that Benjamin (1968) makes between modes of historical narration. One mode he calls historicism, which regards history as preconstituted and given: a continuous chain of causes and effects existing in a homogenous space-time continuum. The past waits for the historian to conjure it up. The other mode—the one that Benjamin prefers, as I do—sees in every act of historical narration a constructivist principle. The historian does not wait for the past to speak its fullness but is an ‘activist’ who brings ages into alignment with each other (Peters 1999, 3).
Third, I have tried to understand and ‘locate’ the narratives, memories and imaginings of my informants in relation to the ways in which Vietnamese women have been said to ‘cope’ with broader social structural issues of power and domination. I have thus developed an extensive review of literature which describes, in part, women’s experiences of gender and gender relations in Vietnam. This is because my informants’ everyday understandings, like everyone’s, can be seen as part of the operation of power. As many historians have argued (Foucault 1982; Gramsci 1971), relations of power and knowledge are mutually constitutive (May 1993, 29–30). Crucially, though, a number of feminists have pointed out that an exclusive valuing of women’s experience may reproduce sexist regimes of truth (Davidson and Layder 1994, 181; Glucksmann 1994, 160; Hollway 1989, 43). This danger is said to be exacerbated in gender-related research on men (Flood 2000). In interviewing my informants about their experiences in becoming men, it was indeed important that I came to their accounts having also already found out something about women’s experiences in Vietnam and feminist understandings of these areas. This was because social, economic and cultural conditions in Vietnam are generally considered to significantly advantage men over women.

In sum, I believe that our understanding of young urban male Vietnamese imaginings of male-ness—what they consider to be important in defining what it means to be male—and prescriptions for social change will be greatly enhanced by detailing the experiences of this small group of informants within a complex web of political, economic and social relations, tracing in turn their understandings of sociocultural contexts based around sex, gender and sexuality, as well as the broader material and political contexts in which they are positioned. In the next section I draw attention to the ways in which one other effect of the chosen research methods has been the elucidation of meanings that my informants gave to aspects of life they identified as important.

Snapshots of fieldwork

Participants in this research project were recruited primarily through word-of-mouth and ‘snowballing’ techniques. This involved discussing the method and aims of my research project with male friends and acquaintances in Hanoi, as well as former male colleagues at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City. I gave these men a thorough understanding of the project by explaining things carefully, providing associated documents and questionnaires, responding positively to any questions they had, and giving them copies...
of the Plain Language Statement.\textsuperscript{12} I automatically excluded these go-betweens from the project, but asked those who expressed interest in the research goals to pass on my contact details and a description of the project to young men resident in Hanoi whom they believed might be willing to participate in the study. I felt that this method would provide me with a broad sample of young urban men while obviating the possibility (despite the convenience) of simply interviewing friends of friends.

This strategy proved very successful, and within the first month I was in contact with a number of men who were keen to help. I began meeting some of the men who had contacted me, but it soon became apparent that some of them had very different ideas about the nature of the project from that explained to my initial contacts. Some men appeared to think that I was interested in language exchange sessions where they could practise their English and I would practise my Vietnamese. One man even told me that he was doing a favour to a mutual friend in Ho Chi Minh City, who was worried that I would be lonely in Hanoi.

Thereafter, each time that I was contacted by a potential research participant I arranged to meet them to discuss the project and go through any questions they might have. At these briefings, which were usually held in cafés around Hanoi, I gave the men a copy of the Plain Language Statement detailing my research project, a Consent Form and Pre-Discussion Questionnaire for their own reference, but I did not ask them to sign or agree to anything. Typically, a day or two after our first meeting I would contact them again, to confirm their interest in participating and to organise times and venues for the interviews. This strategy ultimately proved successful in recruiting participants who were interested enough in my questions (or polite enough) to be expansive in their answers (and thus avoid too many one-word responses), and familiar enough with the deficiencies in my Vietnamese language skills to be patient with me. It also meant that I was able to select a sample of informants using relatively restricted criteria of geography, age, education, sex and sexuality but who were nonetheless varied in their career positions and relationship status, among other factors.

These initial tentative conversations were also encouraging for other reasons. While all the men were employed, educated and urban, they had widely varying experiences and opportunities—of politics and history, family relationships and economic stability, and romantic relationships with

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{12} Copies of the Plain-Language Statement, Consent Form and Pre-Discussion Questionnaire can be found in the appendices.
\end{footnotesize}
women, to name only a few. Their narratives, however, displayed a number of common themes and interests. Even though these shared commonalities in social and cultural profiles were not yet clear to me, they provided a basis for me to develop the early directions in my research.

I made the qualitative questions for the interview settings informal, non-judgemental and open, phrasing them carefully to avoid the suggestion that one answer might be more desirable than another. Conversations followed a pattern comprising three types of questions: topic identification and primary themes, follow-up questions, and probes (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Patton 1990). I made digital recordings of the interviews and some of the informal conversations. For the conversations that I did not record I would jot down notes during the chat, write up field notes from memory upon my return home, or do both. The participants often showed some hesitation about being recorded, but after I assured them of their anonymity all but one agreed.

I conducted interviews and conversations in cafés, restaurants and bars. The interviews lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours, depending on the availability of the interviewee, the mood of the conversation and, on more than a couple of occasions, the difficulty in communicating due to nearby construction or torrential rain. Upon completing each interview, and most conversations, I had the audio recordings transcribed verbatim by native Vietnamese speakers and then translated into English by a translator, and often several research assistants. As mentioned, these translators and assistants were trained social science researchers recruited to my project on an ad hoc basis from CIHP.

It turned out that there was a considerable variation in the quality of information from the semistructured interviews and the unstructured conversations. Frequently in semistructured interviews I would suggest to the interviewee that I was interested in talking about his family, education background, romantic past, or the like. On such occasions I actively sought to use the practice of interviewer restraint and allow the respondent to identify and discuss themes he thought important (Bloom 1998, 20–21). This technique requires that the interviewer ask very few prepared questions and listen carefully, generating new questions from the interviewee’s narrative (Reinharz 1992).

My first interviews in Vietnam were clumsy and not very productive, however. The men often spoke with some uncertainty and in very general terms, using broad categories that I perceived as concealing rather than revealing information. I subsequently proposed to a couple of my early informants that we meet up again, and stressed the informal nature of the meeting. Rather than trying to steer the conversation in my own fairly limited Vietnamese or delegating the whole
process to a research assistant, I sought to reassure each man about the value of his individual role in my own research project and to enquire about any challenges that they perceived in communicating their experiences. One man, for example, had suggested that I was ‘asking about Vietnamese men, but I am only one man. Each man has a different life … How can I speak for all Vietnamese men?’ Another man had commented that he thought that his experiences were not ‘typical’ (thường) of Vietnamese men, and so struggled to answer the questions.

I concluded from these conversations that the young Vietnamese men in the interview environment were at the time reflexive in ways that inhibited their full and open disclosure. This problem was similar to that which Lloyd et al. (2004, 12) had experienced doing qualitative fieldwork in Vietnam. The men whom I interviewed seemed conditioned to not talk about everyday practices that may run counter to given social norms—at least not with anyone doing research. Croll (1994) suggests that such challenges are especially prevalent in socialist or transitional sites. She argues that in China the methodological challenge is to break through ‘collectively constructed representations, to differentiate social norms from social practice’ (1994, 291). This must be attempted amid (sometimes) clearly defined state ideology representing social structures and social processes as they ‘ought to be,’ certain sociopolitical and economic institutions as they ought to function, and political, social and economic relations as they ought to be constructed: ‘It is thus difficult to identify rapidly what actually is, as opposed to what ought to be’ (1994, 292).

In response to my informants’ early concerns that they were ‘unrepresentative,’ as well as their inclination to offer ‘generalist’ responses, I stressed the importance of their willingness to reflect on their particular experiences, memories and emotions rather than broader narratives which conformed to political or orthodox accounts. I also undertook to better recognise and respond to the difficulties that the men appeared to face in isolating their memories, experiences and expectations from the daily contexts in which they were experienced. The semiformal interview environment appeared to produce a tendency among my early informants to respond in ways that were consciously intended to appeared ‘formalish,’ which meant that it was quite challenging to move the discussion from policies, norms or discourses to personal practices.

Over time I was able to improve the discussion outcomes in my fieldwork by changing my approach to be more conversational. This included emphasising to my informants that I was sympathetic to the complexities they faced in responding in a formal interview environment. Often I joked that I had been unable to answer my own questions during my practice interviews.
Simply by acknowledging that some of the issues we were talking about were ‘hard to think’ I was sometimes able to encourage young men to expand on their earlier comments.

But while my interview techniques improved quite gradually, the richness and depth of the conversations developed rapidly. Reflecting on possible reasons for these increasingly engaging interviews, it seems that the trust in and understanding of my project shown by the informants changed dramatically between our first meetings and later ones. Often on our second meetings my informants would volunteer to revisit issues and themes they had reflected on from the initial semi-structured interviews, and add significant detail and nuance to their descriptions. I realised that between our meetings some of the men had consciously dwelt on the issues raised, come to better understand the research process, and were thus better able to elaborate on their anecdotes. They seemed much more likely to talk about their own memories, experiences and expectations than in the semi-structured interviews. At the same time, I was often much more likely to ask questions which required detailed personal answers.

It is also possible that my inconsistent attention to recording the unstructured conversations conveyed a sense of casualness and informality that was missing in the semi-structured interviews. Despite my repeated assurances of confidentiality and use of pseudonyms that I encouraged the informants to choose for themselves, it is clearly possible that some respondents feared the possibility of reprisals for being too candid with a foreigner. It is probably no coincidence that most criticism of the Vietnamese Communist Party and of familial pressures arose during the unstructured conversations and when the MP3 recorder was switched off.

Despite my clumsy and perhaps inauspicious start to fieldwork, even the most reluctant of my initial informants eventually provided me with detailed life narratives full of frank accounts of strong emotions that were often very reflexive. This is not to say that my discussions with these young men conformed to ideal research interactions. A number of issues still obstructed the easy collection of data—these included my difficulty in responding to comments that were phrased in unfamiliar or colloquial ways, and research respondents second-guessing my intentions in asking about certain issues. For example, informants sometimes made comments that suggested they were revising their memories, emotions and experiences in line with narrowly defined cultural tropes, such as Confucianism, an issue to which I shall return in later chapters. Even where young men acknowledged that gaps existed in their narratives between what actually ‘was’, as opposed to what ‘ought to be’, the dissonance was extremely complicated to negotiate.
The young men’s life narratives thus did not often conform to the norms that govern narrative *per se*: those of structure and coherence, clarity and closure. The interview material was richly evocative but also ambivalent, contradictory, highly diverse and messy (cf. Flood 2000). Perhaps surprisingly, however, some of the very difficulties around emotional disclosure that previously have been cited as evidence of men being ‘bad’ both as interview subjects (Wight 1996) and interviewers (Scully 1990) probably contributed to the conditions in which some of the key findings of this thesis emerged. As the empirical chapters will make clear, young men can make awkward interviewers and uncomfortable respondents, but that does not make their exchanges unrevealing. For example, my constant, inelegant attempts to clarify the meanings my informants gave to or resolve the contradictions within their narratives, which involved me asking and rephrasing the same questions again and again, led many times to some exasperation on their part. But I recognise now that the elusiveness of my informants’ answers to my myriad questions actually led me to start thinking about the particular silences and ambivalence about ‘being a man’ in Vietnam today.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained the qualitative research methods I chose for this project, my reasons for choosing them, and how I applied them. I described the ways in which I used principles of phenomenology and methods of dialogical research to posit the ‘subject’ in my thesis as an ‘effect’ of my informants perceiving the world and its objects, and interacting with others (including myself). I also discussed the ways that I have adapted ideas about ‘transactions’ between people, the ways that people project emotions onto social life, and the function and affects of personal memory in order to get a ‘close’ reading of my informant’s narratives. I suggested that this loose analytic frame would help me to shed light on the landscape of the ‘social imaginary of masculinity’ in Vietnam.

I then argued that fieldwork methods which are popular among some feminist scholars, such as the taking of oral histories, narrative analysis and principles of reflexivity and reciprocity, are highly relevant for conducting research into the lives of contemporary Vietnamese men. Similar methods have previously been used to draw attention to the ways in which women in Vietnam (attempt to) order their experiences and weave inchoate sense impressions and fragmentary episodes into a ‘coherent’ conception of life (Gammeltoft 2006, 589). Following Gammeltoft (2006),
I apply these methods to the study of young urban Vietnamese men in order to lay bare the circumstances in which impressions and episodes reveal things about ‘being a man’ that did not go according to plan for my informants, or where their experiences as men unfolded in ways that differ from those that are said to be ideal.
RELEVANT LESSONS FROM THE WIDER LITERATURE

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss literature on Vietnamese men and masculinities drawn from the (often overlapping) fields of anthropology, sociology, history, economics, development studies and gender studies. I have selected works that deal primarily with men’s practices and situations in Vietnamese society and the family, and the ideological and policy structures influencing gender relations in Vietnam during the Twentieth Century and presently. I have also included research that does not have Vietnamese men as its primary focus. This review aims to achieve three things:

1. to provide a broader historical context to my questions about Vietnamese men and masculinities,
2. to cast light on the combination of epistemological frame(s), particular political objectives and scholarly trends that have influenced research into gender relations in Vietnam, and
3. to ask whether researchers may have failed to recognise other gendered processes at work by positing men and women in terms of particular configurations of power relations (that is, gender equality, Confucian versus non-Confucian, or more broadly a dominant versus alternative binary of gender relations).

It is significant that some of the literature on Vietnam that I will discuss may not have had Vietnamese men as its research focus. One of the arguments in this chapter is that young urban heterosexual Vietnamese men not displaying overtly hostile or ‘risky’ characteristics have only rarely been the focus of researchers’ attention, and may have been ignored for their supposed banality or everydayness. Thus, in order to gain insights and provide a context to my thesis, I sometimes reference research carried out on Vietnamese women and femininity, and in health and community development fields. This approach is obviously fraught with difficulties. Mining the varied literature on gender in Vietnam for specific insights into men and masculinity
indeed is to link together some often very different types of research and approaches, and risk misconstruing or simplifying the existing scholarship.

For example, some of the scholars that I discuss in this chapter conducted quite extensive research among populations that did not include young urban men or even urban women. They also had different research goals and different theoretical perspectives than my own work, and their studies took place during a different time period. Much has changed in Hanoi since the mid-1990s, and my emphasis on the gaps in gender scholarship might in fact reveal less about the literature and more about changes to life in Hanoi itself. My discussion is thus not intended as a criticism of the researchers who have gone before me, or to misrepresent their contributions. Instead, I aim to provide a snapshot of dominant or at least common discourses and ideas in scholarship about Vietnamese men and masculinity.

For convenience, and to make clear the common explanations for the emergence and maintenance of the culture(s) of Confucian and masculinist ideological prescriptions that underpin men’s (and women’s) gender situations and practices in Vietnam, I have organised the discussion of inter-related and overlapping themes into two parts, and under four section headings.

Part 1 explores the historical trajectory of some ideas dealing with gender relations in Vietnam, and is developed under two headings:

1. *The promise of a gender revolution*. In this section I discuss some of the political statements and campaigns about gender in Vietnam from the 1940s to the 1990s, and the gendered nature of development discourses from the 1970s to 2000s. I suggest that political projects aimed at gender equality may have influenced the ways in which researchers have depicted men and masculinities in this literature.

2. *The problems of Confucianism, kinship and the family*. In this section I review literature which argues that patterns of gender relations in Vietnam during Đổi mới have generally reinstated cultural values that are broadly in line with Confucian prescriptions and patrilinial kinship systems. I reflect on the supposed power of Confucian systems, ideas about kinship and the ‘nature’ of masculinity, as well as other reasons given for the failure of gender equality under socialism in Vietnam.
Part 2 looks at the intersection of ideas about Vietnamese women and men with emerging ideas about youth during Đổi mới, and is developed under two headings:

1. **Some emerging ideas about youth, the middle class and change:** In this section I look at literature about the changing ideas and practices of Vietnamese youth and urban women during Đổi mới. The literature suggests that the balance and type of relationships that models of Confucianism are supposed to represent are confounded by evidence about new patterns of behaviour and consumption among young urban Vietnamese women. I suggest that such scholarship invites scrutiny of previous claims about the strength and intergenerational durability of ‘traditional’ and Confucian forces in the lives of both women and men.

2. **Enduring privilege:** In this section I review some of the most recent literature on Vietnamese men and suggest that apparently passive assumptions around Confucian systems, ‘the family’ and the ‘nature’ of masculinity continue to shape the ways in which Vietnamese men are understood in contemporary media as well as Vietnamese and Western scholarship.

PART 1

**Introduction**

In this part I seek to situate my thesis and argue for its contribution to the literature by discussing the historical trajectory of scholarship dealing with questions of gender relations in Vietnam. Vietnamese masculinity has long been described in this scholarship as a source of power, domination, inequality and subordination. I suggest that men are described as advantaged in more or less straightforward ways by inter-generational Confucian and patriarchal familial structures. Yet, I argue, there remain only vague ideas about the meaning and function of Confucianism and patriarchy in men’s and women’s lives. As I show, there also appears to be little evidence in the literature of men’s ambivalence about their gender situations and practices. Accordingly, I suggest that significant further research is required in these areas.
The promise of a gender revolution

In this section I discuss briefly some of the ideas, projects and research agendas aimed at achieving gender equality in Vietnam between the late 1940s and the early years of Đổi mới. For a time there was some excitement and enthusiasm among researchers about the possibilities for a revolution in gender relations under the socialist state. This prospect probably encouraged Vietnamese and ‘Western’ scholars interested in gender to concentrate on Vietnamese women’s disadvantaged situations. State social mobilisation campaigns, and the health initiatives that emerged, described women’s economic, social and health advancement in Vietnam primarily as an issue that would have to overcome apparently extant, powerful masculine cultural forces and the perceived self-interests of individual men. I conclude that while men were rarely the object of the early gender scholarship on Vietnam, a number of ideas about the self-interest of men and oppressive, unyielding masculinity were nonetheless present.

Questions about gender and gender equality were at the forefront of early revolutionary debates and State policy concerning gender, family, economic and national interests (Spencer 1945; Hickey 1964; Le Thị Nhamster and Mai Thị Thu 1975; Hy Văn Luong 1989). From the inauguration of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in 1945 through to the fall of Sài-gon in 1975 and beyond, the government cast its actions often in terms of moving people away from ‘old’ or ‘backward’ cultural traditions and habits toward fundamentally ‘new’ ideas about science, social development and gender relations (Marr 1981; Eisen 1984; Hy Văn Luong 1989). Vietnamese Marxist historiography depicted Confucianism as a remnant of Chinese rule that was blamed for backward (lạc hậu), feudal (phong kiến), or superstitious (mê tín) elements of Vietnamese ‘tradition’ (Leshkowich 2006, 298). Marxist historians implicitly criticised Confucianism as inauthentic, as what Pelley (2002, 131) calls a ‘veneer’ under which lay ‘a powerful substratum of indigenous culture that was shared by all Vietnamese’. Leshkowich (2006) argues that such ‘veneer models’, which ascribe feudal backwardness almost exclusively to foreigners and elites, were consistent with a longstanding Marxist nationalist agenda that classified elements of Vietnamese tradition into two camps: the foreign, elite, feudal and bad versus the indigenous, mass and good (cf., Taylor 2004, 251; Thanh Duy 1998, 37).

Matters that earlier might have been considered ideological issues of (im)balance became, under the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), a political project of rectification (Vo Văn Ai 2000; Nh.ACCESS CODE. Tuyet Tran 2006). For example, the Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU), a mass
organisation which coalesced in the 1930s and 1940s, was explicitly mandated in 1945 to achieve the goal of gender equality, and that equality was later enshrined in the first constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam of 1946 (Rydstrøm and Drummond 2004, 3). The VWU set out to identify the social structures and conditions of women’s health, education and employment that prevented Vietnamese women from achieving gender equality (Goodkind 1995, 348; cf. Le Thi and Do Thi Binh 1997). In addition, VCP officials implemented a number of laws and policies aimed at transforming gender systems through the larger political and economic framework, as suggested by the prevailing Marxist-Leninist theory. These included provisions designed to free women to participate in the agricultural and industrial labour force, paid maternity leave and equal pay for equal work, and new marriage and family laws to protect women from concubinage, forced marriage, child marriage and other feudal customs (Drummond and Rydstrøm 2004). Addressing the national assembly of 1959, Ho Chi Minh himself deemed the new Marriage and Family Law as integral to the socialist revolution; he stated: ‘This law aims at the emancipation of women. It is necessary to liberate women, but it is equally necessary to destroy feudal and bourgeois ideologies in men’ (Goodkind 1995, 348). The Marriage and Family Law was central to the socialist vision because it attempted to break the cycle of private property transfers under the capitalist system. An underlying feature of this system, originally identified by Engels (1972), was that of a patriarchal exchange of young females through arranged marriages.

Policies explicitly attacking Confucian family models from the 1940s to the 1960s were gradually modified during the 1970s and early 1980s. The ‘Cultured Family’ campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s de-emphasised collectivisation and concentrated on creating a skilled and ready workforce, as well as on using family planning to serve the national population policy. The goal of

1. The mandate of the VWU remains to achieve gender equality in Vietnam. It monitors gender inequality by keeping an eye on all activities regarding women and conducting studies on health, education, employment, legislation, problems with social structures and problems that have arisen because of the new economic and social climate of openness (Le Thi and Do Thi Binh 1997). Soucy (2000, 123) states, however, that while the VWU was set up to promote gender equality, the fact that it is a branch of the government serves to stifle progress rather than promote it (cf. Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004; Tran Han Giang 2004).

2. Social mobilisation campaigns have been used by the Vietnamese Communist Party from its earliest days to try and mould Vietnamese society in specific ways. Drummond (2004, 1602) states ‘through these campaigns, the Party wields the power to declare insiders and outsiders’ (cf. Anagnost 1997, 86). The slogans and campaigns changed over time to reflect different development goals of the State, and have signalled apparently contradictory directions for women (Drummond 2004). Earlier, the ‘New Way of Life’ campaigns of the 1940s and 1950s focused on the
gender ‘equality’ (bình đẳng) was retained by the VCP after the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, however, and men and women were deemed equally responsible for taking part in the construction of the new society. According to Rydstrom (2001, 395), consciousness-raising campaigns and social mobilisation programs promoted the idea that successfully socialised individuals in the post-revolutionary period in Vietnam were those who, for example, learned to support the idea of ‘equality of the sexes’ (nam nữ bình đẳng). Such individuals were also expected not to ‘reproduce any pre-revolutionary (prior to 1945), Confucian, feudal, or backward (lạc hậu) ideas that give priority to sons in deference to the widespread tradition of patrilineal ancestor worship that emphasises male progeny’ (2001, 395). Drummond (2004, 164) argues, however, that after the implementation of Đổi mới, the Cultured Family standards were adapted to the new conditions of a market-oriented, multi-sector economy and its society, focusing on the “progressive” nature of the ideal family and the readiness of its members to fulfil their civic duties. This meant that from the 1960s to the late 1980s the focus of Vietnamese state mobilisation campaigns shifted from an attempt to build a new socialist person and weaken the family unit (which would allow its reconstruction by and in terms of the state) to focus firmly on the family as the basic cell of society. Bélanger and Barbieri (2009, 18) suggest, however, that the campaigns aimed at putting forward the ‘New Culture Family’ might have had limited success because they questioned family relations and hierarchy, suggesting a powerful cultural force at work (cf. Kleinen 1999). Accordingly, as I discuss later in this section, scholars have suggested that choices about work, education and broader household resource allocation during Đổi mới have become, or remained, ‘subject to authority relations in the family’ (Werner 2002, 32; cf. Werner and Bélanger 2002, 16; Hy Van Luong 2003A, 2003B).

Efforts after reunification to socialise the citizenry toward gender equality were often accompanied by statements about the ongoing, baleful influence of men. For example, Pham Van Bich (1997) argues that in the immediate postwar years Vietnamese men were regularly denigrated in state rhetoric as uncooperative and too ‘traditional’. And during the ‘New Culture Family’ campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s men were criticised for resisting gender equality and their

‘New Socialist Person’ and how s/he should support the war effort or collectivising of agriculture. The campaign of ‘Three Responsibilities’ (Ba đảm đang) took place in the mid-1960s and called upon women to fulfil (1) the responsibility to encourage their husbands, sons and brothers to go to war; (2) the responsibility of caring for the family; and (3) the responsibility of serving the state, including playing a greater role in industrial and agricultural production and being ready to fight against the aggressors (Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1976).

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wives’ participation in public life, even as women’s pre-revolutionary virtues as loyal, hardworking wives and mothers were praised (Pham Van Bich 1997). Further, Ha Thi Que, president of the Vietnam Women’s Union in the early 1980s, criticised men’s ‘passive resistance’ to popularising family reform programs (Cima 1987).

Such statements from officers of the VCP and the VWU were given added emphasis during the emergence of second-wave feminism in American, European and Australian universities during the 1960s and 1970s, and ‘Women and Development’ (WAD) discourses in the 1980s. Some of the key English language works on gender in Vietnam during this period examined the ways that women negotiated and coped with ongoing ‘traditional’ gender scripts, said to place men in the position of power and authority in the family (Haines 1986; Jamieson 1986; Krowolski 1995). As I shall argue, this emerging ‘Western’ scholarship on Vietnamese women’s conditions reiterated the idea that Vietnamese men endorsed, or at least benefited from, the ‘backward traditions’ and practices that supposedly sustained patterns of gender inequality.

According to Werner and Bélanger (2002, 13), gender analysis by Western scholars working within ‘Vietnam studies’ originated in the 1960s, coinciding with the Vietnamese revolution and wars of resistance against French colonialism and American intervention and the concomitant rise of Western feminism. As such, this literature on gender focused on the revolutionary movement and the war, and their impact on the ‘modern’ goal of gender equality (Quinn-Judge 1983; Pelzer-White 1987, 1989, 1990; Kruks and Young 1990). Early studies also investigated the role of ideology and the state in promoting women’s liberation, along with the resultant loosening of

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3. There is a growing interest in the role conceptions of Vietnamese womanhood have played in historical narratives of the nation, and what practical outcomes have been achieved over time through (mis)representing the degrees of ‘equality before the law’ women experienced. The emergence of Vietnamese women in national identity debates is traced by Nhung Tuyet Tran (2006) to the first few decades of the twentieth century, when French-trained Vietnamese legal scholars equated Vietnamese women’s property rights with the emergent national identity. Nhung Tuyet Tran (2006) argues that in the few decades before the Second World War, doctoral theses and studies linking ‘traditional’ Vietnamese law as exemplified in the Lê Code, the family and women. Such scholarship attests to the hold that this particular paradigm had on nationalist legal scholars. In the postwar period, Vietnamese and Western scholars rearticulated these claims to exemplify national greatness. In Hanoi scholars charged with writing women’s history traced the country’s history from its matrilineal origins to a transition to patriarchy to the socialist revolution that liberated them from feudal society (cf. Mai Thị Tu and Le Thị Nham Tuyet 1976). Nhung Tuyet Tran (2006) destabilised these ‘protofeminist’ grand-narrative versions of Vietnam’s history, however, by revealing the Lê Code (especially Article 388, usually cited for its preservation of a daughter’s equal rights in inheritance) as conditional upon other state statutes in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries discriminating in favour of sons.
bonds of patriarchal authority in the family (Werner and Bélanger 2002, 13). Gender, Marxism and socialism were therefore explored mainly from the standpoint of women’s emancipation. For example, Eisen-Bergman (1974) wrote about women’s liberation and revolution in the Red River Delta. Werner (1981) analysed the dependence of the 1960s northern wartime economy on women’s labour and resultant political openings for women (cf. Werner and Hunt 1993). Pelzer-White (1988) looked at the impact of socialist development on gender. Wiegersma (1988), by contrast, explored gender and Marxism from the standpoint of the impediments posed by the ‘patriarchal peasant’ precapitalist system to the liberation of women in the North. She argued that the greater penetration of capitalism in the South held more possibilities for the long-term advancement of women.

The conditions and experiences of Vietnamese women remained a primary focus of research conducted in relation to Woman and Development (WAD) discourses in the 1980s, and Gender and Development (GAD) discourses in the 1990s and 2000s (see, for example, Le Thi Nam Tuyet 1989; Le Thi Phuong Mai and Do Thi Binh 1997; Werner and Bélanger 2002; Fahey 1998). A central tenet of WAD scholarship is that development is an uneven process, not only within and between nations but also between the sexes (Rathgeber 1990). Women and men are understood, categorically, as differently situated culturally and economically. They are considered to have unequal access to material and cultural resources, different and unequal relationships to the provision and consumption of material goods, and different and unequal access to the political process that guides economic development (Kimmel 2002). The change of terminology from WAD to GAD in the 1980s and 1990s was supposed to represent a shift towards recognising the need to analyse social relationships between men and women and to be more aware of factors such as class, age and personal agency in these relationships (Rathgeber 1990). Despite this shift in emphasis, however, Doyle (2002) and Long et al. (2000) argue that development studies have been far more likely to focus on the situation of Vietnamese women than on the situation of men (see for example, UNFPA and Vietnam Ministry of Health 1999).

Public health has been one particular area in which the impact of Đổi mới has been discussed primarily in relation to the (negative) experiences of women. Since the early 1990s there has been a dramatic increase in institutions and researchers surveying the disadvantaged status of Vietnamese women relative to men and the hidden costs and statistical invisibility of the

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4. For a more recent discussion of the impact of Marxist ideology on the Vietnamese family in the Red River Delta, see Pham Van Bich (1997).
development process upon women. Perhaps most pronounced has been the emergence of new institutions and scholarship related to issues of gender and sexuality. In the 1990s a number of social and health research organisations were created, including the Consultation on Investment in Health Promotion (CIHP, which emerged in 1993), the Center of Public Health and Development (CEPHAD, in 1995), the Supporting Center for HIV/AIDS/STI Control (SUCECON, in 1995) and the STI/HIV/AIDS Prevention Center (SHAPC, in 1998). These organisations have become important contributors to discourses around sexuality and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, and the empowerment of adolescents and women. During this period, larger and better funded international development organisations—including Marie Stopes International Viet Nam (MSIV, in 1990), Care International (1991), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA, in 1991) and Family Health International (FHI, in 1997)—entered Vietnam and began soliciting, creating and funding programmes congruent with their objectives, which often included improvement of women’s lives. Vietnamese family planning models during the 1990s came to posit men’s sexual behaviours as broadly problematic (see, for example, UNFPA and Vietnam Ministry of Health 1999).

Doyle (2002) surmises that during the 1990s the range of subject positions that Vietnamese men could occupy in different kinds of relationships with women, or other men, was rarely brought into the health and development research frame.

I conclude that between the 1960s and the early 2000s little research appeared that dealt specifically with Vietnamese men ‘as men’. Despite the under-representation of Vietnamese men in all their diversity, Long et al. (2000, 130) argue that as a key construct, gender inequality has nonetheless been assimilated into social analyses of Vietnam during Đổi mới to account for increasing differentials between men and women’s public versus private lives (see, for example, Nguyen Vo Thu Huong 2010; Rydstrøm 2010; Goodkind 1995). For example, a number of arguments have emerged that during the 1980s and 1990s the Đổi mới state used ‘the household’ to tie its members to the market, to reformulate new subjects of rule, and ‘to rearticulate new conceptions of the nation’ based on assumed gender practices and divisions of labour within families (Werner 2002, 25; Werner and Bélanger 2002; Soucy 2000; Gammeltoft 1999; Le Thi Nam Tuyet 1999; Tran Thi Que 1999). One of the key narratives of social change during Đổi mới...
indeed focuses on how women’s obligations within the household, particularly in terms of reproductive tasks such as caretaking and domestic work, have restricted their equal participation in labour markets, access to credit and capital, and even representation in formal decision-making bodies such as the National Assembly (Tran Thi Van Anh and Le Ngoc Hung 1997; Hoang Thi Lich 1996; Bui Thi Lan 1998; Croll 1998; Lofman 1998; Luong 1998; Oxfam UK/Ireland 1997).

According to Truong Thanh Dam (1996), state emphasis on the household under Đổi mới was intended to increase women’s work in production and reproduction, and to make paid work arrangements more flexible in order to improve women’s productivity. As evidence of the gendered inequality of reforms, scholars have pointed to the disproportionate number of women workers who left the state sector in the early years of Đổi mới (see, for example, Goodkind 1995; Rapp and Young 1990; Pelzer-White 1989; Desai 2000; Trung Tam 1995; Le Thi Nam Tuyet and Phat Huy Tiem 1997). Werner (2003), for example, concluded her analysis of the first decade and a half of Đổi mới by arguing that women ‘lost ground’ to men in employment, agriculture,

7. Werner (2003, 30–33) argues that in the early 1990s state sector work was mainly male in areas such as construction, fishing, transportation and dock work. Women’s work was mainly in agriculture, trade, service occupations, textiles and food processing. While men were traveling to work for seasonal employment, women were generally working closer to home. Despite their proximity, however, women did not necessarily have more time to attend to family and domestic duties. Instead, because of that proximity, many women experienced Đổi mới reforms toward marketisation primarily as ‘an increase in their paid working hours on top of their unpaid domestic work’ (Hy Van Luong 2003, 220).

8. In broad economic terms, Đổi mới did initially mean a reduction of public sector employment for women, with market substitutes, on the whole, consisting of low-end, low-income, household-based work (Werner 2003, 46; Trung Tam 1995, 30–31; Le Thi Nam Tuyet 1997, 103). Of the total number of workers displaced from the state sector—reduced from 3.86 million in 1985 (about 15 per cent of the labour force) to 2.92 million in 1992 (9 per cent)—about 70 per cent were women (Beresford 1994; Rama 2002). In 1990–91 alone some 553,000 female workers at state-owned enterprises were laid off, representing 19.7 per cent of all female wage employment in 1992–93 (Rama 2002). This meant that in 1992–93, women accounted for 51.4 per cent of the total work force in the national economy but accounted for only 27.3 per cent in the state-owned sector. At the time, wages of women overall were on average only 69 per cent those of men (NCFAW 1995). In addition, non-state sector jobs tended to be unstable and cut off from public benefits and resources.
possibly in education, and politics. She states that the evidence up to 2003 is that more women had been laid off from state sector jobs than men, and that women had been ‘thrown back’ onto the household economy for their economic livelihood (2003, 46; cf. Long et al. 2000, 130; McDonald 1994, 1996; Esser 1996; World Bank 1998).  

While much of the development studies and gender studies literature constructs these private/public distinctions about ‘gender equality’ in Vietnam (Long et al. 2000), some researchers contest this dichotomy in their analyses of the different domains over which power and authority are exercised in Vietnam (Rydstrøm 2001, 2003). For example, Long et al. (2000, 130) argue that analyses which presume the disadvantaged status of one gender vis-à-vis the other may ignore the ways in which power and authority are constructed in Vietnamese households and communities, the importance for men’s and women’s status and household influence of informal and familial channels of credit (such as remittances), and the contribution of household labor to family welfare (cf. Knodel et al. 2005). They may also ignore the gendered effects of the growth of women’s jobs in the private sector in the late 1990s, while ‘two heavily masculine sectors, the bureaucracy and the army’, were ‘retrenching’ (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001, 183; King et al. 2007, 11; Glofcheski 2001). Le Thi Nam Tuyet (2001, 7) argues that during this period, many women ‘untied’ from ‘state-subsidy, centrally planned’ mechanisms became ‘dynamic and bold in developing business, and learning new trades or crafts to enhance the living standards of their families’.  

The emergence of what Thaleman (1996) describes as ‘shopfront capitalism’—household businesses typically operating with a storefront on the street, comprising retail shops, textile/tailor shops and food processing units—was just one example of the new kinds of economic and entrepreneurial activities dominated by women re-emerging after their withdrawal from the state sector in the early 1990s reforms (cf. Desai 2002). Others included wholesale and retail trade, itinerant food peddling, street vending, garbage and junk collecting, and hired day laboring in

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9. Rama (2002, 171) notes that because public sector jobs account for a larger share of wage employment among women than among men, even a gender-neutral downsizing would lead to a larger drop in wage employment (in relative terms) for women than for men. He also states (170–71), however, that a striking fact that emerges from a comparison of the Vietnam Living Standards Survey data between 1992–93 and 1997–98 was the slow growth of salaried employment among women (growing 10.1 percent between 1992–93 and 1997–98) relative to men (growing 25.6 percent during the same period).

10. Rama (2002) argues that women’s experiences weathering massive instability during public sector downsizing in the early 1990s, familiarity with petty trading, and typically diminished salaries relative to men indeed left them ideally suited to the abundance of temporary contracts available in the rapidly growing private sector subsequently.
the informal sector (Werner 2003, 33). Fforde (2003, 36) surmises that a typical middle class household profile in the 1990s included a father working in the state bureaucracy, the mother probably in trade but moving into other areas of work as market opportunities became available, and their children in both public and private sector employment.

In summary, in Vietnam there has been ongoing discussion about gender relations and equality between the inauguration of the DRV in 1949 and the early 2000s. But it appears that a number of ideas about men during this time emerged from research and advocacy centred on the situations of disadvantage faced by women—in labour markets, household economies and family decision-making, among other things. These analyses appear to suggest that macro institutional systems and economic policies were adapted, or conformed to, existing (though perhaps latent) masculinist practices and conditions in families and households that benefited men and disadvantaged women. Other literature suggests, however, that the fledgling ‘household economy’ provided a range of new (and not so new) formal income-earning opportunities for women. Nonetheless, in each of the conceptualisations discussed in this section women’s work appears to be more or less devalued and men are seen as advantaged in domestic and public spaces, if they appear at all. This poses the question of how such ideas about men’s continuing advantages in Vietnam persisted in the face of limited empirical research on men.

It is clear from reviewing the literature that the common use of language and ideas familiar from Marxist literature on gender equality, VCP social mobilisation campaigns, and second-wave feminism and WAD literatures has defined Vietnamese men and women as distinct groups that will gain and lose in very different ways from ‘modern’ state initiatives to change the structures of inequality.\(^\text{11}\) It also appears likely that, historically, those research projects aimed at helping Vietnamese women to achieve ‘equality’ have been regarded as demanding greater urgency and holding wider political and scholarly interest and consequence than research on men. As I will argue in the next section, however, the ongoing failure of such projects over the past seventy or so years—dating the inauguration of the DRV in 1945—appears to have led scholars not to identify the limited value of such terminology and associated analytical frameworks in

\(^{11}\) It is also possible that the hierarchical terms of address between men and women in the Vietnamese language have contributed to such readings. As O’Harrow (1995) remarks, the vocative system of the Vietnamese language is largely devoid of pronouns and uses, relying instead on static kinship terms. Thus, in Vietnamese, a husband and wife enjoy a fictive incest. The husband speaks to his wife using the same terms he has always used towards his real younger sisters, referring to himself as anh (‘older brother’) and calling his wife em (‘little sister’).
explaining the trends (or the absence of them). Instead, they presume that masculinist cultural forces in Vietnam are both constant and more or less immune to modification. As I will show, recent studies indeed argue that longstanding masculinist ‘traditions’ regarding the position of men and women in the family and the household are (still) fundamental to understanding gender relations in Vietnam, with the implication that few, if any, ideas about Vietnamese men and masculinity have fundamentally changed for a very long time. This indicates a number of problems in the current literature on Vietnamese men and masculinity, and the power of both imported and local paradigms and political agendas.

**The problems of Confucianism, kinship and the family**

In this section I review literature which argues that patterns of gender relations in Vietnam during Đổi mới have been heavily influenced by, and articulated broadly in terms of, ‘traditional’ masculinist cultural values in families, linked closely to Confucianism and patrilinial kinship systems. According to this literature, over at least a century of dramatic social change in Vietnam, gender relations have to a significant extent remained influenced by household patterns shaped by patrilinial descent, discourses about ‘traditional’ Confucian family arrangements and ideas about (relations between) masculine and feminine elements. Implicit in some of these analyses is the notion that the perpetuation of gender inequality in most significant public and private forums has resulted from a conflation of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ gender ideologies and structures that consistently disadvantage women and benefit men. I will argue that these critical elements of gender relations take on special significance when considering the ways in which strategies adopted during Đổi mới by households attempting to diversify their economic production have negatively affected socioeconomic outcomes for women. I conclude, however, by noting that little is known about men’s day to day experiences and understandings of Confucian ‘traditions’ and masculinist cultural forces, and suggest that in the study of gender in Vietnam, connections sometimes appear to have been made between notions of maleness, designations of manhood and attributions of masculinity, despite those connections having no obvious referent in the lives of individual men.

Despite the massive cultural and social upheavals of French colonialism, more than thirty years of war and the socialist reunification in Vietnam, Hy Van Luong (1989, 754) states that ‘the male-oriented model of kinship within which gender inequality is embedded has persisted
to a much greater extent than many studies suggest. In his influential article on the structure of kinship and gender relations in twentieth-century northern Vietnam, Hy Van Luong makes the argument that ‘two structurally opposing male-oriented (‘patrilineal’) and non-male oriented (‘bilateral’) models of Vietnamese kinship persisted as the fundamental parameters of household formation and gender relations throughout twentieth-century Vietnam’ (1989, 749). In this understanding, men and women are caught up in social processes of negotiation, cooperation, and reconciliation, under broader male-oriented or patrilineal kinship systems.

More recently, Knodel et al. (2005, 87) argued that ‘continuity rather than change’ is evident in the ‘long-standing cultural tradition(s) regarding the position of (Vietnamese) men and women in the family’. But it has often been unclear in the scholarship which gender systems and positions are considered long-standing and/or ‘traditional’ and which are considered new and/or ‘modern’. It is also unclear which realm is considered to be desirable for the purpose of moving toward gender equality. For example, the reasons given by both government and many feminist academic commentators for these failures of ‘modern’ ambitions of gender equality in Vietnam have included the persistence or resurgence of ‘traditional’ kinship systems and Confucian ideas (Hy Van Luong 1989; Sue and Sue 1993, 1999). At other times, failures of modernity

12. Preliminary findings from the combined works of Spencer and Benedict (1945); Hickey (1964); Haines (1986) and Jamieson (1986); Krowolski (1995) and Hy Van Luong (1989) suggest that kinship in Vietnam may vary, however, from region to region. This scholarship implies that the North has been more influenced by the Chinese system of patrilineality than the South has been. But other work suggests that we should be more cautious about concluding definitively that the North reflects the Chinese system more than the South. Krowolski (1999), for example, shows that the usage of kinship terms in the southern portion of Vietnam appears to be closer to Chinese kinship terminology, while Chinese-inspired legal codes also appear to have had more of an impact in the South and central region over the past two to three centuries.

13. Nguyen Tuan Anh (2010, 14) argues that from the viewpoint of Vietnamese kinship as patrilineage, ‘each man is a member of a patrilineage. His name is written in the book of patrilineage [sổ họ]. Officially, the patrilineage defined its member as someone with rights and obligations in matters such as worshipping ancestors, inheriting lineage property and contributing to building, maintaining the property of the patrilineage such as ancestral house and graves, bearing the name of the patrilineage, and attending other activities of the patrilineage. Traditionally each woman carried her father’s patrilineage name as her family name all her life but she had no rights to become a member of her father’s patrilineage. After getting married, she also did not become a member of her husband’s patrilineage. The position of women in the patrilineage sphere was quite ambiguous. A woman was considered to belong to her father’s patrilineage and because of this she carried her father’s patrilineage name all her life. She was considered to belong to her husband’s patrilineage based on the simple fact that she was married to him. However, officially, she belonged to neither of them.’
have been cast as elements of social life incompatible with ‘traditional’ Vietnam (Tran Thi Que 1995; Tran Thi Van Anh and Le Ngoc Hung 1997). The state (through the academy and the media) has also blamed this on the effects of opening the country to a market economy with the advent of Đổi mới (Rydstrøm and Drummond 2004). Whereas previously gender inequality had been blamed in State social mobilisation campaigns and pronouncements on ‘backward’ feudal tendencies in the population (Marr 1981; Eisen 1984; Hy Van Luong 1989), Soucy (2000) argues that ‘modernity’ is now blamed, and a conservative appeal to ‘tradition’ is presented as the solution to increasing disparities. Another more subtle argument has been made that the reassertion of ‘traditional’ systems and ideas concerning gender emerged during Đổi mới ‘as a result of the confluence of state policies on the one hand, and household strategies and the gender socialization process on the other’ (Hy Van Luong 2003b, 12). Harris (1998, 56) suggests that within the re-emerging patrilineal kinship traditions Vietnamese women have commonly submitted to the task of what Boulding (1980) has termed ‘integry’, where women create female networks and support systems that provide ‘services to the entire community that are integrative, centripetal, stabilizing and conserving’. Werner and Bélanger (2002, 16–17) surmise that during Đổi mới the socialist models based on gender equality have been discredited and the role of the state in encouraging such models has declined; they also note that a number of post-socialist scholars have suggested that notions of femininity have reverted back to pre-socialist norms.

The range and thrust of these disparate ideas is echoed in other academic work on tensions between ‘traditional’ gender relations and those that emerged under socialist/post-socialist policies in China and the former socialist states of the USSR and Eastern Europe (Won 2007; Flynn and Oldfield 2006; Stenning 2005a, 2005b). This comparative literature suggests that reopening to the global system of Western capitalism and internal restructuring in post-socialist states have troubling implications for gender equality (Einhorn 1993; Einhorn and Yeo 1995; Gal 1997; Gilmartin 1994). Scholars have reported on the retreat of women from the labour force back into the family and the erosion of women’s rights. Gal (1997) asserts that while femininity under socialism in the former East Germany was conceptualised in terms of equity in the workplace, many women felt this reversed the perceived ‘natural balance’ between the sexes. Men, it was said, had become feminised and feeble, while women had become tired and anxious about achieving the norms of the socialist model. Many East German women saw the state as intruding into their lives and bodies and as usurping men’s roles in the family. State socialism was seen as infantilising the whole population and taking over the ‘traditional’ paternal role of men. What
is common among much of this scholarship on post-socialist societies is an awareness of the constructed nature of ‘tradition’ and the ways in which it was important to state policies aimed at overhauling the minutiae of society (see, for example, Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Verdery 1996; Won 2004; Burawoy and Verdery 1999; Horschelmann 2002). These were intermittently cast as a backward or undesirable realm, and then a sphere of legitimate national identity.\footnote{For recent debates about the analytic usefulness of ‘post-socialism’ see Stenning and Horschelmann (2008).}

In Vietnam, however, most of the debates and tensions about gender relations have been couched specifically in terms of the family and the household and the ways in which the minutiae of domestic gender relations within supposedly male-headed families variously affect the society. In such cases, popular and academic invocations of ‘tradition’ typically refer to Confucian ideologies and patrilineal and patrilocal kinship systems, apparently originating in social and belief systems operating prior to Communism. This makes it important to find out how such systems were imagined to work within contemporary Vietnamese society and families.

Proschan (1998) argues that ‘traditional’ Vietnamese societies were strongly shaped by neo-Confucian conceptions and practices of ancestral veneration and filial responsibility (hiếu), and influenced to varying degrees by elements of Hinduism and all three Chinese religions: Mahayana Buddhism (Phật giáo or Thích), Daoism (Lão giáo) and Confucianism (Nho giáo). According to O’Harrow (1995, 161), the Confucian and Buddhist-Taoist patriarchal ideal has infused Vietnamese daily life for centuries. While the Buddhist-Taoist ideologies relate more to definitions of public and ritual power, it is Confucianism which permeates family, intersexual and intergenerational relationships in the most profound way (O’Harrow 1995, 162).

Jamieson (1995) argues that Confucians developed the idea that each person possesses both a ‘masculine principle’ and a ‘feminine principle’. In each person there is a combination of dương-soul (yang-soul) and an âm-soul (yin-soul). Under Daoism, ‘the individual self is not set apart from nature but is, like all things, a product of yin (âm) and yang (dương) as the creative processes of dao; man [sic] in the universal order’ (Jamieson 1995, 18). This order depends on the balance of the two elements yin and yang, which represent the constant duality of nature: rest and motion, liquid and solid, light and darkness, concentration and expansion, and material and spiritual. Yang is commonly associated with male, the sun, positive energy, heaven, day, dryness, transcendence, discipline and life, while yin is commonly associated with female, the moon, negative energy, earth, night, cold, immediacy, spontaneity and death. Yin and yang each
seem to have a separate existence; at the same time they are harmoniously interfused with one another (Huoi Xung Lee 2003).^{15} Jamieson surmises:

Ideologically men were *yang*; women *yin*. Women were subordinate to men in the nature of things. Like children and younger brothers, they were supposed to be submissive, supportive, compliant towards their husbands. Husbands were supposed to teach and control their wives as they did their younger brothers and their children. (Jamieson 1995, 18)

According to O’Harrow (1995, 162), ‘such metaphors associated with the ideal male in macro society permeate family intersexual [sic] relationships, engendering the family system further’. He writes that this enables the husband to formalise his position as superior by assuming the features of mandarin and teacher. The man is responsible for trying to command, guide, teach, nurture, and protect the ‘inferior’, who is here the wife. On another level she becomes the student and commoner, and is responsible for obeying and venerating the ‘superior’. O’Harrow (1995, 162) writes:

A. Those relationships linked to the ‘macro’ society, i.e.,

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

A. relationships on the ‘micro’ level, i.e.,

- between husband [idealised gentleman] and *wife*
- between father [idealised gentleman] and *children*
- between elder brother [idealised gentleman] and younger *sibling*
- between teacher [idealised gentleman] and student
- between friend [idealised gentleman] and friend

\(^{15}\) A number of other studies in the areas of kinship and family/household organisation argue similarly that much of ‘traditional’ Vietnamese culture, social organisation, and behaviour expressed balanced opposition between *yin* and *yang* as interlocking sets of ideas, including values, conceptual categories, and operating rules (see, for example, Hy Van Luong 1984, 1989; Haines 1984, 1986; Nguyen Tu Chi 1986).
O’Harrow also states, however, that:

One will immediately note that this paradigm is **holistic** in both content and style (it is **all-encompassing**, treats society as an organic **whole**, subject to a **single** mode of meaningful analysis); secondly that it is **normative** (it tells us what we **ought** to be doing); and thirdly that it focuses on the ‘idealised gentleman’ and is **expressly patriarchal** (except for the roles in italics, there is little or no emphasis on roles that women can play, and those which might involve women are all subordinated to men).

(O’Harrow 1995, 162)

Yet strongly essentialist ideas about Vietnamese personhood continue to appear in scholarship and government populist rhetoric (see, for example, Hirschman and Vu Manh Loi 1996, 249; Khuat Thu Hong 2004, 124; Pham Van Bich 1999). Certainly the idea remains common in scholarship that household practices in Vietnam tend to be structured around Confucian ideals, such that older generations are given elevated status, men are accorded a higher status as compared with that of women, and the father is the dominant member of the household and has unquestioned authority (Sue and Sue 1993, 1999). Korinek (2002, 98) argues that the powerful sense of family in almost all Vietnamese from early childhood ‘is perhaps the most fundamental source of women’s subordination and the control of their labour’. Mai Huy Bich (1991, 49) similarly asserts that in Vietnam ‘the individual is not an independent entity; there is no free individual; every facet of his [sic] life is bound up with the family; he [sic] owes complete allegiance to the family’. Even more stridently, Jamieson (1995, 16) describes ‘a core of values that (has) formed the heart of traditional Vietnamese culture, the window’ through which Vietnamese viewed the world and interpreted what they experienced.16

As evidence for this claim, Jamieson (1995) argues that while the DRV enshrined the full and complete equality of Vietnamese men and women in its first constitution in 1946, it also modelled its relationship with the Vietnamese people in familial terms. Though the Party explicitly condemned the ‘Confucian patriarchal family’, at the same time it assimilated the essence of

16. Such recent statements about the ‘family’ in Vietnam appear to bear strong similarities to scholarship from the early twentieth century. For example, Cadiere (1930, 66) wrote on Vietnam that ‘the essential feature of this civilisation lies in the dominance of the family in all domains: religious, cultural, social. Since the fundamental institution of this society could not be politics or the economy, it is the family’ (cited in Belanger and Barbieri 2009, 10).
ideas about the ‘traditional’ family and the household system into its operations. Jamieson (1995, 235) writes that ‘Ho Chi Minh referred to himself as “Uncle” in order to oversee state affairs while avoiding the direct responsibilities of leadership. As bác (the term for father’s or mother’s older sibling, or a symbolic term of respect), Ho Chi Minh could intervene when problems arose and exercise discipline for the sake of the collectivity’, but steer clear of the day-to-day direction of the family. More fatherly activities like the direct control of the state and institutions were delegated to senior officials, who in turn further recast familial vocabulary in contemporary political terms.

Further, Jamieson (1995) suggests that by mobilising the ideological device of ‘the family’, the DRV appeared to some as a defender of past certainties and of the village kinship systems common to some of the many distinct groups in Vietnam. This manoeuvre bears striking similarities to the Chinese communist government’s mobilisation campaigns regarding the family through the 1960s and 1970s. There, Rofel (1999, 246) argues, the family was cast as the bedrock of society, ‘the basic “cell” upon which the nation is built’, at the same time as the state (re)appropriated many of the patriarchal functions of the ‘traditional’ family. In both Vietnam and China, then, the most significant rethinking of the relationship between the individual and her/his history, ethnicity, and the ‘new’ nation and the state was thus couched within, and delimited by, terms and principles both familial and hierarchical.

Vietnamese gender relations during Đổi mới have been primarily described in the literature reviewed in this section in systemic terms of Confucianism, where men are ideologically most significant. But some anthropological and folkloric scholarship in North Vietnam attends to the idea that other existential conditions which privilege men provide the source of individual and social perceptions, experiences, and actions (Rydstrøm 2001, 2002, 2003A, 2003B, 2004; Tu Wei-Ming 1985). In Rydstrøm’s (2001) analysis, females and males are socialised as children

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17. The word bác, of itself, is ungendered; bác gái is ‘aunt’, bác trai is ‘uncle’ (father or mother’s older siblings).

18. For example, Jamieson (1995, 17–18, 217) writes that in one party handbook nghĩa, traditionally meaning one’s notion of familial/social obligation and righteousness was revised to mean ‘having nothing to hide from the (Communist) Party’, while nhân, the Confucian virtue of compassion, charity, benevolence, humanity and love for one’s fellow beings, was altered to mean ‘assisting one’s comrades and compatriots’. Rhetorical kinship also meant that in new ethnically mixed communities engineered by the DRV to disengage ethnic minorities from autonomous or alienated pasts, those minorities would be under the influence and tutelage of their (Viet) ‘older brothers’ (Pelley 1998). An Thu (1968, 181) states that ‘while 54 different ethnic groups were declared, each was cast most simply as “the brother peoples of the great Vietnamese national family”’.
through assumptions about gender specific ‘characters’ (tính cách). Such assumptions are said to reflect ‘traditional’ patrilineal kinship systems and to invoke eclectic cultural ideas that morality is embedded in the masculine and not the feminine. Boys are defined as being ‘inside lineage’ (họ nội), embodying the past, present and future history of their entire patrilineage and, in turn, the accumulated ‘morality’ (đạo đức), ‘honour’ (danh dự) and ‘reputation’ (tội) of their father’s lineage. As I flagged in the Introduction, ‘male blood’ is thought to be passed through the lineage of male descendants (Rydstrøm 2001, 403); girls are understood as ‘outside lineage’ (họ ngoại) and without any accumulated moral value (Rydstrøm 2001, 403). In this argument, male and female bodies in Vietnam reflect rules, hierarchies and commitments. A boy’s body differs from a girl’s because a boy’s body ensures the continuation of his patrilineage. This also determines a holistic perspective in which gender practices are not voluntary and conscious (rationally chosen) but instead respect the social and historical traditions of bodily comportment.19

Other scholarship has argued that such involuntary and unconscious replication of pre-existing systems and institutions—and their associated systems of meaning—has meant that Vietnamese people may survive socioeconomic transition without radically transforming themselves or previously developed values and ways of life. For example, Truong Huyen Chi’s (2001) ethnographic study of changing processes of social reproduction in the northern Vietnamese countryside argues that the 1990s decade did not constitute a transitional period between a non-capitalist and capitalist social formation, but was a function of relations to large-scale capital on the one hand and the use it makes of pre-existing relations of production and reproduction on the other. Werner (2002) also argues that Đổi mới can be seen as arising from the pre-existing institutional matrix of society, meaning that new forms of economic activity were shaped by the ‘historically determined character of the state apparatus and the nature of the social structure’ (cf. Evans 1995; Hy Van Luong 2003). Long et al. (2000, 130) thus conclude that transformations in gender relations during Đổi mới may ‘begin by transgressing expectations or norms followed by cultural and social reactions to “normalise” or “stabilise” the status quo along familiar patriarchal lines’.

19. Rydstrøm calls on Bourdieu’s (1992, 73) theory of practice to suggest how individuals embody the logic of social structures and transform them into individual possible choices. Conditions of existence (including past experiences) produce the habitus, which in turn determines the perception of future experiences, thus allowing for their reproduction. According to Bourdieu, ‘the body’ does not represent what it performs, it does not memorise the past, it enacts the past, bringing it back to life.
Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, fairly rigid ideas about gender relations within the idealised family in Vietnam are commonly said to mirror broader societal hierarchies (Nguyen Tu Chi 1991; Mai Huy Bich 1991; Tran Dinh Huou 1991). According to Rydstrøm and Drummond (2004, 7), ‘the family’ in Vietnam came to be seen as a parallel to the community, which was considered to be a parallel to the country that, in turn, was recognised as a parallel to the world. The sociologist Tuong Lai explains:

[In Confucianism] nhà [household/family] occupied the central position, because nhà is the foundation of the country (quốc chi bản tại gia). The category of the family, therefore, occupied a special position in theoretical thinking as well as in Confucian morality ... According to Confucianism, nhà [household/family], nước [country] and thiên hạ [world] do not differ in essence, they only differ in dimension, it is especially true for and . Therefore, the family morality () is also the morality which rules over all other relationships in the society. Village, community, country and the world are all similar, extended and developed from the original family model. (Tuong Lai 1991, 5)

And, yet, much of the ethnographic research which points to prevailing symbolic elements of ‘traditional’ gender roles also indicates ways in which Vietnamese women renegotiate in their day-to-day lives patrilineal systems, (patriarchal) social conditions and cultural expectations about Confucianism. Research has shown that Vietnamese women previously undertook a repertoire of important practices in the household, keeping the ‘family’ together and bringing up children while making important economic contributions to the household. Kabeer and Tran (2000) and Long et al. (2000), for example, suggest that Vietnamese women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were at the centre of small trade and played an important role in managing household property and budgets. In the more recent past, one can identify women’s risk-taking in economic undertakings and their adaptability and flexibility in the face of difficult odds during the Bao cấp era, where almost all women were engaged in the ‘market’ (bartering or the black market) to get by (Beresford 1988), or the early years of Đổi mới, when many women were laid off from state sector jobs and moved into the (abundant) temporary contracts available in the rapidly growing private (Rama 2002). Most recently, research has emerged documenting unmarried women in Hanoi having abortions (Gammeltoft 2003; 2006); women in northern villages choosing not to marry (Nguyen Huu Minh 1999); nuclear families
headed by women (Teerawichitchainan 2009); women dedicating their time and energies to industrial production instead of families and child-care (Korinek 2002; 2004); and women taking the initiative in dating and sex (Nguyen Phoung An 2007). Horton and Rydstrøm (2012, 548) recently surmised that, ‘in principle, a woman cannot acquire status equal to that of a man, regardless of her seniority; in practice, however, the patrilineal hierarchy is challenged by new household organisations and gendered power balances’ (cf. Hue-tam Ho Tai 2001; Phinney 2003; Rydstrøm 2003a; Werner 2008). Taken together, such data suggest the ideological function of ‘traditional’ masculinist structures and Confucian ideas are far from absolute in the shaping of gender relations in Vietnam and that this may have been the case for a long time.20

So far in this chapter I have reviewed literature dealing with Vietnamese women’s experiences of disadvantage relative to men, as well as the persistence of explanations suggesting that this disadvantage derives from state economic and social planning, and ‘Confucian’ traditions and patrilinial kinship principles shaping the idea of the family and daily gender relations in households. In the literature there have been both explicit and implicit assumptions that individual Vietnamese men benefit from these conditions in ways that make them likely to be unwilling, or perhaps even unable, to question their own practices. Much of this research, however, has been carried out on women, in kinship studies, or from a broad political economy perspective, and some of it is quite old. So in the next sections I explore a sample of recent qualitative and quantitative studies on Vietnamese women and men, and examine what, if any, changes in ideas about masculinity have emerged in the early years of the twenty-first century.

Summary

In the first section I pointed to the influence on the type of research carried out on gender in Vietnam by state modernisation projects, second-wave feminist politics, and WAD and GAD scholarship/projects. I argued that research influenced by or aimed at the very practical goal

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20. Similar ideas are expressed in recent feminist critiques of kinship and the family, especially the work of Janet Carsten (2004a; 2004b) and Linda Stone (2004). Carsten (2004, 29) states that ‘kinship has often been taken to stand for what is given rather than what is made in anthropological renditions, so that kinship studies have lacked a vocabulary for conveying change and fluidity in relationality. Carsten’s work suggests anthropological insights into people’s actual experiences of personal relations within households might be gathered by moving from ideas of physical connection to the contexts in which kinship is said to come into being, perhaps even without procreative links.
of Vietnamese women’s emancipation from Confucian and patriarchal familial structures and household arrangements might also have influenced understandings about the ways in which those structures and arrangements are expected to work to men’s advantage.

In the second section I reviewed state, academic and popular literature which posits the models of the Confucian family and patrilinial kinship systems as central to understanding macro political and micro familial relations in Vietnam. A good example is O’Harrow’s (1995) work on the dynamic relation between social and familial and household masculine practices, whose Confucian character he sees as engendering the Vietnamese family system itself. Reviews of Vietnamese women’s position in the family and in society seem frequently to follow such a mode of analysis. This is not to say that gender hierarchies in Vietnam are (or are not) intransigent, or that the Vietnamese state apparatus has necessarily been very effective (or ineffective) in shaping people’s experiences of their most intimate relationships either towards or away from Confucian lines. Rather, it is to emphasise the ways in which particular research paradigms and depictions of ‘the family’ may have dramatically affected representations and understandings of Vietnamese genders during transition.

PART TWO

Introduction

In this second part of my literature review I look at some emerging ideas about changing youth practices and attitudes, and their intersections with ideas about gender during Đổi mới. First, I briefly review literature that links ‘youth cultures’ directly to growing economic individualism. Such cultures are seen as central to the complex cultural logics of emerging capitalist orders, particularly in relation to consumption, materialism and transgression. I then review the literature on young urban Vietnamese women’s experiences of Đổi mới, indicating some of the ways in which women are said to conceive of themselves as agents of change in both the immediate context of gender relations and in the wider context of socioeconomic transition. I suggest that such scholarship points to the very limited influence of Confucian and patrilineal systems on the lives of young Vietnamese women. As such, I argue that these areas of scholarship provide unexpected insights into the conditions influencing the experiences of contemporary young urban Vietnamese men.
I contrast this idea, however, with a review of recent literature dealing with Vietnamese men and masculinities during Đổi mới. In the final section of this chapter I point to the ways in which young men during this time are described frequently in relation to longstanding masculine advantage in Vietnam. I conclude by reflecting on some of the ways this emphasis on the various effects of Confucianism and Đổi mới on Vietnamese gender relations may have come at the cost of recognising other gendered processes at work in areas of social relations.

Some emerging ideas about youth, the middle class and change

In this section I explore some of the work dealing with the possible meanings and functions of categories of ‘youth’ and ‘the middle class’, and discuss these in relation to recent scholarship focused on the experiences of young urban Vietnamese women during Đổi mới. I pay particular attention to examples in the literature where the consumption practices of these young urban Vietnamese women are viewed as a tool for transforming and developing new subjectivities. I conclude that this literature raises important questions about young Vietnamese men’s experiences of social change.

Questions of youth have become increasingly prominent in scholarship in recent years, particularly in the anthropology of East and Southeast Asia (Stivens 2002b, 1994; Adams and Dickey 2000; Brown et al. 2002; Lynch 1994; Zhang 2000). Drawing from theories of practice, activity and performance, this literature posits that categories of ‘young people’—for example, ‘youth’, ‘adolesecents’ and ‘teenagers’—across Asia negotiate cultural identities in a variety of distinctive ways, for example, both material (Shen Jie 2003) and semiotic (Retsikas 2006), leisure-based (Whang and Chang 2003), sexual (Westley and Choe 2002), at home (Bennett 2005), at school (Puyat 2003), at work (Kawasaki 1994, 185–204) and in the political sphere (Hague and Uhm 2003, 212–5). Scholars have been especially interested in youthful cultures of hedonism, ‘new’ masculine and feminine practices, and the ‘social problems’ of youthful consumption, materialism and transgression (Stivens and Sen 1998; Hodgson 2001; Liechty 1995; White 1993). Some youths have been shown as increasingly rejecting ‘traditional’ worldviews in favour of individualism and consumerism (Stevenson and Zusho 2002; Naito and Guilien 2002; White 1993).

Scholars have also recently focused attention on young people’s lives and gender in Southeast Asia in terms of (intersections with) changing patterns of (emerging, middle) class experience (Yuval-Davis 2006b; Sen and Stivens 1998; Ong and Peletz 1995). But as I flagged in the
introduction to the thesis, and as will become apparent in the following chapters, I consider that such definitions may be too broad or confused to be analytically useful for unpacking my informants’ narratives. According to King et al. (2007), for example, the ‘emerging middle class’ in Vietnam is not really a social class or ‘class identity’ in any economic or political sense, but is much more a category comprised of various occupational groupings: people in positions of administrative power, people who control economic capital, and people with education, experience and employable skills (cf. Trinh Duy Luan 1993; Bresnan 1997, 77). King (2008, 98–9) argues that these elements, along with ‘a greater interest in consumption, leisure activities, and the maintenance and achievement of social status’, seem to be what ‘mark out middle class identities’ in Vietnam.21 An even broader definition was recently offered by Bélanger et al. (2012, 9), who argued that the ‘middle class’ in Vietnam is a ‘social group (including sub-groups) which adheres to a certain lifestyle (or set of lifestyles), or is encouraged to do so by market or state actors, in order to assert its social position in the respective class structures of colonial capitalism or socialist capitalism (post-1986)’.22 Vann (2012, 158) surmises that we can thus understand the ‘middle class’ in Vietnam ‘not as a clearly-defined category or set of criteria, but as a far more

21. In contrast to King (2008a), Gainsborough (2002, 694–707) delimited five main classes in post-reform Vietnam: Large land owners; the peasantry and rural workers; the urban working class; the bourgeoisie or entrepreneurs; and the salaried and middle classes (comprising state employees and those in foreign companies). King (2008, 84) suggests that such a definition also stands in some contrast with Hsiao’s (2001) explanation of the Southeast Asian ‘middle class’ as ‘a class in the making’, comprising three main segments: The ‘new middle class’ (salary earning professionals and administrators), the ‘old middle class’ (small proprietors, the self-employed), which was often referred to in the Marxist tradition as the petit bourgeoisie (cf. van der Kroef 1953), and the ‘marginal middle class’ (lower grade white collar clerical and sales and service workers and small proprietors who deal with more routine tasks), sometimes referred to as a ‘lower middle strata’ (Girling 1985, 178). He states that these latter nonetheless ‘usually overlap with, and, in some respects, are indistinguishable from elements of what we might term the upper working class, often of skilled and semi-skilled manual workers’ (King 2008, 84; cf. Hsiao 2001, 5–8, 35–36; Hewison 1996, 143; Robison and Goodman 1996a, 9). Heberer (2003), on the other hand, rejects altogether the relevance and analytic value of ‘class’ in his comparative study of private entrepreneurs in China and Vietnam. He argues that when ‘class’ in a purely Marxist or in a Weberian or even Bourdieusian sense, implies more coherence than could describe the Vietnamese or Chinese cases of economic transition (Bélanger 2012, 7) Despite the possibly fatal complexity and opacity around issues of definition, King (2008, 98) argues that the ‘expanding young middle class in Vietnam … displays some of the characteristics of the middle class elsewhere in Southeast Asia—a firm commitment to education, an orientation to consumption and to accessing news and information, aspirations to improve and develop in personal and career terms, and a more general self-confidence.’ Drummond (2012) argues that it is nonetheless still extremely difficult to ‘see’ the middle class in Vietnam.

22. These arguments echo very longstanding debates in sociology about how to define the middle class. See for example, Wright Mills (1956) and Weber (1964)
unstable situation, not unlike what Li Zhang (2008, 24), in her research on the middle class in China has called a “process of happening”.

Interest in both the flexibility of youthful identities and transformative affects of emerging class stratification—however vaguely defined—has nonetheless been prominent in scholarship and development research on gender relations in Vietnam (Thai Duy Tuyen 2004; Tran Bach Dang 1994; Gammeltoft 2002a; Efroymson et al. 1997). Young people during Đổi mới have often appeared remarkable to both scholars and Vietnamese media commentators for their rapidly changing ways: that is, seeking multiple degrees in areas of study of their choosing, pursuing immediate financial rewards even in positions unrelated to their training, rapidly deserting one emotional relationship for another, marrying later for both sexes, and declining arranged marriages (King et al. 2007; Ngo Thị Ngan Bình 2004). These changing ways among the youth have apparently been accompanied by significant unease among many older Vietnamese. State and party officials, policy-makers and social researchers, as well as parents and members of the senior generation, have appeared in the media and scholarship as concerned about the ways in which young women’s adherence to Vietnamese traditions were being seen as vulnerable to the influence of globalisation, Western-style consumerism, advertising, media, Euro-American and international feminisms, and civil society (King et al. 2007; Werner and Bélanger 2002; Nguyễn Bích Tuan and Thomas 2004). For example, Marr and Rosen (1999, 200) recount a contribution to a 1995 forum in Tuổi Trẻ (Youth) newspaper that called for young people to assimilate pride in their origins with modern communications, technology and industry to form a meaningful contemporary identity that could be passed on to future generations. They elsewhere argue that concerns about youth losing their roots (mất gốc) were by the mid-1990s so great that ‘even Communist Party members loyal to the reform strategy’ were wondering ‘if Vietnam is losing its soul to Coca Cola, Madonna and Hollywood’ (Marr and Rosen 1998, 149; cf. Earl 2008).

Perhaps exacerbating such concerns, Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001) argues that during the early years of Đổi mới the perceived failures of the centrally planned economic system and the waning of

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23. Marr and Rosen (1998) also cite the 1994 government report ‘Understanding value tendencies of Vietnamese youth in conditions of the market economy’ (Tìm hiểu định hướng giá trị của thanh niên trong điều kiện nền kinh tế thị trường) as evidence that since the early days of Đổi mới older Vietnamese have worried about how the attitudes of young people who came of age and formed their identity and value perceptions in a market-oriented society might clash with the expectations that the older generations who grew up under socialism have of young people (cf. Trần Bạch Đằng 1994).
socialism worldwide meant that that Vietnamese state forces suddenly set aside their previous vision of the future as a communist utopia emerging victorious from a heroic and triumphant struggle against foreign domination, and took up instead the idea that the future would be driven by a market-based economy. Philip Taylor (2001) suggests that family memories would have made young people who grew up during this period alert to the deprivation suffered in the postwar period of central planning, but that state and popular myth-making in the early 1990s around renewal meant they also grew up in a period characterised by popular and self-conscious awareness of a radically changing reality.

Particular scholarly attention has been directed toward the new and different attitudes of young women (O’Harrow 1995; Pham Van Bich 1999; Drummond and Thomas 2003; Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas 2004; Gammeltoft 2006; Pettus 2003) and professional or middle-class youth (King et al. 2007; Sakellariou and Patrinos 2007; Nguyen Phuong An 2002, 2005). In this scholarship, the attitudes and behaviours of young urban Vietnamese women who came of age and formed their identity and value perceptions in the market-oriented society after Đổi mới are often considered to be different from those expected of them by the older generations who grew up under socialism. Changing consumption habits among women in urban centres, a renaissance of popular religious activities, imitative celebrity culture and dramatic changes in attitudes and behaviours regarding sexual relations and sexuality are just a few examples of what Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas (2004) theorise as ‘post-socialist sensibilities’. Other scholars have argued that participating in cybercultures, eating in outdoor restaurants, using perfume and exercise equipment, beauty contests, and buying the latest clothes serve as particularly ‘modern’ ways of constituting young Vietnamese womanhood (see, for example, Taylor 2004a, 2004c; Gammeltoft 2003; Ungar 2000; Earl 2004; Nghiem 2004). Such scholarship certainly could be read to suggest that young Vietnamese women are broadly proficient in negotiating these emerging gender identities in contradistinction to the perceived morality of their (sexed) bodies within neo-Confucian models.24

The research on the new youth-based styles and practices of urban Vietnamese women reveals an interesting paradox. In the idealised Confucian models reviewed in previous sections, men embody both the power and prestige of their entire patrilineage, all women marry, all women

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24. As we briefly saw in part 1 of this chapter, such scholarship adds to a long history of research in Vietnam documenting manifold ways women negotiate social and bodily expectations of male-oriented policy or belief systems in their daily lives (Pham Van Bich 1997; Werner 1981; Eisen-Bergman 1974).
remain virgins until they do marry, everyone lives in a three-generation household, and divorce and separation are not acknowledged as viable options for either men or women. Yet the emerging ethnographic research suggests that, far from understanding themselves passively within closed dynamics of production and reproduction, Vietnamese women in the 1990s and 2000s constructed new and different types of social interactions, and did so in the context of apparently conflicting structural pressures on gender relations, such as the increasing pressures on women to enter the private sector labour market while being told through state social mobilisation campaigns that they were responsible also for maintaining family harmony (Hy Van Luong 2003a, 220; cf. Trang Quach 2008; Vu Song Ha 2008). This argument appears to be further borne out in the increasing body of empirical work on the incidence of single parenting by women, the rise of cohabitation, the rapid rise of single households, the emergence of new patterns of intimacy and the changing practices of women within and beyond the family (see, for example, Werner 2008; Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong 1999, 1998).

Young urban women are thus said to be challenging Vietnamese family ‘traditions’ and formulating new and different relations between men and women. Some recent studies on postsocialisms in Eastern Europe and elsewhere argue for scepticism, however, about assuming the local meaning and values connected to ‘global practices’ of consumption, leisure activities and the maintenance and achievement of social status. For example, Truc’s (2003) work on gender, globalisation and postsocialism in the Czech Republic after communism gave a sustained critique of neoliberalism, Marxism and institutionalist theories precisely because these theories all overlook the gendered aspects of transitions and base their analyses on formal political and economic institutions. She further argues that because gender is a process and has numerous variations even within one culture, an awareness of gender defies the idea of a unified transition. Other ethnography-based scholarship on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union alerts us to the notion that the merging of Western ideas into postsocialist moral and value systems can lead to unpredictable outcomes. Humphrey (2002) highlights the fact that concepts such as market, trading, democracy and global economy come from Euro-American traditions and that they are often taken for granted in those places. When these concepts are transplanted into new contexts, however, they work in bizarrely different ways, often because they receive different (and constantly changing) moral and cultural evaluations (cf. Buyandelgeriyn 2008).

Emerging scholarship on Vietnam argues that young women’s supposedly new and different relations may, indeed, have long been present, just invisible to most researchers. For example,
research by Barbieri and Bélanger (2009) and Vu Song Ha (2008) suggests that rather than accepting the series of idealised or ‘appropriate’ patriarchal relationships models of gender inequality under Confucianism suggest, the everyday life of Vietnamese women can be conceived as frequently based on a series of relationships in which they actively resist the power of public discourses about feminine sexuality in contemporary Vietnam. Vu Song Ha (2008) points to the power of rural Vietnamese women’s silences in resisting and transforming sexual relations to better serve their needs. She argues that such alternative conceptions of female sexual agency confound sexological enquiries based on Western sex research techniques, and mistakenly allow Vietnamese women to be considered sexually passive even as they subtly shape their sexual encounters. Trang Quach (2008, S152) additionally argues that one consequence of sexuality and gender research which posits Vietnamese women as constrained by patriarchal, male-dominated cultural notions is that young unmarried women have often, and mistakenly, been understood as victims of a transitional social context rather than as ‘agents of social change’. Nhung Tuyet Tran (2006) surmises that broader critical investigation of the meaning and effects of supposedly powerful cultural forces in Vietnam has for a long time failed to influence scholarly writing on gender:

In the last two decades challenges to the [Vietnamese] national narrative have profoundly changed the ways scholars think of Vietnamese history, shifting the conception from that of one grand narrative to one of multiple versions of Vietnamese history. Writing about gender in Vietnam, however, seems to have survived these invocations, as scholars continue to accept a hundred-year-old construction of Vietnamese womanhood as historical fact. Images of Vietnamese women who defy Confucian standards and symbolise a national essence have maintained a tenacious hold on the contemporary imagination. Forcing Vietnamese women to conform to intellectual and political agendas, whether imperialist, nationalist, postcolonial, feminist, or postfeminist, does an injustice to their experiences. (Nhung Tuyet Tran 2006, 139)

In this section I have argued that recent scholarship on Vietnamese youth during the transition to a market economy suggests that new patterns of behaviour and consumption have emerged among young people. It also points to ways in which the changing practices and sensibilities of some urban women within and beyond the family are challenging presumptions about
the persistence and meaning of ‘traditional’ gender relations. I further argued that studies on postsocialisms in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, and emerging research on women in Vietnam indicate some of the ways that broad assumptions about social systems and transition can conceal the nuanced processes of gendered, moral and cultural rationalisation undertaken by individuals. Such findings invite scrutiny of previous claims about the strength and intergenerational durability of ‘traditional’ and Confucian forces in the lives of both women and men.

Enduring privilege

In this final section I review some of the available literature on Vietnamese men that has been carried out in the last fifteen years. I propose that a number of these studies describe men as inheriting and embodying traditions of stability, strength and dominance, even where those traditions are unclear and contested. I conclude that many scholarly accounts of men and masculinities in Vietnam appear to lack a vocabulary for conveying the change and fluidity in relations between genders during Đổi mới that became evident in the previous sections’ review of scholarship on youth and young women’s experiences.

One common argument about Vietnamese men’s behaviour during Đổi mới suggests that they were able to easily defend inherited gender privileges by invoking ‘traditional’ gender roles and relations. For example, in her study of changing processes of social reproduction in Dong Van village in the Red River Delta, Truong Huyen Chi (2001) argues that in the early years of Đổi mới, trading in Hanoi by Dong Van women became the major source of income for their households, threatening ‘traditional’ familial gender roles. Dong Van men increasingly came to depend on the cash income provided by their wives’ urban trade. Despite their economically disadvantaged positions, however, the men were able through manipulation and social pressure to exert a powerful claim on women’s lives and their families, predicated upon ‘Confucian notions of behavioural appropriateness’ and women’s submission (Truong Huyen Chi 2001, 131). Women traders complied with these expectations by publicly using the language of love and sacrifice to explain their moving beyond ‘traditionally’ defined roles of household production. At the same time, they emphasised privately to Truong Huyen Chi their role as the ‘central pole’ (trụ cột) of the family life in both material and emotional terms, not just in budgetary terms (2001, 148). A similar argument appears in Tran Ngoc Angie’s (2004, 224–6) chapter on male negotiations and gender reproduction in the Vietnamese garment industry. She argues that men
undertaking the ‘women’s work’ of sewing easily balanced any loss of face, or mitigated their offended masculinity, by describing their experiences in terms of ‘fulfilling the male provisioning role’ in their households.

Vietnamese men also appear able to exploit for personal gain or pleasure the changing positions of women in the market economy through recourse to ‘traditional’ expectations of men’s ‘nature’. Nguyen Khanh Linh and Harris (2009) argue that changing social conditions and gender relations in Vietnam are fairly easily negotiated by both young and middle-aged men through ideas about men’s desires and sexual ‘traditions’. As their wives become better educated, more independent and greater contributors to family income, men can obviate any ensuing strain or anxiety by engaging in extramarital relationships or homosocial bonding around female commercial sex workers (cf. Vu Ngoc Bao, Long and Taylor 1999). Drawing on more than 220 survey interviews and 22 in-depth follow-up interviews, Nguyen Khanh Linh and Harris (2009, 127) argue that contemporary men share experiences of commercial sex and cover up one another’s extramarital affairs in order to reiterate signifiers of ‘maleness, sexual potency, and prestige’. These signifiers are predicated on very old Vietnamese ‘traditions’ of polygamy and (female) concubinage:

> The construction of masculinity based on sexuality is so strong in Vietnam that this construction becomes quite homogeneous: gender, economic condition, education level, and age are not contributing variables in the consistent ideology about extra-marital relationships. (Nguyen Khanh Linh and Harris 2009, 136)

Phinney (2008) similarly argues that during Đổi mới Vietnamese men have been able to pursue their desires for sex outside marriage because of very old ‘traditions’ and very ‘modern’ opportunities. Practically all of the men interviewed and observed for Phinney’s study are said to have negotiated their ongoing construction of a modern masculinity in relation to other men and by using sex workers (2008, 652). Those few men in the study who did not want to go out looking for sex were said to have expected to be pressured into the services of sex workers when

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25. For comparative discussion about about links between men being in groups and having sex with sex workers in Asia, see for example the studies on Thailand (Greene 2000, 55; Fordham 1995), China (Jeffreys 1997) and Korea (Cheng Sea-ling, 2000).
socialising with other men (2008, 653). Tran Duc Hoa et al. (2006) argue that those young men who try to avoid the pressure from their peers to have sex with commercial sex workers feel that they must offer ‘excuses’, such as that they are tired or have some urgent work to do.

Phinney (2008) argues that this is because in Đổi mới Vietnam there has emerged a confluence of ‘traditional’ structures and modern structural factors which accommodate and encourage men’s sexual risk-taking. The ‘traditional’ role of husbands as the ‘pillar of the family’ requires them to have a good understanding of society and ‘encourages and enables men to explore the urban environment and to socialise with male friends in new gendered social spaces’ (2008, 655).

Thus, in the market economy Vietnamese men are easily able to leverage advantages associated with their ‘traditional’ roles in families in order to pursue new commercial and sexual leisure activities. Vietnamese women, on the other hand, remain ‘ideologically and structurally inferior to their husbands’ through a combination of domestic and familial demands on their time, and new concerns about body image and their ability to keep their husbands faithful (200, 653–5). Similar arguments have been made that men’s extramarital sex is tolerated as long as they still take care of their family (Tran Duc Hoa et al. 2006). Specifically, a husband must fulfil his responsibility of financial support towards his family in his position as breadwinner (Nguyen Khanh Linh and Harris 2009). He also must make it clear to his wife that he does not intend to break the marital contract through extramarital affairs (Tran Duc Hoa et al. 2006).

Arguments have also been made that Vietnamese men are less physically and morally vulnerable than women to the exigencies of life under Đổi mới. Gammeltoft (2003, 2002b), for example, has argued that there is a clash between ‘traditional’ morality and social expectations regarding female virginity prior to marriage on the one hand and contemporary urban dating culture on the other (cf. Johansson et al. 1998). In this view, young Vietnamese women and men find it difficult to negotiate ‘traditional’ moral considerations of female propriety and chastity, and their own erotic interests. Gammeltoft’s (2003, 2002b) work nonetheless suggests a clearly gendered experience of youth sexuality and abortion. The ‘traditional’ and changing value orientations and practices around sexuality appear to be in many ways unmanageable and dangerous for women. On the other hand, they usually only appear problematic for men when their female partners experience an unwanted pregnancy. A related argument is made by Nguyen Thi Thuy Hanh (2009, 174), who argues that because ‘men have the right to gain pleasure from sexual activities, they are limited in taking responsibility for contraception and the termination of unwanted pregnancies’.
A similar theme is evident in Nguyen Phuong An’s (2007) work on emerging trends in youth sex culture in contemporary urban Vietnam. She argues that during Đổi mới there has been a ‘continuation of the “traditional” perceptions of gender practices (particularly the expectation of women to uphold propriety and chastity). At the same time there has been a recognition of the increasingly assertive role of young women in modern [sic] sexuality and hence of increasing gender equality in this regard’ (2007, 287). Nguyen Phuong An (2007, 302) charts a rapid shift in her male and female informants’ attitudes towards female virginity during the late 1990s and early 2000s. She suggests that these shifts have been accompanied by dramatic changes in young women’s attitudes towards premarital sex and their behaviours, including casual sexual encounters. On the other hand, for men the loss of virginity has ‘obviously never been seen as either a loss or a moral consideration’ (Nguyen Phuong An 2007, 303). Instead young men appear to be carrying over into their ‘love-based’ relationships with young women the sexual attitudes and behaviours ‘based on need’ (2007, 309) that they have also (already) exploited through prostitution and at sexual recreation establishments. Such scholarship suggests that some young Vietnamese men display more or less hydraulic sexual ‘needs’ and are also able to negotiate more complex relations based on love and desire.

La Manh Cuong’s (2005) Master’s thesis presents a qualitative study of the ‘reciprocal relationship between masculinity, virginity and Confucianism’ in Vietnam in the early 2000s. From a sample of twenty young men in Hanoi, he argues that present-day negotiations about sex remain ‘influenced and shaped by profoundly cultural and historical forces’, which are manifest in gendered attitudes and behaviours relating to virginity (2005, 6). La Manh Cuong argues that Confucian beliefs influence men’s sexual behaviours and constitute in contemporary dating cultures ‘the privileges that men inherit, and the disadvantages that women face’ (2005, 10). He suggests that amid a dramatically changing social order young Vietnamese men generally still expect to be able to marry virgin women because of traditions [sic] around ‘patriarchy, social status and the power of men in Vietnam (2005, 3). They behave this way to ‘enhance their social reputation and masculinity’ in line with those traditions (2005, i).

Other arguments have emerged that social and economic transitions threaten Vietnamese men ‘as men’; these bear some similarities to earlier discussions about men being prone to experience disruption or loss when they face changing social situations. For example, the sociologist Le Thi Nam Tuyet (1999, 84; 1996) argues that the relative independence of women, particularly in the economic field, threatens the esteem with which men are held within families:
In the process of development and progress of new family relationships, all strict ranking and orders and concepts of respect for men and none for women have been disappearing... The power structure of man as head of household related to private property or means of production no longer exists. (Le 1996, cited in Harris 1998)

Turner and Nguyen Phuong An (2005) argue that changing social and economic conditions have meant that young married men are facing ‘dramatically increasing levels of responsibility’, primarily in relation to their wives and families. They state that men are now categorically expected to be the main earner of the family:

Young men entering the market economy are now expected to provide their wives and families with housing, economic security, holidays and other comforts, all of which were once provided by the socialist state under the Bao cấp (subsidy) system. (Turner and Nguyen Phuong An 2005, 1699)

The challenges adapting to the social transformations of Đổi mới are not restricted to married men. Le Thi Nam Tuyet (1999) argues that in order for a single man entering the market economy in the 1990s to keep up with a modern age of social and economic flux he must try to embrace fundamentally new subjectivities. The modern man must retrain himself to ‘take the initiative in economic activities’, ‘not surrender to challenges and failures’, ‘create or seize opportunities’, and ‘not hold on to old stereotypes’ (Le Thi 1999, 105).

Most other available information on young men in Vietnam emerges either through anthropological investigation into how men’s behaviours are experienced by women (Rydstrøm 2003; Gammeltoft 1999) or in the fields of public health and development. These works have focused typically on behavioural characteristics of men who have sex with men (MSM), male clients of commercial sex workers (CSW) (Bao, Long and Taylor 1998), injecting drug users, and perpetrators of domestic violence (Doyle 2002; Bao Ngoc Vu et al. 2008; Le Thi Phuong Mai 1998). There is thus much known about the behavioural characteristics of urban men who are at high risk of causing significant physical harm in their own or others’ lives (see, for example, Hy Van Luong 1989; Proschan 1998; Doyle 2002; Vu Ngoc Bau and Girault 2004).

There also is some historical work dealing with Vietnamese masculinities during the French colonial period and the American war—literature that almost universally casts Vietnamese men

As my focus is on ‘very ordinary’ heterosexual men aged under thirty and the effects of recent sociocultural change on their notions of masculinity, however, I consider a discussion of French colonial racism and American war literature beyond the scope of the thesis. Further, as my empirical chapters bear out, the findings from the extensive development literature focused on Vietnamese men’s hostility to women or their sexually ‘risky’ behaviours has little direct relevance to this study.

In this section I have focused on the small body of recent literature that is primarily concerned with Vietnamese men or at least touches on the changing social conditions affecting issues of men and masculinity. Though the scholarship that I have reviewed differs widely in aims, methods and findings, there is a common theme presenting young Vietnamese men as willing and able to exploit for their own pleasure a confluence of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ advantages within gender relations or as enduring less suffering in life because of those advantages. Vietnamese men also seem to have a strong interest in the physical, economic and sexual domination of women and retain many of the gender sureties of ‘traditional’ masculine practices and identities in families and workplaces (O’Harrow 1995; Hy Van Luong 1989; Khuat Thu Hong, 2004). The lives of Vietnamese men, their relationships with their families, and their relationships to men and women in both private and public spheres appear in the literature as grounded in terms of Confucian ‘traditions’ and ideas of masculine ‘advantage’; they are also depicted as benefiting in fairly straightforward ways from those ideological and structural conditions.

Summary

In the third section of part 2 I reviewed some of the emerging ideas about changing youth practices and attitudes, and young Vietnamese women and femininities during Đổi mới. I argued that these descriptions of youth, and young urban Vietnamese women in particular, appear to confound notions of entrenched masculine advantage in Vietnam and thus provide some
unexpected insights into the conditions surrounding the contemporary experiences of young urban Vietnamese men. In the fourth section I suggested that themes of powerful Confucian forces nonetheless remain common in research conducted on Vietnamese men in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This recent scholarship seems to suggest that there are significant related costs for women of (contemporary invocations of) ‘traditional’ perceptions of gender practices, and practically none for men.

The persistence of such homogenising and essentialist treatment of the category ‘men’ is curious for at least two reasons. First, many of the challenges that young Vietnamese women face in relation to changing labour conditions, economic expectations and educational requirements are also faced by young men. But men appear in this literature far more frequently as either fairly untroubled by the processes of social transformation or able to rely on cultural values predicated on ideas of masculinity and femininity that assure men of their social authority. Further, in these accounts men generally appear willing and able to exploit inherited (masculinist) structures in new and sometimes troubling ways.

Second, the perpetuation of male privilege in most significant public and private forums seems to have resulted from a somewhat unproblematic conflation of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ gender hierarchies in Vietnam, which are seen as benefiting men. Vietnamese men thus appear constituted as subjects within those powerful forces of cultural reproduction, rather than as agents of change in gender relations or as engaging in social practices around new or changing masculinities. It is clear in this literature, however, that the authors have not examined in any detail at all the microprocesses of Vietnamese men’s identity creation and processes of negotiation underpinning their experiences as men.

PART THREE

Conclusion

This literature review set out to do three things:

1. to provide a broader historical context to my questions about Vietnamese men and masculinities,
2. to cast light on the combination of epistemological frame(s), particular political objectives and scholarly trends that have influenced research into gender relations in Vietnam historically, and
3. to ask whether researchers have failed to recognise other gendered processes at work by positing men and women in terms of particular configurations of power relations (that is, gender equality, Confucian versus non-Confucian, or more broadly a dominant versus alternative binary of gender relations).

Working toward my first two goals for this chapter was, as I hope is evident, reasonably straightforward. In part 1 I reviewed literature suggesting that ongoing debates in Vietnam about gender equality may have contributed to particular understandings and representations of Vietnamese genders and gender relations. I emphasised work suggesting that early VCP goals and VWU campaigns for gender equality may have encouraged Western feminist researchers to take an interest in, and call attention to, the disadvantaged conditions of Vietnamese women. I argued that this emphasis continues today in the GAD literature on Vietnam. One unintended consequence of this enduring focus has been the persistent and sometimes apparently uncritical assumption that social systems that disadvantage women generally also discriminate in reasonably straightforward ways in favour of men. Probably because of this assumption there has remained little scholarly interest in, and certainly no sympathy for, the possible difficulties that urban heterosexual Vietnamese men have faced in sustaining, resisting and renegotiating their experiences of ‘being a man’. My review of research conducted on Vietnamese men in the first decade of the twenty-first century appeared to confirm this argument, suggesting that men are still frequently and uncritically described and understood in scholarship in terms of their Confucian advantages.

Achieving my third goal has, however, been significantly more complicated than with the first two. It appears that references to structural and ideological systems favouring men as a gender in Vietnam have brought us no closer to understanding the microprocesses implicit in the (re-) creation of many of those inequalities in the first place. In the literature reviewed in part 1, Confucianism often appears to be understood as a holistic system that tended in Vietnam to work to the benefit of male power, even as Vietnamese women are shown to play an openly powerful role in families, and counter Confucian precepts with strategies that sometimes appear to have been overlooked by researchers (Vo song Ha 2008).
Of itself this is a cause for concern, if not scepticism, about the views on Vietnamese men and masculinity that I have outlined in this chapter. A description of Confucian and masculinist principles might tell us something about the ways in which men are expected to, or may aspire to, dominate women, but it does not necessarily tell us much about which men, or how, why, when or even whether particular men can enact such essentialist ideas and practices in their daily lives. Some scholarship on urban women’s experiences during Đổi mới indeed suggests that the persistence of assumptions in scholarship about Confucian and ‘masculinist’ traditions may have obscured the experiences of those (possibly very many) women whose behaviour and choices lie outside the ‘gender norms’ such idealised versions inscribe (Trang Quac 2008; Hirschman and Nguyen Huu Minh 2004). It seems reasonable to presume that the same could well be true for men.

This point is implied in Doyle’s (2002) examination of the CARE International research project ‘Men in the Know’. As already discussed, Vietnamese family planning models during the 1990s came to posit men’s sexual behaviours as ‘broadly problematic’. Doyle (2002) argues that subsequent initiatives to involve men in decision-making about reproductive and sexual health were limited by negative and stereotypical expectations about men, appealing to (men’s) self-interest rather than promoting mutuality between the sexes. Strategies designed to engage men in reproductive health appeared to posit responsibility, resistance and ultimately agency firmly with women: heterosexual men’s identities, attitudes and sexual practices were taken as givens that women must deal with as best they can. But some men in the study said that their sense of self-worth ‘as men’ depended in part upon their partner being sexually satisfied. Doyle (2002) points that these men might have been in an empowered position vis-à-vis their sexual partners, but this advantage was tempered by a fear of ‘failing to perform’ (2002, 188). He also points out that it was not necessarily known to what extent sexual gratification motivated the female partners of the men in the study (2002, 202). Doyle (2002, 189) surmises that dominant gendered discursive formations of ‘patriarchy’ in Vietnam may indeed serve ‘as a form of hegemonic ideology which appears to characterise men’s everyday negotiations of their gender and sexual identities even when it is being resisted’.

The dangers of presuming the meanings of gender practices are also borne out in the conclusion of Dang Nguyen Anh and Le Bach Duong’s (2002) research into myths and realities of penile implants and sexual stimulants in Vietnam. In this study, ball bearings inserted into men’s penises were seen by researchers as a type of violence against women, until the women involved were interviewed:
The results from interviewing with women indicate that some of them found ball bearings, the animal shaped condoms, and the latex ‘magic bands’ very pleasurable, although they all were scared the first time. Later on, they liked and enjoyed the practice, even missing it when their men left home or disappeared for some time, or were passionate about it, forcing their partners to have sex more frequently. (Dang Nguyen Anh and Le Bach Duong 2002, 12)

These vignettes suggest that it is not at all clear just how ‘traditional’ or ‘Confucian’ gender differentiation extended during Đổi mới to gender practices and inequality in patterns of sexual behaviours and economic activities. In the broader literature, various sets of beliefs and practices in families which discriminate against women sometimes appear to be generalised to explain preferential treatment and higher status positions for males relative to females in wider society. But it is not clear that the symptoms of inequality embedded in gender relations in Vietnam are also the systemic causes. Nor is it clear that the data show that men act in ways consistent with Confucian tropes or masculine principles.

In other words, it cannot be presumed—although it often is—that idealised Confucian models of gender relations play the powerful roles attributed to them and formalise social interaction. And even if the Confucian moral order does envisage gender hierarchies based upon idealised relationships, neither is there any reason to believe that most men seek to integrate these ideals into their day-to-day activities. I thus conclude from this literature review that there is both a space and an urgent need for research on young urban Vietnamese men’s experiences, memories and expectations about masculinity during Đổi mới.
This chapter will argue that my informants’ memories of their mother’s situations and practices within the family during the early 1990s contrast with broader discourses of women’s disempowerment and young men’s own masculinist narratives. As I have suggested, the literature has argued that women remained economically and socially curtailed during Đổi mới, at least in part because of authority relations in the family (Rydström 2003, 687; Werner 2002, 32; Werner and Bélanger 2002, 16; Hy Van Luong 2003a, 212). But this idea is challenged by my informants’ narratives about their family’s experiences during the early 1990s, and in particular their mother’s changing work practices and the ways in which these women were sometimes major contributors to their family’s household budgets. While describing men’s ideal positions in their families in broad Confucian tropes, these young men also pointed to some of the ways that labor market changes in the early 1990s diminished their father’s familial influence and authority. They described their mothers as dramatically increasing their power and authority over family decisions, and as economically dynamic relative to their fathers. This appears to have led them to cite their mother’s histories of economic risk-taking as relevant examples of economic capability in today’s market economy. As we shall see, my informants remembered the domain of home life (nhà) as containing interrelated and overlapping relations of economic activity, ideas of gendered authority and symbolic and actual power relations which challenge the ideas that gender appropriate behaviours within Vietnamese families include, and overwhelm, the household economy.
Theoretical considerations from the literature

Studies in other countries have demonstrated the significant impact of women’s economic independence on progressively shifting the balance of power in their favour within society in general, and within the household in particular. For example, Chinese women’s ability to earn a wage has been said to ‘endow them with new resources and the will to attempt to renegotiate their role in the household (Otis 2003, 209; cf. Rofel 2007). Studies on Vietnam tend to qualify this claim (Teerawichitchainan 2009). As we saw in chapter 3, Rama (2002, 170–71) suggests that women’s activity has showed some signs of decline during Đổi mới. Other studies have suggested that women who do work do so increasingly in the wage sector, and that their earning potential is much larger than it was in the past (Werner 2003; Le Thi Nam Tuyet 2001; Thalemen 1996). Women have been becoming significant, and sometimes major, contributors to their parents’ household budgets, when still unmarried, and to their husbands’, after marriage (Oudin 2009). They have also come to represent a sizable proportion of household heads (Teerawichitchainan 2009). Other studies tend to conclude, however, that the role of renovation in the reduction of gendered inequalities should not be overstated: women’s economic contribution may not necessarily translate into enhanced status within the household and reduced disparities in the household division of labor (Bélanger and Barbieri 2009, 31; Teerawichitchainan 2009, 336; Drummond and Rydstrøm 2004; Hy Van Luong 2003; Pettus 2003). Teerawichitchainan (2009, 334, 357) argues that a sceptical approach to the effects of Đổi mới questions the well-known feminist theoretical postulate that a woman’s ability to earn money, independent of her husband, larger kin group or local community, strengthens her decision-making power. A significant gap remains in the literature, however, regarding the effects of these documented changes on men in the household, and on young men growing up during periods when their mothers are increasing their income earning activities.

As discussed in the introduction and chapter 3, a central theme in the literature on gender relations during Đổi mới stresses the ways in which the newly emerging social and economic

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1. A comparison between the 1992–93 and 1997–98 rounds of the Vietnam Living Standards Survey reveals the slow growth of salaried employment among women relative to men from then. Rama explains, however, that this employment pattern is not due to a decline in female participation rates, as observed in many countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Labour force participation rates are very high for women in Vietnam, and they increased in the 1990s. At the end of the decade the percentage of women of working age who were employed was almost the same as the percentage of men. Moreover, women were less likely than men to be unemployed.
systems that focused on 'the household' became linked to pre-existing internal institutions in 'the family' and their associated systems of meaning (Pelzer 1993; Fahey 1998; Werner and Bélanger 2002; Pham Van Bich 1997; Drummond 2004; Chu Van Lam 1991). Such accounts indicate the intersection of two more or less distinct types of social arrangement as primary and overlapping categories of intervention and analysis. The first was a ‘cultural family’ (hộ gia đình) premised on apparently longstanding ideals of Confucianism. The second was an ‘administrative’ household (hộ) or ‘family economy’ (Kinh tế hộ gia đình), which was said to be organised through various labour market reconfigurations during Đổi mới in ways that co-opted and rehabilitated the form and function of the ‘traditional’ family and thereby tried to improve women’s productivity (Werner 2004, 116; Drummond 2004; Werner 2004; Rama 2002; Le Thi 2001; Knodel et al. 2005). Rydstrøm (2003, 687) surmises that one effect of the recent changes in Vietnamese society, above all the developing market economy, has been to some extent the reconstitution of females’ ‘more traditional and Confucian roles’ [sic] within the family.

As we saw in the introduction, however, while categorical distinctions about the matrix of practices, discussions, exchanges and rituals that constitute being and belonging in a family or social unit may be useful to think (and by extension write and read) with, they may render both the Vietnamese terms and meanings in ways that are more than a little static. They also might reinstate the ‘dominant’ versus ‘alternative’ hierarchies commonly said to formalise social interaction in Vietnam studies, categories perhaps more meaningful to analysts than subjects. For example, Hy Van Luong (1998, 309) argues that the role of Vietnamese women in entrepreneurial activities can be understood ‘only in terms of the interplay of ideologies and the political economy framework’. Elsewhere he argues that the strong resurgence of a male-oriented kinship system during Đổi mới emerged ‘as a result of the confluence of state policies on the one hand and household strategies and the gender socialization process on the other’ (2003a, 212). In suggesting this interplay and confluence, however, Hy Van Luong demarcates a priori domains of practice and meaning, separating the household as an economic unit (constituted within and constitutive of broader economic and administrative structures) from the exigencies of individuals and families who lived within houses. Such arguments do little to help us understand the ways in which work is valued in the home or whether home life may make meaningful work.

Such analytic distinctions between the ‘cultural’ and ‘political/economic’ aspects of family life also may conflate what is given to anthropologists with what is made through analysis (Fabian 1983; Russel et al. 1986). The problem is that the analytic split between ‘the household’ and ‘the
family’ is seen to be grounded in reality rather than as, itself, also a symbol system or ideology (Gittens 1993, 59; Russel et al. 1986).

As my ethnographic vignettes will now show, the overall explanatory power of the concept of the (Vietnamese cultural) ‘family’ or the (economic, political and cultural) ‘household’ in attempting to understand my informants’ life experiences is limited by my informants’ awareness of the change and fluidity in relations between genders while growing up during Đổi mới and the contextual specificity of their relationships per se. It is also limited by attention to the ways in which my informants described their families as abstract, homogeneous entities, more or less undifferentiated by such variables as class and regional differences. This gives a false impression that those variables are unimportant or indeed somehow absent from my sample. Such variables are, of course, neither unimportant nor absent. But in the regular conversations I had with my informants during fieldwork, the administrative or political categories of household almost never came up, and even when they did (under various guises) their uses were far from being analytical abstractions.

On lessons in risk in the market era

I encountered Minh, who was twenty years of age at the time, while he was in Hanoi on mid-term break from his studies in economics at a university in France. We met only a couple of times, as his time was precious: he was soon to return overseas and had numerous family and social engagements. Before leaving for France, Minh had lived in a house with three generations of his family in Hanoi. Minh was the oldest son, with one brother and sister, of now-retired parents. Minh described to me the challenges and opportunities afforded him while studying in France, but couched most of his descriptions of himself firmly in the context of the extended family in Hanoi. He told me that despite spending the majority of his previous two years away

2. This argument is mirrored in debates on the ‘separate spheres’ approach to history (Kerber 1988; Lynch 1994), feminist critiques of kinship and the family (Carsten 1995, 2004A, 2004B; Stone 2004), and in questions about the utility of the public/private split and other western dualisms in the analysis of Vietnam (Rydstrøm and Drummond 2004, 6–9; Afsaruddin 1999; Drummond 2000). According to Davidoff and Hall (1987, xvi), the ‘separate spheres’ approach functions as a metaphor that permeates contemporary language and enables historians to select what to study and how to think about it. Stone (2004) argues that to extract a theoretical entity from any (local) matrix of practices, discussions, exchanges and rituals has often been to position local constructions in relation to Western ones, in such a way as to make the assumptions of both intelligible.
from Vietnam, he still felt a significant weight of responsibility to his younger siblings and that it was his job to provide ‘the bridge’ between his brother and sister. As the eldest son in the family he felt responsible for ensuring the good behaviour of his two younger siblings and the enforcement of his parents’ household rules. Minh explained:

The rules in my home (nhà) aren’t really defined, they’re just known … I am affected most by my father: my father follows the models of East Asian philosophy (triết học phương Đông thì theo mẫu), he follows the older people and reads Chinese books.

Minh described his family in terms of East Asian tradition and cited Chinese practices as exemplary forms of behaviour within that tradition. He also spoke of the importance of having a clear ‘family plan’ or purpose from ‘the beginning’. With the right kind of familial arrangement and administration, which he said was East Asian, Minh believed that his family would always manage to sustain itself through difficult periods: ‘If we have a plan from the beginning then we can always find the right solution [to problems]; otherwise we cannot do anything’. A central part of this plan included members of the family occupying gender-appropriate roles regardless of their economic contributions or other capacities within the household. Minh explained that this was because the Vietnamese people follow East Asian ideas (theo quan niệm Á Đông):

Regardless of whoever the woman is she still must do the housewife’s work, such as cooking. It doesn’t matter what area she works in—[she could be] a manager or a doctor … a man must always do things to make his wife respect him. He is the pillar [of the family] (trụ cột); he always has this basic authority (cái uy).

As the eldest son, Minh said that he was given the right to oversee (bao quản) his family when his parents went out, specifically to ‘shut the doors, look after grandmother … I have to take responsibility for my brother or sister coming home late, or leaving home early, [and for] daily life activities, study, and tidiness in the house’. This is in line with Vietnamese historian Le Thị’s (1999, 92) comments on the characteristics of family education, where she stresses the importance of elder siblings setting examples for the younger to follow and correcting their actions when necessary. Minh also had to take responsibility for ‘internal and external affairs’ (đối nội đối ngoại như thế). According to Minh, the internal hierarchy of his family made it easier for its
members to act in ‘union’ in external affairs, where ‘the unity of the family creates the power’ 
(gia đình đoàn kết tạo ra sức mạnh).

Although Minh described his ideal gender configurations and behaviors in ways that suggest 
Confucian and patrilineal continuities, men’s privilege and rank began to look less certain in 
Minh’s family life when the topic of the early years of Đổi mới came up. In subsequent conversa-
tions I asked Minh to elaborate on his parents’ jobs when he was a child. Minh said that before 
he was born, during the later subsidy period, his mother, Hanh, worked as a raincoat maker 
until she was made redundant (giảm biên chế bắt buộc) in the early years of Đổi mới. Hanh 
subsequently started peddling clothes, a difficult and uncertain job on the streets of Hanoi. 
Minh told me that his mother struggled with the loss of her job and the effort of starting a 
small business even as she provided the primary care of her children. His father, he said, had 
continued in his employment at ‘the only company he ever worked for’, a market store (hàng 
thương mại) in Hanoi.

Minh said that his father’s continued employment job constancy during the key periods of 
public sector downsizing demonstrated only ‘sedate’ or ‘staid’ (trầm tĩnh) behaviour. He said 
that his strongest memory of his father during this period was of him (the father) sitting with 
a newspaper and a cigarette, ‘doing nothing’. In stark contrast, Minh stated that his mother’s 
boldness (cả gan) in the market during the early 1990s served as the key enabler to his family’s 
later financial success, not least their ability to send Minh and his younger brother overseas for 
education. Minh recalled that after selling clothes on the street for less than a year, his mother 
had been able to take a lease on a small clothes shop. By 2002 Hanh owned five clothes stores 
around Hanoi. Hanh retired and sold off her business in 2004, which Minh said had earned the 
family enough money for Minh’s father to also be able to retire from a job that he now ‘hated’. 
Minh appeared to draw significant life lessons from the different career paths that his parents 
had taken, stating that when he begins working after university he intends to ‘take risks, like my 
mother (did), because men are sometimes too cautious and can’t achieve their goals; women 
are able to make riskier decisions and thus be more successful’.

Similar statements were made by two other informants. Hai, twenty-five years old and a recent 
graduate in architecture, suggested to me that women were certainly more able than men to take 
risks in doing business: ‘they have the basic knowledge of commodities and whether to sell or 
not’ (hiểu khi đánh hàng thì hiểu là liệu có bán được không). Hai’s mother, Thuy, had also left her 
employment in the state sector in the early 1990s. Unlike Minh’s mother, however, Thuy had
not been forced out of the public sector but had instead chosen to pursue new opportunities, working in a privately owned factory making sandals and undertaking sewing and textile work at home. Though Hai was too young to remember the period in which his mother had first changed her employment, he said that he could clearly remember his home being organised throughout the 1990s around her commercial activities.

I remember that our dinner was never at the same time, and that my father would make [dinner] if my mother was busy working. He didn’t mind ... Before [my parents] got married, my father’s family did not agree [to the union], I do not understand why but my grandfather hated my mother. But after her marriage, my mother treated all her family [in-law] members even better than my father did, and she provided help to the difficult and poor relatives by working so hard, and having money for them.

Hai said that there remained an ‘echo’ (dư âm) of the 1990 reforms in his family: ‘My father’s family used to say mean words behind my mother’s back but now they cannot say anything (nhà nội hay nói xấu nhưng mà sau này thì không thể nói xấu được nữa). Even my grandfather has to be quiet when my mother speaks now’.

Another informant, Binh (twenty-one years of age), was an unemployed graduate from Bach Khoa University (Hanoi University of Technology). He said that ‘so many men still seem to be resigned to their fate (số); women are more flexible (mềm mại), and this is now a big advantage’. Binh explained that he had followed his father’s advice to study chemical engineering at university, but now regretted the decision because of the poor opportunities for graduates in that field.

My father worked in a [state] fertiliser factory for his whole career, after returning from the army in 1980. The conditions were very bad, and he didn’t like his job. But he said that I would be able to get a very good position with the correct qualifications.

Binh said, however, that he had not received any responses to job applications he had made in 2005 and 2006, and was unhappy that he had followed his father’s advice:

I was so stupid [to study chemical engineering]. My mother has done so many different things [for work], and she said to my [older] sister to be pragmatic (thực dụng)
about her studies. Now my sister has got a good office job after only doing a short certificate in IT [Information Technology], and I have nothing.

I turn now to a related theme and explore some of the ways that gendered ideas about market competence during Đổi mới appear to have influenced the ways in which my informants remember the role of fatherhood within their families.

On reconsidering the function and role of fatherhood

Tho was a twenty-three-year-old architecture student who grew up in a rural district on the northern edges of Hanoi. He had moved to central Hanoi at age nineteen because ‘moving to the city is the modern trend’ and ‘people advised me that with my specialisation in interior design, it is better [for employment] that I am in the city’. I first met Tho in late July 2006 at a coffee shop near Bach Khoa University, where he was waiting for his girlfriend to finish her courses for the day. He was born in 1983 and said that he only learnt about Đổi mới through the stories his parents told, as well as what he had read in newspapers and books: ‘I can only remember from 1991, when there was TV and radio in our house, and the road in our village was tarred’. Though he said he was too young to remember Đổi mới, he also stated that the affects of the reforms produced a ‘new change in my family’:

In the 1980s, my parents were state employees and they worked every day, and nothing happened. But with Đổi mới the work changed, and people changed: they had to work harder with more pressure; the economy was harder than before ... Before with only my father’s salary we could support the entire household (họ gia đình), but after Đổi mới his salary couldn’t support one house (gia đình) ... now there are five salaries that can’t support the family’s (gia đình) daily spending.3

Though Tho described changes in his family in terms of progress and in relation to typical

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3. The ‘five salaries’ that Tho mentioned included the monthly remittances his elder sister and younger brother added to his mother and father’s incomes. Tho said that he sent ‘as much as he could’, but from a monthly salary of approximately VND 1,300,000 he earned as a part-time graphic designer, he would often only be able to send VND 100,000.
narratives of urban migration and development, he suggested that Đổi mới also gave rise to both extra financial burden and difficulty of care within his family. In a later conversation, Tho said that prior to Đổi mới, ‘children lived with their parents, and parents took care of their children and grandchildren ... but after [Đổi mới], people must take care of themselves more, and parents cannot subsidise the lives of their children.’ Tho stated:

Renovation created so many opportunities to have contact with new things; it created new systems at work for people; it changed people’s thoughts. People suddenly wanted to earn more money; they were no longer sluggish or slow as in the socialist ideal ... When I lived in the countryside and after the renovation period, my family met a lot of difficulties. I did not think that I would be able to study at university ... But with the sacrifice of my family, I have been able to come to university. My parents said that they would eat corn and potato so that I could study more, and that if I did not get a good education, that I would be poor all my life, and unhappy forever.

While Tho was extremely grateful for his parents’ dedication to his education, he also suggested that the sacrifices made in his family were unevenly shared. Tho’s father’s job in the early to mid-1990s required him to travel regularly and for ‘some weeks’ at a time to Hanoi. Tho recalled that his mother was left to ‘manage’ the family and their small duck farm. Though she also worked full-time as a teacher at a local primary school, Tho said that his mother also looked after the family’s three children and ‘my grandmother, and the family in all details: our food, our habit of eating’. Still, despite his mother’s many responsibilities, Tho recalled spending more time speaking with his mother than with his father while growing up, and he reflected on the ways in which his mother’s dominant presence in his household impacted his own decisions around his career and education:

My father is a patriarchal (gia trưởng) man, and wants always to show off that he is the backbone of the family (là người trụ cột trong gia đình). He said that I should study law to get a good job, but my mother said that I should follow my dream.

Tho elaborated on his father’s ‘patriarchal’ tendencies by saying that he ‘never beat my mother or the children, but when he said something, no one could interfere’. And yet Tho stated that
his choice of university course was directly at odds with his father’s wishes. Although his father was ‘patriarchal’, Tho said that because he was often out of touch with the family’s activities ‘[he] only made decisions after [taking into consideration] my mother’s opinion and leadership’.

Further, Tho suggested that as ‘family manager’ his mother had given him excellent lessons on ‘the way of living, family relationships, neighbour relationships, how to communicate with other people, and how to get past challenges in life’ and that he still often sought her advice before making important decisions. Tho’s father, however, appeared as a much less influential figure in his son’s decision-making:

> It doesn’t mean that we are not close when we don’t communicate with each other …
> But what would he base his advice to me on? Every father wants his son to be better than him, and work less hard than him, especially with my father’s job, just managing a store …
> But what does he know about the difficulties of life? What direction could he provide?

Tho appeared to consider that his mother’s increasing family and small business responsibilities and challenges during the 1990s qualified her as a useful and relevant guide in his current life choices. On the other hand, Tho suggested that his father’s extended absences from the family revealed him as ‘the backbone of the family’ in name only and that, as such, he had deservedly little say in its running. While Tho acknowledged and seemed to appreciate the significant economic role his father had played within the family, it appeared that his memories of his mother’s increased responsibilities while he was growing up had made him see his father’s contribution as secondary.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Phuc, a twenty-seven-year-old sales officer for a large Vietnamese manufacturer. Phuc said that in the early years of Đổi mới, his mother had left the shop where she worked and had started her own business. Unlike Minh, however, he was not sure whether she had been made redundant during state downsizing programs. He said, ‘I was too small to know anything … it happened a long time ago, and now we only talk about [the period] as the end of a mistake for the country. For us the miserable time is over and now it is stable already’. But while reflecting on the (few) memories he had of his early life during Đổi mới, Phuc began to speak about his father. He explained that although his father was a lawyer and had a mind of ‘great depth’, he had not managed to stay relevant in today’s society: ‘He does not dare to venture in life, and acts like it is still the subsidised times. For example, with his position many other people can do more and gain more, and get a lot of advantages, but he
does not’. He said that his father’s aversion to risk was not suited to the ‘contemporary trend’ (
xa the hien tai) in Vietnamese business and society:

I remember once my mother joked that my father is ‘wise in the family, but silly in the market’ (khong
nhau dai chat). My father became very angry. But I don’t even think that is true. Now if you are silly in the market, you also are silly in the family (gia dinh).

Phuc was unwilling to elaborate on the ways in which his father was ‘silly’ in his family, ‘out of respect’ (ton trong) for his parents. He concluded his discussion on this topic by reflecting only that ‘nowadays women’s roles are already considerable’ (nhung ngay nay vai tro cua nguoi phu nu la lon roi):

Anyway, I must say that my father and my grandfather lived for a long time in the feudal time, and after that in the subsidised time. Generally speaking, as a society, we have grown up. And of course a person’s ways of thinking and behaviour depend on the society’s teaching very much. I can’t reproach my father for his behaviour, or say it is right or wrong. Maybe, he thinks he is right, or thinking in the old ways is very good for us, and he does care about us ... However, I think the old ways are obsolete, and unnecessary, so I think if it is possible that my father should open up a little ... of course it already happens a bit, because of my mother’s influence ... so I think it can change more. I think it can happen ... I mean he is in contact more with the outside society and sees what things are like ... he should see further, and I want my father to see what he has been wrong about.

Discussion

It is reasonably straightforward to argue that women’s practices and situations have been changing and becoming more complex as a result of socioeconomic reform in Vietnam. It is harder to ask what value men have been putting on these changes and to understand the ways in which the beneficiaries of the so-called resurgence of patriarchal and patrilineal structures understand and represent the changes they noticed in women’s lives. The five informants that I discussed in
the chapter, along with Thanh, who I discussed in the prologue, follow a similar pattern. Their mothers changed or diversified their work in the early to mid-1990s, became engaged in various income-generating activities and made increasingly important economic contributions to the household. Their fathers, on the other hand, maintained their jobs and were said to remain risk-averse and non-responsive to new opportunities brought about by the reforms.

This small number of cases is in danger of providing a biased impression of Vietnamese society during Đổi mới, and gender relations in particular. Other research suggests that women were subject to often contradictory pressures associated with their ‘traditional’ roles of nurturance and forbearance in the family and expectations of dynamic market competence in the household (Soucy 2000a; Rydstrøm 2003, 687), that men and women both bore the brunt of changes in policies (Werner 2002), or that men suffered more because they remained working in sectors of economic activity that were internationally uncompetitive (Rama 2002). The effects of Đổi mới on the family are highly variable. Phúc’s uncertainty about the conditions leading to his mother’s changing employment also suggests that such effects are not always remembered with any clarity.

Nonetheless, in the literature reviewed for this chapter the trend towards individual households becoming more economically independent during Đổi mới was said to reinforce Confucian beliefs and practices concerning the appropriate places of men and women, both in the household and in society. The argument is that households came to be increasingly dependent on the wages of all their adult members, while still remaining dependent on women’s domestic servitude. There is an overriding sense that women’s work is not respected because of prevailing Confucian values in the (idealised) ‘family’. An implicit theme suggests that men in the household have not learned anything, and that their commitment to socialist ideals of gender equality—never achieved during socialism—may have completely disappeared during Đổi mới (see, for example, Bélanger and Barbieri 2009, 5; Hy Van Luong 1993; Malarney 2002).

Such contentions sit uncertainly with the empirical evidence discussed in this chapter and the prologue. On the one hand, the informants whom I have discussed in extended detail (Thanh, in the prologue, Minh and Tho) remembered their households during the early years of Đổi mới.
mới as increasingly reliant on both their mother’s and father’s salaries. Their mothers reportedly worked longer and more resourcefully than their fathers, and often at more tasks simultaneously. Further, my informants each discussed the assigning of ‘proper’ tasks and obligations within the family/household as essential to understanding Vietnamese culture and identity. These practices were broadly described in terms of male dominance and relative female servility, and were interpreted as the result of longstanding Oriental or East Asian (phương Đông) or Vietnamese ‘traditions’ (truyền thống).

On the other hand, my informants also described the conditions supporting Confucian gender hierarchies as being in a state of flux, and gave clear examples of the ways in which their mother’s changing income-generating pursuits were part of changed symbolic and real power relations within their families. For example, Minh’s account of Đổi mới included memories of his mother’s greater vulnerability to public sector downsizing in the early 1990s relative to his father but also highlighted her significant business success since. In particular, Minh emphasised how well his mother managed household finances during a period in which his family experienced greater vulnerability to market forces. Minh thus regarded women as better ‘risk-takers’ and more suited to current market economy exigencies than men.

Tho also emphasised that his parent’s changing work conditions during the early years of Đổi mới influenced gender relations within his home. He called attention to his mother’s increasingly high levels of financial responsibility for his family in the early and mid-1990s, contrasting this with his father’s increasingly ineffectual claim to family authority. Tho’s description of his father during Đổi mới indeed dealt less with memories of actual events and more with the disjuncture between the idealised, atemporal rhetorical framework of ‘patriarchy’ and the irrelevance of this ‘traditional’ masculine authority in his family. This theme was also echoed in Thanh’s comments.

Thanh was too young to remember the latter years of Bao cấp. But he nonetheless imagined ‘pre-Đổi mới’ as a time of relatively immutable social arrangements and proper, fixed gender hierarchies. Thanh’s apparent nostalgia for the ‘traditional’ family arrangement, however, was in many ways at odds with the enthusiasm he showed for his memories of increased personal mobility by women in his family and in Vietnamese society during Đổi mới. This apparent contradiction appeared to render unconvincing his invocations of ‘traditional’ masculine authority in the family and society. After initially claiming an important role for men in family and societal affairs, Thanh conceded that the ‘normal man’ (người bình thường) is actually not particularly powerful or skilful in life.
While the salaries (and in later years, pensions) of these young men’s fathers may have provided their families with a low-risk source of income that facilitated the economic risk-taking of their mothers, the young men either did not realise this or did not regard their experiences as reflecting this possibility. Instead, they appeared to believe that their mother’s increasing responsibilities in their families and exposure to risk during the early years of Đổi mới had challenged extant masculinist conceptions of ideal gender hierarchies in the household.

My key informants for this chapter each had memories of their parents’ work experiences during the early 1990s, which suggested an awareness and appreciation of their mother’s then-heightened vulnerability to labour market reconfigurations and overall work intensification. The young men remembered their mothers in this period as economically dynamic relative to their fathers. My informants’ perceptions of their father’s relative constancy amid change in the labour market lead to a (re)vivification of discourses condoning roles of ‘contemplative’ and ‘unruffled’ men within their households. Their father’s apparently ‘Eastern’ characteristics, which included reading Chinese books and acting in a ‘Chinese’ manner, recast men in a condition of prevailing authority but with limited potency in areas of the home that the informants remembered as being significant: income-earning, domestic duties, caring practices and decision-making. At the same time, the young men invoked tropes of female servitude, subjugation and dependence that were directly at odds with their memories of their mothers’ greater independence and economic dynamism during this period.

**Conclusion**

The memories that Minh, Tho and Thanh have of the early years of Đổi mới mark that period as the commencement of an uncertain shifting of pre-existing cultural identities, particularly around new economic opportunity for their mothers. Among other things, these men recall that conditions in the early 1990s brought choices for their mothers in contexts where they thought that more or less Confucian gender and family models were strictly observed. Each of the six informants discussed in this chapter appeared to posit Đổi mới as having produced a kind of splintering and discontinuous epistemological (dis)order: there was some notion of discontinuity in the transfer of cultural conditions and gender expectations between their fathers and themselves.

In support of these claims, this chapter has drawn attention to the contradictions between my informants’ ideas about, and endorsements of, ‘traditional’ Confucian gender hierarchies, which
are underpinned by notions of strong and authoritative fathers, and my informants’ memories of early experiences within their homes, where their mothers apparently were pre-eminent. These contradictions might indicate that changes in their families during the early years of Đổi mới were remembered by my informants in relation to a kind of a priori interpretive framework of masculine authority, especially as the men discussed were too young to have any memories of life in Vietnam prior to 1986. But they also might indicate a degree of ambivalence about the ways in which these young men described their ideal gender configurations as one and the same in families (gia đình) and at home (nhà), and what they also seemed to value and respect (women’s domestic work, and women’s achievements during the early 1990s public sector reforms). While descriptions of Vietnamese women as the ‘general of the interior’ are sometimes regarded as evidence of women’s intergenerational disadvantage by sympathetic theorists, the ethnographic vignettes in this chapter suggest that young men growing up during Đổi mới may have looked upon their mothers with admiration and respect. Further, while this chapter has discussed only six informants (including Thanh, from the prologue), it is worth noting that that none of these men told me that their particular experiences were unusual.

This chapter thus supports the conclusions of some scholarship on the gendered effects of transition, and argues that deeply held moral principles incompletely shaped Đổi mới economic practices (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009). For example, as we saw in chapter 3, the alleged persistence of Confucian ideology in Vietnam has underpinned the idea that men continue to dominate society because women’s roles are devalued at the domestic level. But as I discussed in the introduction and chapter 3, recent scholarship has suggested that this dichotomy is challenged by Vietnamese women’s exercise of different forms of power and authority in kinship systems, households, communities and organisations (Trang Quach 2008; Vu Song Ha 2008; Horton and Rydstrøm 2012). The ethnographic vignettes in this chapter appear to complement and expand these arguments by suggesting that young men who witnessed their mother’s experiences of labour market reform have grown up with a profound awareness of the incompleteness of Confucian moral and social codes.

Unlike the literature on Vietnam discussed at the start of this chapter (Bélanger and Barbieri 2009, 31; Teerawichitchainan 2009, 336; Drummond and Rydstrøm 2004; Hy Van Luong 2003; Pettus 2003), the empirical evidence I have introduced suggests that, for six young men at least, the changing economic practices in Đổi mới have not been underpinned by ‘traditional’ practices in their households and belief systems within their families. Informants also did not
remember changes in women’s income-earning practices leading in a straightforward manner to detrimental effects for women or advantages for men. All of the informants in this chapter remembered their mothers making the day-to-day decisions about running the household and making the key decisions in the ‘family’ (both described using the term gia đình or, less commonly, nhà). These memories indicated to my informants that women’s practices in their home, and more broadly, were anything but unimportant. It is significant that they were recalling the gender practices and relations within their households during a period in which the household became the fundamental economic unit in Vietnam (Werner 2002, 30–31), was stronger than in the preceding three decades and a half (Hy Van Luong 2003, 212), served increasingly as the locus of economic, social and cultural reproduction and transformation (Tran Han Giang 2004, 149), and held primary responsibility for labour allocation (Werner and Bélanger 2002, 16). The young men appeared to appreciate that their mother’s ‘minor’ day-to-day decisions and actions held great consequence for their assumption of more and different responsibilities within and beyond their households. This appears to have led my informants to question a number of ideas about the nature and durability of ideas about Vietnamese masculinity, as the following chapters argue.
THE IMPRESSION OF POWER

Introduction

In chapter 4 I argued that six informants were ambivalent about the gaps they noticed between the ways they described the ideal gender configurations in their homes and what they also seemed to value and respect about their mothers. In this chapter I expand on, and extend my focus to explore, the ways in which this gap—between my informants’ imaginings about the masculine advantages that they believe underpinned ‘traditional’ Vietnamese sociality and their relationships with their mothers—affect the everyday encounters that five of my informants had with young women, as girlfriends, friends, sisters and colleagues. I argue that while these informants were aware that discourses of ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ gender relations simplified and misrepresented their complex relations with young women, they sometimes nonetheless chose to see and interpret their experiences of changing socioeconomic conditions during Đổi mới through a familiar repertoire of ‘world-ordering’ devices and tropes, such as Confucianism. I suggest that my informants used such tropes not because of any difficulties they faced amid changing gender relations, but rather because those tropes were useful in accommodating and simplifying some of the emotionally and personally complex experiences they had as young men relating to young women.

Theoretical considerations from the literature

In chapter 3 I reviewed literature suggesting that the relative independence of women, particularly in the economic field, may threaten the ‘traditional’ esteem with which men are held within families (Le Thi Nam Tuyet 1996). I also reviewed literature which argued that ‘traditional’ masculine advantages and expectations of men may make it difficult for young men to keep up with a ‘modern’ age of social and economic flux (Le Thi 1999, 105). Other scholarship has drawn attention to the ways that men during Đổi mới may be expected to update their approaches to
'being men', particularly in their relationships with women (Turner and Phuong An Nguyen 2005). In the introduction to the thesis I suggested that such ideas were broadly consistent with some of the ways in which certain modernisation (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992) and masculinities (Connell 1995) frameworks have been applied in scholarship on men undergoing transition, presuming that men will struggle with or resist rapidly changing societies and gender relations. Chapter 4, however, argued that the experiences of Đổi mới may have indicated to six of my informants that ‘traditional’ Confucian models of gender practices and household arrangement were, in part, symbolic constructions that were no longer grounded in the day-to-day challenges emerging in their homes in 1990s. I suggested that their mothers’ actual exercise of power and authority in their homes transcended any clear dichotomies of ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’ gender practices.

Young men’s memories of their mothers during the early years of Đổi mới may well be idealised, of course, and tell us nothing about their attitudes and practices in relation to young women today. This is an important distinction, as young men in the literature also appear to be changing their attitudes and practices about ‘being a man’ in relation to contemporary young women, particularly in relation to women’s expectations about men’s physical appearance, bodily comportment, emotional literacy and consumption (Connell and Julian 2005; Horton and Rydstrøm 2012). For example, Duane and Dowsett (2010) argue that in global popular culture, men are increasingly expected to develop sexual skills and courting practices reflecting the undesirability of ‘traditional’ masculinity. This ongoing process is supported by a consumer culture in which men are impelled to work upon their bodies, their seduction techniques, their culinary skills, and their emotional literacy (Cook 2000; Rogers 2005). Further, in the interests of sexual health and intimate wellbeing, young men are exhorted by popular sex and relationship guides to cast off a male gender role that ‘disassociates [sic] sex and intimacy and leads to anxiety, shame and the exploitation of women’ (Duane and Dowsett 2010; cf. McCarthy and Metz 2008; Zilbergeld 1999).

Ordinary empirical evidence available to any observer of contemporary media in Vietnam similarly suggests that in their relationships with women young men face new and different anxieties, stemming from rapid socioeconomic change and globalisation. In particular, Vietnamese men’s lifestyle magazines commonly suggest that young men are facing urgent questions about

1. For extended discussion about relationships between contemporary global economic orders and the formation of selves, see McRobbie (2007, 2004) and Pred (1996).
the meaning and function of old and ‘traditional’ ideas of masculinity in their lives. For example, an article in a 2006 issue of Men’s Health (Sức khỏe đàn ông) warned that ‘now the society is changing so much, and women are different from before: they not only stay at home, take care of the children or family, do the housework and cooking, but [also] want to obtain higher education’. It included an extract of a letter from a woman who has defied her husband’s wishes that she have children. She stated that she wants to get a Masters degree and that her husband simply must wait until she is ready before they can have children. The article concluded that to have a successful marriage, men these days must be prepared to be ‘much more understanding’ of their wives’ needs than before.

Another recurring theme in men’s magazines has been that men now must work to demonstrate relevance to a ‘modern’ age of social and economic flux. For example, a story in volume 108 (2007) of the magazine Man’s World (Thế Giới Đàn Ông) stated that ‘before, women paid attention to characteristics in men such as resourcefulness, dexterity, and their ability to make money’. But now, because ‘the social position of the women is higher ... women increasingly seek handsome men, in the same way that men always have wanted to have beautiful women’. The article proposed that because of increased levels of gender equality, ‘men cannot count on their traditional strengths any more’, although those strengths were not actually specified. Having lost their traditional’ gender sureties, men’s attractiveness to women depends much more on ‘appearance than before’, the article suggested (24–5).

Articles have also referenced the ways in which perceived changes in the position of women in Vietnam have been influencing and sometimes undermining cultural expectations about being men. For example, an article in volume 104 (2006) of Man’s World drew attention to

2. Until now there has been a strong emphasis on women’s susceptibility to ‘new’ media forms in Vietnam. Hy Van Luong (2003) has written about the rapidly growing self-help literature in Vietnam, whose readers were mainly middle-class women. He argues that such literature advised women how to preserve happy families ‘by keeping feminine appearances and by providing their husbands with appropriate pleasures’ (2003, 219). Lisa Drummond (2004) has written about the central role women’s magazines in Vietnam play in both the reiteration and reconfiguration of state-driven social mobilisation campaigns, and the promotion of specific images of women and domestic life, which are based on the consumption activities of an urban middle class. Drummond argues that Vietnamese women need, or are enticed to need, women’s magazines because the ‘outside’ world in which they live is so dominated by men and masculinity (Drummond 2004, 168). Men, on the other hand, ‘do not have or need magazines for “A Man’s World”; it is their world, out there, beyond the shelves: the culture of the workplace, of politics and public life, the world of business, property and technology, there they are all “boys” together’ (Winship 1987, 6, italics in original, cited by Drummond 2004, 168). It seems that Drummond was unaware that Thế Giới Đàn Ông (‘Man’s World’) magazine would commence circulation in the same year that she published her article.
the increasing numbers of men who live with their wives’ parents.³ While ‘traditionally women were expected to move to the family home of the husband’, now ‘there are many reasons why men live with the parents-in-law, and they are all reasonable and acceptable reasons’. The reasons listed included ‘when the office of the husband is near the wife’s house’ and ‘when the wife is the only child in the family and her parents do not want her to move to the husband’s house’. The article concluded that ‘men living with their families-in-law marks a change in the thoughts of men. Independence used to be the thing that men always wanted’ (37, my emphasis added).

Another article appearing in Man’s World (2006, vol. 104) provided a lengthy checklist of criteria that women use to measure ‘modern’ men. The commentary outlines in some detail the elements that are intrinsic to a man’s desirability: seriousness; power and enthusiasm; steadfastness; broad-mindedness; liberal manners and passion; senses of dress, humour and responsibility; and firmness of body. The article also lists behavioural characteristics typical of men who are attractive to women. Among other things, those men ‘are very faithful, [and] love their children and wife. They know how to take care of their family and they always respect traditional behaviours ... To them, the

³ In Vietnam, married couples often live with the husband’s parents and other family members, especially early in their marriage. For more on this, see Pham Van Bich (1999, 212–15).
moral rules in life are very important’ (32). They should provide a ‘shield for’ but never take ‘liberties with’ women, and they know how ‘to keep their reputations and their family’s’, but have ‘light hearted characters’ capable of bringing ‘relaxation and humour’ to women’s lives (33). This account stands in some contrast to an article appearing in an earlier issue (vol. 102). The article stated that for a single young man to be considered both ‘modern’ and worthy of peers’ respect, he must have:

a very beautiful girl behind his @ motorbike ... whenever he goes out, and he’s nobody if he doesn’t have 2–3 girlfriends, and more waiting to be used when he needs. This is the definition of a standard young man, the @ time hero. (Men’s World 2006, vol. 102, 13)

Explicit in the article is a supposedly ‘modern’, free and easy attitude among the ‘new’ men to sexual and other relationships with women. The term ‘@ time’ seems to here signify at least three things: the relatively expensive ‘Honda @’ motor scooter popular in the mid 2000s in urban centers of Vietnam; digital technology, the internet and interconnectivity; and a sort of convergence of economics, urban aesthetics and notions of modernity informing dating behaviours and sexual relations. The ‘@ time hero’ is validated by other men seeing him perform satisfactorily across these domains of consumerism, morality and modernity. The article—written somewhat tongue in cheek—speaks of differences between the type of men who are convincingly ‘keeping up’ with socioeconomic change in Vietnam, and those that are not.

All this appears aimed at helping young Vietnamese men develop, or at least consider, the ‘modern’ traits of masculinity said to be desirable in the globalising world. It also seems to reflect an enduring concern in studies of gender in Vietnam, that Confucian ideas and structures intersect in men’s lives in ways that may make it difficult for young men to ‘keep up’ with young women’s changing attitudes and behaviours. In the ethnographic vignettes that follow, however, I discuss the ways that eight of my informants reflected on their actual experiences of ‘keeping up’ with changing relationships with young women amid broader socioeconomic change.

On new challenges to becoming a ‘normal man’

I begin my ethnographic vignettes by returning to Tho. In chapter 4 we saw Tho discuss his parent’s changing roles in his household during the early years of Đổi mới. He had a broadly positive opinion of women’s importance within his family and society, apparently because of his memories

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of his mother’s efforts to maintain the family while his father travelled for work in the early 1990s. As discussed, similar themes were also present in the narratives of both Minh and Thanh.

Tho had also raised the issue of what exactly was expected of a ‘normal’ man these days, and provided his own fairly modest description. I had wondered whether this idea of ‘normal’ male behaviour was common to other men, and later asked Tho whether he saw himself as a ‘normal man’ in Vietnam. The question provoked a thoughtful response:

> Not yet. My parents still have to sometimes support me, and I have had no proper romantic relationship; [I just have] friends, and sometimes I fool around (chơi bời) … I don’t see ‘fooling around’ as a bad thing, but a normal man should have [more] definite feelings of love (có tình cảm chắc chắn).

Tho appeared embarrassed to admit that his parents still supported him financially, and unhappy that he was unable to develop a proper romantic relationship with a woman. Tho added that he was single because ‘young girls are now looking for men who are rich, and who have residency in Hanoi’. He suggested that women’s modern expectations that men should have a good job were incompatible with his current life as a student living at home. This resulted in him sometimes feeling left out of his male friends’ conversations. As ‘normal Vietnamese men’, Tho’s friends ‘sit and gossip, and compliment this member’s or that member’s girlfriend, or discuss why that man liked or loved a particular kind of girl’. Tho stated that these conversations made him feel as if he were ‘just a child’ (trẻ con), and that he was often humiliated in the company of his male friends as they ‘mocked’ (chê giễu) his inability to attract a girlfriend.

Tho considered that his ability to become a ‘normal man’ was tied to his male friends’ recognition of him achieving a ‘proper’ relationship with a woman. But this was thwarted by the material demands and lifestyle expectations of modern women. Tho described his problems in a historical context:

> Maybe I am too critical (kỳ tính), or just not charming (không có quyến rũ), but I also know that it is now much harder to find a wife than before … Now you must be able to afford to live apart from your family, but I do not have the money to do this. In Western countries, young people live together for a while before they get married, and now Vietnam also has the same situation. Two years ago, this behaviour caused
quite a stir in public opinion, but now [the public] somehow accepts it and sees it as normal. This is not like in our traditions. My father’s marriage was arranged by my uncle when he (my father) was twenty-one and only in the army; my grandfather [first] got married very early, at about thirteen years old, and he had four wives.

The emerging social conditions, including cohabitation before marriage, and new, materialist expectations among women, meant that Tho now found it ‘much harder to find a wife than before’. He illustrated the difficulties he faced by contrasting the quickly changing levels of acceptance for young unmarried couples living together in Hanoi today with the tradition of arranged marriages for his father and grandfather in decades past. Tho’s nostalgia for the ‘traditional’ processes of acquiring a wife were not directly at odds with his proud memories of his mother’s changing economic and social responsibilities and opportunities during Đổi mới, which I discussed in chapter 4. But they nonetheless suggested that Tho was at least equivocal about how these changing gender relations now affected his own marriage prospects. Two weeks earlier Tho had said to me that the ‘modern changes’ brought about by Đổi mới ‘benefited women’, which was ‘better’ (tốt hơn chứ). But he now appeared uncertain about the relative merits of the different marriage practices of his grandfather’s generation and his own. I asked Tho whether he thought that the ‘modern benefits’ women enjoyed as a result of Đổi mới had come at a price for men.

I don’t really know how a traditional man lived, but I guess they were very patriarchal (gia trưởng). For example, in the past [a man] could have several wives, but these days he cannot. And they had ‘singsong girls’ (hát ả đào)4 as their entertainment in the old society … But if a man has several wives, he has to share his love … Now women’s abilities are promoted and we have a family with just one husband and one wife; I think that one husband and one wife are able to build a good family. Anyway, I am a modern man and I am used to [this arrangement].

Instead of directly answering the question, Tho spoke to me about the relationship between men and women (now) being better suited to ‘build a good family’. He explicitly rejected ‘old

4. Hát ả đào is a very old form of geisha-like performance. For a rich account of cultural prominence and questions of memory around Hát ả đào, see Norton (2005).
thoughts’ that placed women at a disadvantage to men, and had, as noted, earlier expressed pride in his mother’s economic dynamism during Đổi mới. But when I asked Tho whether he saw the broader liberalisation of ideas about women as having diminished men’s authority, he chose to speak about the ways in which changes in women’s practices might still be understood in terms of the manner in which they contribute to the ‘family’ as a whole. I rephrased the question, and asked whether Tho thought that greater equality between men and women was a significant aspect of ‘renovation’. He grew impatient with me:

You do not understand ... Before, the ideal man (người đàn ông lý tưởng) only had to know how to make money in small amounts, just enough to support his family. But now, a man not only needs his family but also his career: he must be a backbone in the family and a successful leader (người đỡ đécoute anh) ... [men] must develop skills so that they are competitive both nationally and internationally.

Tho identified new pressures on men to ‘be competitive’ in the market and to fulfil their proper family duties. At the same time he revealed his own anxiety about the ways in which the high cost of modern living and changing expectations of men by women during Đổi mới had contributed to his inability to achieve a ‘proper’ relationship with a woman. Tho portrayed young urban Vietnamese women seeking ‘rich men’ with ‘Hanoi residency’ as typical. But by restating the value of Vietnamese women’s positions in the family, he also rendered those young urban women as aberrant.

Despite Tho’s apparent earlier enthusiasm for the rapid social and economic changes in Vietnam, his statements on the household suggested that he thought that men’s and women’s positions should remain organised under a kind of Confucian patriarchal arrangement. Perhaps seeking to rationalise this position, Tho volunteered that a ‘distinctive feature’ of Vietnamese women was their willingness and ability to support their husbands and families, even in the face of ‘difficult conditions’ and ‘change’. Tho described this view of Vietnamese gender roles as ‘not traditional and not modern’ (không truyền thống nhưng không hẳn là hiện đại), but merely the ‘Oriental manner’:

If you talk to Japanese, it’s clearer than talking to Vietnamese about this issue. You can see that they consider the family values (giá trị gia đình) very highly, because they
live with the strong effects of Feudalism and Confucianism. They think men can do everything, so they call the housewife ... well, in English you have the word 'housewife', but in Vietnamese, or Japanese, we [sic] have the word ‘nội trợ’. [It] means ‘the one who manages everything inside the house’, not outside ... [It] describes the role of a woman in the house ... Domestic affairs belong to women, and non-domestic affairs belong to men ... if the man is going out [of the house] then it means he is in charge of earning the living, so the wife is just in charge of the household.

Vietnamese women have strong characteristics. They are calm, and endure difficult conditions robustly. [They are] very strong, but extremely calm, and faithful ... most of them are faithful not only in love, but also in their relationship with their husband’s careers ... In a foreign country, if the husband can’t earn enough to support his family and become a 'normal man', then both the husband and the wife will be very bored and have no happiness. But Vietnamese women are very resilient, and will even help their husbands earn money to support their family.

Tho’s reflection on his own inability to attract a girlfriend led him to discuss the ‘role of women in the house’. In invoking ‘Japanese’ traditions, and suggesting that they shared with Vietnamese the characteristics of women managing the family while men managed ‘foreign affairs’, Tho also appeared to perceive the gendered division of labour in the ‘East’ and the ‘West’ as very different. As noted, Tho valued his mother’s dynamism during Đổi mới and acknowledged the extent of change in the wider society. But he obviated his own anxieties about ‘keeping up’ with the requirements of a ‘normal man’ by (also) stating that he may still have ‘the feudal ideal’ (vẫn giống phong kiến). Although Tho had earlier identified himself as a ‘modern man’, he now reconsidered his position:

Maybe I am a man half in the present and half in the past (có lẽ em là người nửa hiện đại nửa quá khứ). Even today, I still do not think it is a good idea for students to live together before marriage ... because we do not know what the future will hold and whether we can be husband and wife, or not. And I think that the woman or girl can be disadvantaged [by living unmarried with a man] ... I cannot imagine marrying a girl in the future who has already lost her virginity.
Lacking the financial resources or employment status of his peers, and thus apparently unable to attract a partner, Tho characterised the positions of Vietnamese men and women in idealised and unchanging terms. When it suited him, Tho described economic change in Vietnam as radically distinct from processes of familial organisation, and women’s positions in each as secondary to men’s. At other times he recalled the shifting position and practices of his mother and father during Đổi mới, seeing them as indicating that such ideas about ‘traditional’ gender arrangements were no longer apposite, or even desirable.

Tho’s ambivalence about women’s positions in the home (nhà), and the degree to which he considered relevant Confucian ideas and tropes were both echoed in some of my other informants’ narratives. Sinh, a twenty-one year old logistics officer in a transportation company, said that ‘before, I did not think anything about men’s and women’s positions in the home (gia đình), but now I am growing up, and think that the man can work in the house (nhà).’ Sinh said that as the youngest child in his family he had been coddled (nung nịu), and thus had taken a long time to begin to think about these ‘new problems’. He then added, ‘But it is natural for men not to think about these sorts of things. In our traditions men never had to help their wives organise the house, but now this is normal. I guess you could say in this way we are no longer completely Confucian ... just part[ly so].’

Another informant, Tung, said that his young female colleagues were often much more competent and professional in their jobs than similarly aged men. Although he worked primarily among men in his finance job, Tung lamented that ‘many [young men] have poor knowledge: they are introduced to work in my company, and they are not dynamic, not fast, and lazy [about] improving their knowledge’. Tung thought that women, on the other hand, were often better at managing their tasks and working hard. But despite his strong praise for his female colleagues, Tung was also equivocal about the long-term prospects for women working in the finance sector. He said that a person needed a particular ‘swagger’ (khoảc) to succeed in banking and that women could never achieve this while being ‘womanly’ (nữ tính). As evidence for this claim Tung described his boss, who was a woman in her late thirties.

She is very hard working and very successful. But sometimes it is like she has the characteristics of a man (có vẻ đàn ông). She shouts at people, and is often very forceful (xâm lăng) ... I warn my [female] colleagues to not end up like her—to get married and have a family before it is too late, and tell them that maybe finance is not the right job for women.
I suggested to Tung that such ideas seemed contrary to his comments that young women were often better at their jobs than young men were. He replied, 'No ... it is good if women stay at the junior levels. But it is hard for them to be a boss ... That is the Confucian culture, and it seems this will never change.' Tung also conceded, however, that he did not like his boss and thought that he, Tung, was long overdue for a promotion. He lamented, 'Her skills are rewarded, but [she] never recognises my hard work.'

I now turn again to an ethnographic vignette that outlines another informant’s reflections on the ways questions about masculine power and authority played out in his home.

On the general in the house, and also the housekeeper

Duc was a twenty-nine-year-old single journalist who lived next door to his parents and his younger sister (aged twenty-three) in the Bach Khoa district of Hanoi. Duc’s parents were retired from jobs as a mechanic (father) and schoolteacher (mother), and they owned the house in which Duc lived, as well as their own. While Duc was reluctant to speak in detail about the newspaper for which he worked (explaining to me that ‘the Ministry [of Information and Communications] is still very sensitive, you know’), he was very enthusiastic about expressing his feelings about his job. He worried that by working as a journalist he was wasting his time (because ‘these days no one believes the media’), that he was poorly paid, and that ‘new opportunities’ in Hanoi were passing him by. Unlike his friends, whom he described as ‘earning lots of money ... in IT, business and tourism’, Duc felt that because of his job he was ‘not up to date’ (không hợp thời) with the ‘modern society’. While he met ‘many kinds of people and [came to] know many types of behaviours in society’ working as a journalist, the profession did not give him the requisite skills to enable him to succeed in today’s market economy. Duc explained that because he entered journalism instead of business, he lacked the dexterity ‘to step on other people for a promotion’ (ngâm mau phun người). Duc said he ‘never wanted this career’ in the first place, and resented his father for pushing him into it:

My old man was a mechanic, and he wanted me to be better than that ... As usual, when my father was a little boy, he could not have what he wanted, so when I was born he spoilt me, giving me everything he could not have before, and recommended that I should study what he could not study before ... When the National University
opened its press department, my father thought it would be good for me [to go there] … My uncle is a reporter, so he could help me to get a job.

Duc explained that while some of his friends were able to select their own fields of study at university, most were ‘led to their choice, and some were forced’ by their parents. Duc described his parents as ‘good people’, but ‘typical of the old generation’: his father was ‘too strict’, while his mother was ‘too indulgent’. Duc stated:

They still have so many preconceived ideas and customs (phong tục) because they remain under the very strong effects of feudalism and Confucianism … [for example,] my father is a person who has rules to live by just so that the family and society will admire him … My mother is not in charge of anything, just the family (duy nhà)

Despite the ‘feudal’ and ‘Confucian’ values embodied by his parents, however, Duc described his sister as having grown up with very ‘modern’ ideas. She had ‘strong characteristics’, was ‘stubborn’ (ngoan cường), and she regularly quarrelled with Duc. Apparently many of these arguments were about the ‘uneducated men’ his sister chose to date. While Duc had not been in a serious romantic relationship since his university years, his sister was apparently ‘easily tricked into love’. Duc explained that while he tried to point out ‘that there are now dozens of uneducated men in every square metre’, she resisted his advice and ‘wants to find out on her own’. His parents apparently did not understand his sister because she was ‘independent’ (độc lập), ‘difficult’ (khó tính) and ‘modern’ (hiện đại). According to Duc, his sister explicitly rejected the traditional ‘four virtues’ of Vietnamese femininity, ‘công, dung, ngôn, hạnh’, which he explained as meaning that ‘traditionally women must be good cooks, beautiful, gentle in their speech, and have good hearts’. Duc stated that his sister thinks that ‘that was all important thirty-five years ago, when women would know only simple things like cooking, sewing or clothes-making’. Reflecting on the changes between his mother’s and sister’s generations, Duc explained that:

It is better now: my sister and her friends can now all just pay attention to making money … Women can now earn a lot of money. They can also study and work in politics … Maybe there are not many successful women in politics, but in economics and other fields—in the family (gia đình) and society (xã hội)—they are better off.
Duc was positive about his sister’s options in life, and expected her to be able to ‘do anything that a man can do’. But he also seemed to resent the way his parents treated the two of them differently while they were growing up:

When I was at high school, my parents put strict limits on when I was able to go out with my friends, because they were afraid that it would affect my studies. On Saturdays and Sundays I could only go out [with friends] in the daytime, and on a weekday, the latest [I was allowed out] was 9.00 pm. However, when my sister was in high school she could go home later, about 10.00 pm to 11.00 pm.

The fact that Duc’s sister was allowed to stay out later during the final years of high school was to Duc evidence both that his parents were more ‘partial’ (thiên vị) to his sister, and that his sister had ‘autonomy’ (tự trị). Duc emphasised that his sister was now in the final year of a business degree that ‘she chose’, and also that his parents trusted his sister more than they had trusted him at a comparable age. Duc suggested that a major difference between his mother’s generation and that of his sister was that women ‘now have awareness’ (ý thức). According to Duc, the ‘development of the society, economy and education’ had positively affected women’s abilities to make ‘choices’ (lựa chọn) in their lives. So long as women did not go ‘too far’ (quá đà), they were able to ‘take part in more social activities’ and have ‘much more success than they had in the past’. To Duc, young women ‘can do what men do’, which is ‘better for them, and better for society’. And yet, while Duc regarded women’s enhanced earning opportunities and ‘equality with men’ (bằng nhau đàn ông) as very significant achievements of ‘renovation’ in Vietnam, he worried that some women could take this ‘too far’, seeing some of their ‘modern’ behaviours as inappropriate and threatening to upset the ‘natural order’ (trật tự tự nhiên) of things:

We have a saying, ‘when the stake is looking for the buffalo, something is wrong’—it means that if a girl is looking for a man, then she is not serious (đứng đắn) … It is the modern trend (xu thế hiện đại), but it is unsound (không lành mạnh). Before, women were more secretive, but their sexual desires are now very public (cầu là công khai).

According to Duc, for example, his sister was ‘too easily distracted by things that excite her’ (chất gây kích thích thần kinh), which in turn inhibited her ability to meet ‘educated men’. I
suggested to Duc that perhaps his sister’s ‘modern’ and ‘independent’ character might be attractive to a potential male suitor of her own age. He replied:

I’m not sure of that. I think that the first thing they would look for is whether she is a proper woman. [My sister] has an individual character which I like ... but she needs to use her character reasonably. Women can now do many different jobs, which is very good, but they should not allow this to distract them. My sister will learn that it is better when women work for both society and the family (gia đình).

Duc clarified his point by suggesting that:

Pressures on men and women in the family are not equivalent (duong luong), but then the kind of pressures [they feel] are not the same either. The reason [for this] is not [that] housework is the duty of wives or husbands, but that the atmosphere in the home (bầu không khí của gia đình) is dependent on wives, because men are thought to go to out to work to bring up the family ... In the future I don’t know whether they can be equal to men or not ... but at present [women] still need to think about their family first.

Duc thus indicated that despite all the superficial changes in gender relations in Vietnamese society, ‘men still have more strength, and power; they make more money, women are weaker but more flexible. They are the general in the house, and also the housekeeper’. I pointed out that this description contradicted his earlier statement that ‘women can do what men do’, as well as his suggestion that women’s ‘modern awareness’ made their life choices more autonomous. Duc disagreed with me, and stated that he was not describing any special privilege for men over women but (merely) his ‘family’ (nhà). In Duc’s view, the enduring hegemony of the eldest male (Duc’s father), and the hierarchical order beneath him (Duc’s mother, then Duc, and then his younger sister), apparently was little affected by the vagaries of women’s commercial opportunities and practices during Đổi mới Vietnam:

In Vietnam the role (vai) of the women is relatively equal to men’s; men’s role is a little higher than women’s, but not by much. In my parents’ time, the man played the
role of the backbone in the family; now [this role] is less, but it still retains its status somehow. The view of the older people, and my view, are affected by the Oriental style (phong cách của Á Đông) ... so maybe I [actually] have more awareness (ý thức hơn) [than my sister].

Similar ideas were also apparent in the recounting of the life history of my next informant, Phong.

On coming from a tradition

Phong (aged twenty-five) was a student at the Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), where he was pursuing a Masters degree in Korean Studies. Before we met he had recently returned from a six-week program in Seoul, where he and a number of his Vietnamese classmates had attended intensive language classes with other international students from around the world. The students had stayed in student dorms at the university campus. Phong explained to me that during this trip he had unexpectedly fallen in love with one of his classmates, and was heartbroken by her refusal to date him. Phong said that he was surprised by these sudden feelings, as he had not previously considered this woman as a possible girlfriend. He had worried that his classmate was too ambitious for him:

She always seemed very ambitious in class, working very hard. And she was involved in so many activities at the university; she was head of the table tennis association and was a member in the [Vietnam Communist] Party ... She also has a job at the Lotteria [Korean fast food chain] office. She had even gone to Korea in the university holidays last year to improve her [Korean] language.

I asked him what had changed. Phong explained that spending time with her in the dorms had exposed him to her 'soft' (mềm) and more 'traditional' (truyền thống) side:

She acts as a princess, very innocent but very Oriental ... Her hobbies are reading picture books, travelling, cartoons—they are very interesting; and I think she is beautiful also ... She has teddy bears, she holds them very softly and picks up each bear very carefully.
I asked Phong to give me an example of the way in which this woman displayed her ‘Oriental manner’. Phong replied, ‘the way she sits correctly, and she combs her hair very gently; when she asks for permission [in class], her hands are straight. The Europeans can’t do things so gently (nhẹ nhàng).

To Phong, ‘Orientalism’ seemed to convey a sense of gender decorum that was unique to East Asian women. He was certain that ‘European’ women were unlikely, if not unable, to express themselves in similar ways. It seemed to me that Phong was projecting a fantasy of passivity onto a particularly dynamic peer. I suggested to Phong that while his classmate was ‘soft’ with her teddy bears and ‘correct’ in the ways that she combed her hair, these acts were of secondary, if not trivial, importance compared to her other activities and life-enhancing practices. Phong disagreed, and elaborated on his answer by explaining Vietnamese gender relations as more or less eternally traditional in the essence but occasionally modern in their practices and dispositions:

[She] might have modern characteristics (đặc điểm), but I know she is a normal Vietnamese woman … After all, only the abilities of women are changing … No matter how modern you are, you still come from a tradition. All Vietnamese people have something in common, it comes from our culture. Our culture is Confucian, I come from it, and I am no different to other normal Vietnamese men … It can be said that now women are more dynamic, but their capacity (khả năng) has not changed very much. This change in society is related to economics … After the 1986 renovation period, Nguyen Van Linh5 adopted new policies, and these produced change in our economy and our society; but this was just policy (chính sách). In my view, [Đổi mới] was late: we could have been innovating economically from 1976, and Vietnam would not have lost ten years (of development … After the subsidy period the policy [has been] good, the economy [has been] good, and society [has been] good. But the guidelines (danh từ) in the family (gia đình) have always been good.

According to Phong, changing state policy affected Vietnamese labour, business and education, and required changing ‘qualities’ (phẩm chất) in Vietnamese men and women. But this shift in

economic responsibility and opportunity was understood by him as existing outside the logic that operated within relationships between men and women overall. To Phong, the emerging market opportunities and responsibilities of the new Đổi mới policies required change in the economic responsibilities of women not because they were women per se, but because as individual units of labour they were not then working in the income-earning economy at their full potential. Phong added that ‘throughout history [Vietnam] has always had talented people. It always depended on the people’s effort, not their gender, whether they acquired the knowledge to work.’ Trying to help me to better understand his point, Phong stated:

Yes, things are different, but ... will you forget Hamlet? Do you think your children in the future will forget Hamlet? Maybe they won’t have a chance to look at the play Hamlet, but the [important cultural and literary] ideas and values will be transferred from you to your next generation. It is like this here.

I later asked Phong why he thought his classmate would not date him. He said that ‘she told a friend that she thinks I am too conservative ... Women are very fickle (thay dỗi) these days’.

**Discussion**

In some of the literature reviewed in chapter 3, young Vietnamese women’s changing practices during Đổi mới were depicted as acts which transgressed scholars’ expectations of the meaning and function of Confucian and other ‘traditional’ masculine cultural forces (Trang Quach 2008; Vu Song Ha 2008). More pertinently, such changes appeared in some scholarship to have led to a fundamental rethinking of the ‘whole system of moral principles that preached women’s moral submission’ in Vietnam (Nhung Tuyet Tran 2006; Barbieri and Bélanger 2009). As mentioned, however, this literature so far appears primarily, if not exclusively, to have drawn conclusions on gender from research carried out with a focus on women’s lives, not those of men (Nhung Tuyet Tran 2006, 139).

This chapter has argued that my informants also had a complicated relationship with ideas about men’s authority and status, and with other discourses of ‘traditional,’ ‘Vietnamese’ and ‘Confucian’ masculinist privilege. Certainly such ideas served a purpose for my informants in thinking about the changes in their relations with women amid processes of globalisation and
changing socioeconomic conditions. But the ways in which these ideas were used in the narratives suggested that my informants did not feel that ‘traditional’ gender configurations resulted in them experiencing any special privilege over young women. Nor did my informants’ descriptions of Confucian gender arrangements appear closely linked with their actual relationships with women and other men. When my informants reflected on their often messy relationships with young women, they also acknowledged that the power and effect of Confucianism always was situated, generally elsewhere, and often some time prior to Đổi mới. But they also suggested that Confucian gender positions and practices remained ‘appropriate’ or ‘correct’.

In what follows, I will present an analysis suggesting that my informants’ ambiguous and contradictory uses of ideas about ‘traditional’ or Confucian gender orders served as a type of sometimes useful interpretive system for accommodating some of the contradictory elements within their expectations and experiences ‘as men’ in their relations with young women. My informants’ comments reported in this chapter certainly appeared at times to project a configuration of (Confucian) order into both the past and the future. This seemed to be directly at odds with their actual experiences of the shifts in gender relations and the changing position of women in their families and in wider society. This chapter, like chapter 4, revealed the considerable gap between my informants’ lives ‘as men’ and the (masculinist) advantages that they perceived to be inherent in the ‘traditional’ social arrangements articulated by Confucianism. For example, Tho appeared to reduce any possible shame or discomfort about his unemployment and inability to realise a ‘proper relationship’ with a young woman by talking abstractly about women’s positions in the idealised ‘family’. It seems possible that Tho thought that one way of reducing his sense of vulnerability to the ridicule of this friends was to position himself as a ‘normal man’ in terms of ‘traditional’ Vietnamese gender arrangements, and thus position both young women and contemporary society as aberrant. But it seemed clear to me that this rhetorical repositioning would have no effect on his friends’ opinions, which was what Tho said mattered most.

Duc also appeared to invoke ideas of Confucian and ‘traditional’ masculine forces in Vietnam in order to reinterpret and translate the changing social conditions. Duc initially mocked his parents for having so many ‘preconceived ideas and customs’, and his father in particular for being blind to the new challenges and opportunities of the market economy. But he also appeared to be both concerned for, and jealous of, his younger sister. He described her life as being significantly more ‘free’ than he remembered his own life to have been at the same age. Duc acknowledged that his younger sister’s success in her university program course and in
attracting men was evidence that now ‘women can do anything’. But, seeming to lament his frustrations about his own career as a journalist and his lack of a girlfriend, Duc also invoked the Confucian ‘traditions’ he earlier had mocked to suggest that it would be more ‘correct’ if young women’s situations and practices were limited.

Phong’s narrative contained perhaps the most obvious ‘gaps’ between his experiences with young women and his expectations or hopes of them. He also used ideas about ‘traditional’ masculine advantages in subtle and indeterminate ways. Phong had fallen in love with a ‘very innocent, very Oriental’ woman whom he described in ways which appeared to characterise both a child (for example, cartoons, teddy bears, sitting correctly) and a very ‘modern’ and ambitious young woman (for example, setting career goals, obtaining an international education). Phong suggested that his affection for this woman emerged after initial misgivings that she was too ambitious for him. But it seems that he had dealt with his own feelings of inadequacy, or perhaps unworthiness, in part by reimagining his classmate’s ‘modern’ qualities merely as products of the changing economic priorities of the state and as outgrowths of her ‘Oriental’ essence. Once the young woman was cast in these terms, her ultimate rejection of Phong appeared to him as ‘fickle’ and possibly characteristic of her deviation from Vietnamese ‘traditions’.

Each of these informants suggested that contemporary young women were somehow not ‘normal’ Vietnamese women, at least according to their expectations of relations and identities premised upon (ideas about) ‘traditional’ masculine authority and Confucian gender arrangements. But each of them also acknowledged, one way or another, that such ideas of masculinities were probably redundant in Đổi mới Vietnam: none of my informants considered that with young women they were able to enact or benefit from ‘traditional’ masculinist attitudes and behaviours. The empirical data thus appears to me to suggest that ideas of Confucianism sometimes emerged in my informants’ narratives simply to mediate and reinterpret their experiences of social change. This was particularly the case when my informants described situations they felt unable to influence.

Ideas of Confucianism might thus have functioned in these men’s narratives not as an element of explanation of gender relations (as they appear to explain nothing that my informants experienced), but rather one of interpretation (Young 2003; Cohn 1993). In this conception, the logic of Confucianism might be understood to affect the ways in which my informants interpreted

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6. I am here using ideas developed elsewhere by Iris Marion Young (2003), who adapts Thomas Hobbes’ work
and described particular events and circumstances, along with positions and possibilities for action within them. But while my informants’ comments about Confucianism appeared consistent with the (patriarchal) organisation and welfare of the collectivity (family, economy and nation), they more likely reflected the indeterminacy of those ‘traditions’ in young men’s lived experiences of transition. In the process of remembering and discussing their relationships with male and female family and friends, the young men in this chapter often appeared to embellish the significance of idealised Confucian relationships even as they more or less conceded the impracticality of these idealisations in describing the series of actual relationships with young women. Put another way, my informants seemed to be aware that rigid ideas of masculine authority and Confucianism did not describe any of the (gendered) relationships in which they participated, and considered meaningful the ways in which their practices ‘as men’ were deficient because they differed from ideal masculinist configurations.

It appears that my informants, in response to history and circumstance, at times came to see and interpret their experiences of changing socioeconomic conditions during Đổi mới through a familiar repertoire of ‘world-ordering’ devices (Kelley 2006), such as tropes about Confucianism and other ideas of ‘traditional’ masculinist cultural forces. These were only ever glimpses, however, of the ideal configurations and outcomes which remained, in practice, elusive in informants’ lives. The interpretive logic of Confucianism thus seemed to have suggested to my informants that their experience and understanding of themselves, their loved ones and the rest of society’s systems and institutions sometimes bore a strong resemblance to the Confucian ideal, even when they did not. This discord appears to bear out Doyle’s (2002) argument, discussed in chapter 3, that dominant gendered discursive formations of ‘patriarchy’ may serve as a form of hegemonic ideology which appears to characterise men’s everyday negotiations of their gender and sexual identities even when it is being resisted.

All this suggests that the young men whose experiences I discussed in this chapter might not have understood Confucian conceptions as exemplifying social positions or cultural identity but rather as a way of conceiving of masculine authority in a changing society. These young men sometimes invoked the language of ‘traditional’ ideas about masculinity not to describe themselves as moving from a Confucian past to a non-Confucian future, but instead to pose on political power founded on a need for desire and protection to analyse emerging discourses of ‘masculinism as protection’ in the ‘War on Terror’.
explanations in ways apparently intended to arrange Confucian and non-Confucian forms of experience and commitment alongside one another.

Conclusion

The argument developed in this chapter expands on, and adds nuance to, my conclusion in chapter 4. For example, in chapter 4 my informants’ memories of their mother’s changing economic activities during the early years of Đổi mới appeared to render uncertain the role and legitimacy of masculine authority in general. I suggested that informants’ indicated a strong degree of ambivalence about the ways in which their ideal Confucian gender configurations contradicted with what they seemed to value and respect in their households while growing up (their mother’s domestic work and economic achievements during the early 1990s public sector reforms). But in this chapter I have presented ethnographic vignettes and quotes in which five of my informants appeared to reiterate the significance of the (Confucian) organisation of social life into their current situations and relationships. As I pointed out, however, in these narratives Confucianism also appeared to be a type of invented signifier that bears a problematic relationship to the things it signifies (Wilson 2002, 24). At the very least, my informants’ rhetorical vagueness and slippage alerts us to the incompleteness of their Confucian world views, and points to young men’s ongoing reimagining of Confucianism and their relationships with both young women and each other.

This chapter thus enriches our understanding of the ways in which ideas of masculinist privilege, including Confucianism, operate in the lives of young Vietnamese men. It provides ethnographic evidence that suggests these ideas might ‘stretch’ to accommodate contradictory elements between men’s expectations and practices of living ‘as men’. In so doing it challenges and extends the scholarship on Vietnam that has emphasised Confucianism as occupying a special position within the morality of relationships in Vietnamese society (Kelley 2006; McHale 2004). Unlike much of this previous body of scholarship, however, I do not argue that ideas about and narratives of Confucian arrangements are necessarily intended to serve as a form of pressure against the threat of women’s changing social situation. I have suggested, instead, that my informants were probably aware of the contingent and political nature of the very ‘traditional’ patriarchal and Confucian tropes that they espoused, which were far from being understood as literal truths. Further, my informants appeared to be aware that discourses of ‘modern’ and
'traditional' gender relations also oversimplified and misrepresented their complex relations with young women. I will argue in the following chapters that this ability to recognise and negotiate contradictions between their ideals and experiences was central to informants’ memories of growing up during Đổi mới.
HETEROSEXUALITY AND CHANGE

‘Starving to death is a small problem, losing your virginity is a big one’

– Vietnamese saying

Introduction

Chapters 4 and 5 argued that young urban Vietnamese men considered that some ideas about ‘traditional’ masculine cultural forces benefitting men may have given way to day-to-day negotiations and transactions, in relation to their mundane familial memories, broader market risks and opportunities, other social changes, and against social practice. These chapters also argued that such renegotiations produced a number of contradictory or inconsistent elements in my informants’ narratives—between expectations of, and actual signifying practices in, growing up ‘as men’. The empirical evidence thus suggested that ideas about various (masculinist) social and historical ‘traditions’ provided important guiding principles for the public statements that my informants made about themselves, and yet achieved limited purchase on their informal observations and critical reflections on their relationships with women. These chapters also indicated that my informants used loose and indeterminate discourses of Confucianism to describe situations over which they could exert little influence. In summary, this thesis has so far argued that changes in gender practices and positions in the family and household, economic opportunities and expectations, and ideas about patriarchal and Confucian ‘traditions’ during Đổi mới have influenced young men’s perceptions of what it is to be ‘a man’.

Building upon this argument, in the present chapter I propose that my informants considered that sexual practices had also been changing ahead of, or in distinction to, ‘traditional’ ideas and practices about ‘being a man’. In particular, I will argue that some of my informants’ beliefs about women’s changing sexual identities and habits generated critical self-reflection about their own sexual adequacy and contributed to growing doubts about ‘traditional’ masculine advantage within sexual relations in general. The informants whom I discuss appeared increasingly
ambivalent about notions of gendered morality and the significance of female virginity in particular. While such ambivalence might at first suggest a shift toward improved gender and sexual equality, I also cite empirical evidence suggesting that some young urban Vietnamese men sought opportunities to control the terms and practices by which women’s bodies were viewed, used and consumed by watching heterosexual pornography in groups with male friends, or by visiting female sex workers and watching their friends have sex. I suggest that by controlling the terms on which, as well as the practices through which, women’s bodies were used and consumed, these young men attempted to stabilise their sense of community and strengthen their relationships with each other at a time when discourses on women were rapidly changing.

Theoretical considerations from the literature

A number of academic, health and development reports have argued that the gendered inequality of power in Vietnam is manifest in young men’s and women’s experiences of sex and sexuality (Central Youth Union 2004; Kaljee et al. 2007). Vietnamese women have appeared in this scholarship in ways that suggest that while responsibility, resistance and ultimately sexual agency remain located firmly with more or less compliant women (Mensch et al. 2003), cultural conditions dictate that women can exert little control in their sexual relationships with inflexible and oppressive men (Le Thi Phuong Mai 1998). Social research on gender in urban settings in Vietnam has interpreted the sexual vulnerability and experiences of women as deriving from economic and cultural conditions that benefit men (Efroymson et al. 1997; Gammeltoft 1999); it has also portrayed men as being agents of patriarchal traditions with whom women need to negotiate their roles (O’Harrow 1995; Rydstrøm 2003) and studied men in terms of behaviours considered highly significant within development discourses (Bao Ngoc Vu et al. 2008; Doyle 2002).

While some recent feminist anthropological scholarship suggests that young urban Vietnamese women are increasingly capable of formulating new social relations and identities through tropes of pleasure, taste, technology and international aestheticism, it also emphasises the salience of ‘traditional’ ideas of the Confucian patriarchal family in Vietnamese society (Gammeltoft 2002; Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas 2004). Here, changing sexual attitudes and practices appear significant for the ways in which they demonstrate Vietnamese women’s ambivalence towards dominant patriarchal ideologies within heterosexual or familial relationships and towards the political economy in which they live. Studies emphasise that women have developed
a wide range of coping mechanisms and strategies for renegotiation within overarching patriarchal social and cultural conditions (Gammeltoft 2002; Khuat Thu Hong 2003).

It appears that no research has ever been done, however, on the microprocesses of Vietnamese men’s identity creation in relation to their negotiation of heterosexual sexual relations. Instead, work on embodiment in Vietnam suggests that young men are born inside patrilineal familial structures (họ nội) and has proposed that men are socialised to occupy their bodies in ways that reinstate male hegemony (Hy Van Luong 1989; Rydstrøm 2001, 2003). These studies do not appear to portray any ambiguity or anxiety on the part of men as they are socialised into their (unequal) relationships with women. For example, Phinney (2008) discusses some of the ways in which North Vietnamese men negotiate their ongoing construction of a modern masculinity by hanging out in groups and using sex workers. She emphasises the ways that the policies and processes of a gendered market economy facilitate and structure the possibilities for extramarital sexual relations over and above the agency of individual men.

As I have argued, however, scholarship that presumes the persistence and meaning of ‘traditional’/Confucian and structural relations of gender inequality appears to obscure some of the ways in which such ‘traditions’ are resisted or renegotiated by my informants. For example, the ethnographic vignettes in chapter 5 suggested that my informants used the language of ‘traditional’ male power not to devalue women’s contributions but rather to deal with their own feelings, desires or problems. These informants appeared to use Confucian rhetoric as one way of reconciling their personal fantasies of masculine authority with their experiences in supporting, resisting and renegotiating their contemporary messy relationships with young women, the job market, their families and each other. Along similar lines, I explore in this chapter the ways in which popular ideas about the moral correctness of women appear to guide the language my informants used in talking about sex, even as their socialising in relation to sex and sexuality seemed to ignore such imaginings. I draw particular attention to my informants’ narratives about changes in the ways in which women and men negotiated sex and sexuality, in particular the unreliability of physical evidence for female virginity given the possibility of hymen reconstruction surgery, the emergence of the internet and pornography and their affect on the lives of these young men, and the feelings they have of sexual naiveté. These issues appeared to cause my informants to reflect with some ambivalence on the utility of embodied knowledge and morality in contemporary life in general. I argue that this ambivalence dispels the notion that Vietnamese men typically expect women to embody compliance and adaptation to overarching patriarchal social policy and beliefs.
Memories of when the girls became more modern

As I shall show, the young men whom I discuss in this section suggested that young women are experimenting with, and thereby changing the relationships between, ideas about women’s ‘proper’ morality and their (modern) sexual practices. The young men considered that these changes were made possible by the enhanced social and economic freedoms available to women as a result of Đổi mới. My informants understood women’s changing sexual practices and attitudes to have occurred as a result of women’s new tastes in fashion, patterns of consumption and technology. These, in turn, were seen by some men as reflected in women’s bodily comportment. As with the rest of my informants, the men discussed in this chapter were too young to remember much of Vietnamese society prior to 1986. They all saw Đổi mới as a pivotal moment of change in women’s sensibilities, however, and as evidence cited the increasingly risqué clothes and more overtly sexual behaviours of young women. But in cases where young women did not dress or act in an obviously changed manner, some of these young men considered them to be concealing the effects of the changes brought about by Đổi mới. Informants argued that residual, ‘traditional’ cultural values around young women’s sexuality now served only to hide from view the actual transformative effects of Đổi mới upon women. For example, Duy (twenty-eight years old) stated that as ‘the environment’ (môi trường) changed in Vietnam in the late 1980s and early 1990s, so too did women. He suggested that women had developed increasingly ‘sexual’ bodies as a result of improved access to food during Đổi mới:

Before [Đổi mới], the Vietnamese girls were beautiful but very skinny because there was no fruit to eat at that time ... but after 1990 the economy of Vietnam was growing, we had the normalization [of trade] with the United States, and GDP improved ... the society changed a lot ... Girls became more modern (biển đại hơn) ... Now they are taller, more plump-faced, plump-bodied, with plump hips, plump chest, and with whiter skin ... their bodies have become more voluptuous (chất dâm) and they wear more provocative (gợi tình) clothes.

Hai also discussed key changes in post-Đổi mới society in terms of changes to women’s body shape and choices in clothing. He explained to me that because most young women no longer rely on bicycles for their daily transportation, ‘it is harder to find girls who have long and thin
legs. Improved economic opportunities in Vietnam after Đổi mới have meant many young women could afford to ride motorcycles. To Hai, this was both evidence of an ‘improved society’ and a reason why women’s calves are these days often big, ‘like Russian ice buckets’. While Hai agreed with Duy that better economic conditions and access to nutritious foods after Đổi mới had ‘improved’ young women’s bodies, he was also concerned that too many young women were now recklessly following new fashions and displaying those improved bodies in figure-hugging trousers (quần ngố):

I don’t want to say who can wear what clothes ... [and] it is really beautiful for girls with a good shape to wear those sexy clothes. But there are more and more fat girls who should not wear trousers like that ... They look ridiculous (lố bịch), like prostitutes (đĩ).

Tuan, twenty-three years old, summed up the broad sentiments among these informants when he stated that women’s post-Đổi mới bodies were literally bursting out of their previous cultural constraints. Combining the theme of emergent materialism in the 1990s and the moral dimensions of the revealing ways in which he thought young Vietnamese women had begun to dress, Tuan suggested that changes in women’s fashion choices made available through improving socioeconomic conditions were also affecting cultural values around Vietnamese women’s bodies:

Now we all care more about our appearance. Before we needed to buy good and durable clothes, but now we all want the beautiful and fashionable clothes; and these days we can change [clothes, fashions] very quickly, so durability is no longer very important ... It is easy to tell that things have changed [for women] by the clothes they wear, [and] what they talk about ... But sometimes [fashion] seems to have gone too far. These days many women wear things that don’t cover what they need to cover.

Tuan stated that young women’s risqué tastes in fashion were evidence that they were now ‘more sexually free’ (hợp thời mai về tình dục hơn) and had ‘advantages’ (lợi hơn) when compared to his mother’s generation. However, he subsequently suggested that those young women who did not wear ‘provocative’ clothes were also ‘more [sexually] free’ than ‘before’, but were probably concealing their relative freedom by appearing chaste. Tuan believed that ‘traditional’ cultural mores inhibited some young Vietnamese women from demonstrating their changing sexual
subjectivities even though ‘society [had] changed a lot’. He stated that if young Vietnamese women did not conform to the trends in fashion and bodily comportment that he saw as inevitable in the changing socioeconomic conditions, then they were simply trying to ‘deceive’ (lừa ai) men into thinking that their ideals (tư tưởng) remained unchanged (vẫn không hề thay đổi). He explained:

Women can be very secretive on this issue ... No girl wants to give the impression that she is interested in sex. Even now, one of my colleagues pretends to be very reserved (dè dặt) about sexual affairs in conversation, but after I got her password to log into her computer, I found lots of sexual poems and materials ... If we just look on the outside and comment on appearance, how can we really know the character? (Chỉ nhìn và bình phẩm bề ngoài thôi, làm sao mà biết được tính cách ạ?)

Although Tuan had earlier suggested that the clothes women wore made it ‘easy’ to determine the changes Đổi mới produced in women, he now appeared to argue that outside appearances provided insufficient clues to the ‘real’ changes going on in women’s sexual subjectivities. This theme was also briefly touched upon by Duy, to whom I now briefly return.

Over lunch at a busy restaurant beside West Lake, Duy explained that ‘Now when women are in love, they can just have sex, but before they had to wait until marriage’. I expressed some surprise and, while pointing out that the young women at a number of nearby tables were dressed in jeans and t-shirts, responded that while ‘modern’ young women might be more socially and economically ‘free’ than women of earlier generations, the women seated nearby hardly appeared ‘provocative’ in what they were wearing, nor ‘lustful’ in their general comportment. I suggested that as he seemed to be overstating the changes in women’s fashions, perhaps he was also overestimating ‘change’ in their levels of sexual adventurism. He replied, ‘You might be right, but that doesn’t change anything. They are just good at hiding it. Most women are’.

Although Duy had initially stated that young women’s changing physiques and fashion choices were evidence of their increasingly ‘sexual’ identities, he now seemed to change his mind and suggest that because of the sexual conservatism of Vietnamese culture a woman’s appearance was not at all a reliable indicator of changing attitudes and behaviours around sex (in the first place). In this logic, the dramatic effects of Đổi mới on women’s sexual subjectivities were obscured by young women’s adeptness at imitating the conservative style and demeanour of ‘pre-Đổi mới’
women. Those women who did wear ‘provocative’ clothes and have ‘lustful’ bodies were simply the most visible example of the radical effects that the socioeconomic changes of Đổi mới had on young women’s approach to sex and sexuality. Indeed, to Duy and the young men discussed in this section, young women in Vietnam were experiencing their sexuality in increasingly liberal ways, especially when it was not overt. He surmised that ‘according to a statistic, 80 per cent of students have sex while still at high school and it is normal in present-day Vietnamese society … [so although] I might not know these women’s views, I do know [women in general] now have sex more freely than before’.

On women’s sexual knowledge and expectations

Drawing on information gleaned from gossip with other men, newspaper and magazine articles, and anecdotes from female friends and lovers, the informants discussed in this section speculated that women have changed their sexual expectations of men as a result of their increased opportunities during Đổi mới to gain knowledge about sex and sexuality. Some of these men presumed that young women would share their own dissatisfaction about the sex education they received at high school and university, and that, like them, they would have made efforts to learn more about sex through pornographic DVDs and the internet. However, the uncertainty these young men had about women’s actual extracurricular sexual knowledge, expectations and experience appeared to produce psychosexual unease. Statements by the young men discussed in this section suggest that their own anecdotes about young Vietnamese women’s supposedly sophisticated sexual knowledge and desires were a source of both titillation and anxiety. Each of the men expressed concern that today’s sexually confident women might have expectations of men that men could not fulfil. Conflating their basic knowledge of anatomy, the ‘fact’ of Đổi mới’s emancipation of women’s sexual activity, and their own erotic fantasies, these men appeared to hypersexualise young women’s bodies while questioning their own abilities to satisfy them. According to Duy, for example,

In the past, many girls at the age of thirteen to fourteen did not know anything about puberty (tuổi dậy thì) and how they got their period every month, so they would ask their mothers … or there were some lessons at school … but this sexual education (học nguồn tình dục) was not about satisfaction or happiness … [it was] just scientific.
Some of my female friends told me they met great difficulties in looking for this information. But now there are many DVDs and internet sites available on sex and reproduction issues for women, [and about] nutrition, eating.

Duy stated that in place of the ‘books, newspapers, [and] magazines about the reproductive organs and how to clean them’, which men and women his age had read while in high school, young women now sought more explicit information about (sexual) ‘satisfaction or happiness.’ According to Duy, erotica ‘is very free now, and even girls can watch and learn about sex’ (học kinh nghiệm quan hệ tình dục). He explained that while ‘everyone’ simply expected young men to access pornography on DVDs and the internet, women were also ‘very curious about that kind of thing ... We must not pretend that young women now only seek health information online’. Although their initial motivations might be ‘to learn more about sex issues and reproductive health’, Duy said that it was common for young women these days to quickly move from the ‘healthy’ (lành mạnh) websites to the ‘debauched, or black, websites’ (trang web xấu dâm hay là đen) containing pornography. Duy stated that ‘the girls who are my age are still very sensitive when they talk about sex issues, but the girls who are five years younger than me can talk about it very freely’. Duy stated to me that this is because now sex education comes from ‘books, newspapers, TV, [the] mass media; everywhere’, which ‘greatly affects [young women’s] ideals’. He explained:

Because of the development of the society, economy and the education, the view of the young people has been affected. The views of the older people and my [own] view are [still] affected by feudalism, so we were educated about sex issues in a way much more secret than now. We really had no chance to learn, and no sex education; we just studied by ourselves. But the young—now—they have a free life!

Hieu, a nineteen-year-old undergraduate studying tourism, said that for young women, like young men, viewing erotica increased both their sexual knowledge and their desire (mạnh muốn ham muốn). He told me that unlike the young men, however, young women were more likely to ‘hide that they watch it.’ This is because ‘Vietnam in general is affected by Confucianism (nho giáo),’ which he said can be understood to mean that men have ‘always been able’ to speak about their ‘desires’ and exploits, while women’s sexuality has typically been ‘a secret thing’. And yet, like Tuan and Duy, Hieu suggested that Vietnam’s cultural reticence around women’s sexuality
served merely to conceal the dramatic changes going on there since Đổi mới. Hieu explained that now women watch erotica as part of their ‘normal demand’, but watch it ‘secretly’ because of conservative ‘Vietnamese characteristics’. And, as women can now ‘easily find erotica on websites, DVDs, [and] books’, they are ‘more open on this [sex] issue’. Hieu explained:

Before [women] were more reticent (kín đáo hơn) about their sexual desires and protective of their virginity, but now they see [sex] as normal. Now the students in grades seven and eight go onto the internet all the time to see [erotica], so they are more open and think more freely than before ... Students in forms eight, nine, ten and eleven—so many have had sex already. I just read research that said the average age for boys and girls to have sex is now sixteen to seventeen years old ...

However, while Hieu suggested that young women’s ‘openness’ to their sexuality and knowledge of sex meant that it would probably be ‘easier’ for him to find a girlfriend, he also stated that ‘if you don’t have any experience, it is [also] very easy to be rejected by them’. Popular discourses around young women’s sexual prowess made Hieu acutely aware of his sexual inexperience. He stated:

For example, all of my friends are boys and I have only one female friend, but she is like a male friend so I didn’t have any experience in being with a girl. I am unsure about how to treat a girl, and I am unsure about how to attract a girl ... [And] through newspapers and friends I know that if a man does not have the right technique in making love, or cannot adjust, he cannot satisfy the women; and the woman will find other men to satisfy her. I read a letter to a [men’s] magazine sharing the feelings of a woman who has not felt any [sexual] desire since she had sex with her husband. She wrote that ‘I have never had any happy moments; he hugged me for a few minutes then he ejaculated immediately’.

Nhung, a twenty-five-year-old postgraduate student at Hanoi University, made similar comments about his concerns about his sexual prowess, lamenting that he read in a popular men’s magazine that ‘a man must satisfy a woman the first time they have sex, otherwise she will find other men to have sex with.’ While he had never had a sexual encounter with a woman, Nhung explained that he knew from the basic sex education textbooks available at high school and
pornographic VCDs and DVDs, as well as his own experience making himself ‘pleasant’ (làm tự sự ờ cho mình), that ‘for men, anytime your penis has an erection, you feel desire, but after you ejaculate, then you become tired immediately. But for a woman, she can make love with two or three men at the same time and it can happen all day long.’

Another man, Anh, twenty-three years old, who had earlier told me that he had moved from his family in Lang Son four years prior because ‘Hanoi is the place where there are all the best things to have’, appeared to supplement his vague belief that young women in Hanoi are increasingly sexually active and pleasure-seeking with ‘evidence’ elicited from a friends’ sexual encounter with one young woman. Like Hieu and Nhunh, Anh stated that he had very little experience with women and had not yet had sex, but he also knew from ‘magazines’ and stories from friends at his university that most young women these days were likely to have encountered erotica (văn hóa phẩm đó), and that some young women even ‘follow and practise the vulgar (thô tục làm) things that they watch on film’. Although he could not elaborate upon this statement from personal experience—he said that he wanted to have his first sexual intercourse with his wife, and also wanted ‘to have a virgin girl to marry’—Anh offered by way of explanation a story about a friend of his who had sex with a nineteen-year-old classmate at his university in Hanoi and was amazed at her ‘professionalism’. According to Anh:

She did not only lie under my friend like the traditional way, [but] had different styles of making love—not just two or three, but lots of positions, and sex by mouth (tình dục bằng miệng); [she was] professional, like with a prostitute ... if [women] do not watch the [erotic] films, how can they know [these positions]?

While the young men in this section appeared to be generally excited and enthusiastic about (stories of) young Vietnamese women’s changing sexual attitudes and practices since Đổi mới, their associated concerns about their own relative sexual naiveté and inexperience seemed to produce a strong sense of ambivalence around sex per se. A few of these men expressed negative sentiments about young women breaching Vietnamese cultural propriety and made derogatory comments about the ways in which some young women’s bodies and behaviours too readily reflected uncertain social developments. But they also all appeared to welcome improved opportunities for young women to enact their emergent sexual identities. These young men thought that, as a result of Đổi mới, women were increasingly able to overcome sexually discriminatory
cultural practices in Vietnam and would be more likely in general to have sex. Using anecdotes from popular culture and their friends, as well as their own erotic fantasies, these men argued that as a result of Đổi mới young women’s bodies were increasingly becoming sexually experienced, even though their own bodies often were not. At the same time, these men worried that residual conservative traditions within Vietnam meant that women were unlikely to fully communicate the extent of their ‘new’ sexual knowledge, desires or experiences to men. As we shall now see, the possibility of women not communicating their sexual experiences had dramatic implications for men’s perceptions of and expectations about female virginity.

Reconceiving female virginity

Young men’s comments in this section suggest that they questioned the reliability of (women’s) bodies in demonstrating women’s sexual history. This section will argue that young men’s distrust of women who maintained the appearance of ‘correct conduct’ amid the post-Đổi mới culture of relative sexual permissiveness was matched by their growing distrust of women’s bodies as reliable markers of virtue in general, and virginity in particular. Popular anecdotes around the availability of hymen reconstruction surgery meant that these young men presumed that young women would be able to display ‘correct moral conduct’ and the physical evidence of their virginity despite having engaged in active sex lives. However, rather than adding to the young men’s anxiety, this paradox resulted chiefly in statements of ambivalence about rigid ideas about gender; the practicality of ‘traditional’ gender arrangements and narrow expectations about sex and sexuality were giving way to young men’s own sense of urgency about acquiring sexual experience. This section argues that instead of further entrenching cultural ideals of female chastity and servitude, the fact that young women were now able to imitate sexual inexperience by cosmetically reproducing their hymens has made young Vietnamese men reflect on the value and role of female virginity in the first place.

Anh’s uncertainty about the implications of young women’s new sexual knowledges seemed to be compounded by his subsequent reflection on the ways in which values about the importance of women’s virginity had changed during his lifetime. I suggested to Anh that his salacious story about his friend’s ‘professional’ (although non-commercial) sexual experiences with a young woman, along with his apparent belief in women’s consumption of erotica, indicated to me that his preference to marry a virgin might be inconsistent with his sexual desires. I asked whether
he thought that the importance he put on being certain of his future wife’s virginity seemed anachronistic in the strongly sexualised social world he described. He responded by saying that ‘maybe it seems this way’.

People sometimes see me as the outdated person because of my attitudes, but before, when we were at the high school, seventeen or eighteen years old, we had a nice love, and it was something new and strange, and it was rare ... Now [young people] are in love with each other much earlier, and they have access to cool [pornographic] films (phim màt) ... [But] when I was at secondary school, no one talked about sex, they spoke about correct conduct ... and that’s why I learnt [the importance of female virginity] very, very early ... we learned that virginity (trinh tiết) is very important for women; [that] it is their ultimate possession before getting married ... women before were more faithful than now. They were affected by the traditional culture and feudalism. They had to suffer a lot and they had no chance to contact with mass communication like now.¹

Anh appeared to believe that the cultural values about virginity that he learnt while at secondary school had been subsequently modified by the changing social conditions during the late 1990s in Hanoi, and in particular the emergence of pornography in young women’s lives there. He revealed his ambivalence toward the increasingly sexualised culture of contemporary Vietnam by suggesting that ‘correct conduct’ was a historically fixed concept rooted in premodern linguistic practices, and contrasted it with the throwaway values of post-Đổi mới Vietnam. He did this by contrasting the etymological origins and the rigid rules of trinh tiết with the supposedly fickle materialism of the free market:

In Sino-Vietnamese there are two meanings to tiết; the first one means blood; the second maybe means a kind of correct conduct, behaviour. This is the behaviour of good people. This is the thing we learn we must maintain ... it’s important for women

¹. The word trinh tiết is a combination of two words. Trinh means the hymen, the membrane that partially or completely covers the vaginal opening. Tiết carries more than one meaning, including pureness, chastity, and moral integrity. The word for virginity in Vietnamese is commonly understood to contain two components: the biological part of a woman’s body and her moral attributes, which are socially constructed.
before marriage, but after marriage it is important for both [women and men]. But at that time, it doesn’t have the original meaning. No one can be virgin after marriage. But it is still very important after marriage ... it means having no extramarital affairs ... It is very complicated ... [But] I think that as society changes, people’s expectations change. For example, before [Đổi mới] people wanted a colour TV made in Poland but now they want to have a modern and nicer TV from Japan—thin and with a flat screen. It is the same with sex. Now, if you love and you do not have sex with a girl in high school, she thinks that you are silly or outdated (quá khứ).

In recounting the reasons for his own adherence to ‘feudal’ values about premarital sex, Anh twice conceded that his views might be considered ‘outdated’ and irrelevant by today’s young women. In addition, his attempts to explain how the concept of ‘trinh tiet’ was in practice translated into everyday ‘correct conduct’ seemed to reveal some confusion about whether ‘traditional’ ideas were actually applicable to the domain of contemporary social practice. It appeared to me that Anh was, paradoxically, affirming the ideal that men should expect their wives to be virgins at marriage while at the same time suggesting that this was something that Vietnamese women were increasingly less likely to be. As Anh had stated previously that he was expecting to marry a virgin, I facetiously asked him whether he thought that the supposedly increasing sexual proclivities of high school girls meant that he would now need to marry a very young wife. He laughingly agreed, saying that ‘now each man must be fast or another man will take the [woman’s] virginity before him ... Although if everyone has this ideal then no one will [ever] be the second one, right?’ He then added:

Everyone wants to have a virgin but not everyone can [have one]; if I can get married to a woman who is virgin then it is a happy factor for the family (là một điều kiện cho gia đình hạnh phúc) ... But maybe in the future I will meet one [woman] who has lost her virginity, [but] because I love her character and her nature, then I will accept her ... Maybe she lost her virginity by accident, or something else ...

After earlier describing a woman’s virginity as ‘their ultimate possession before getting married’, Anh now seemed equivocal about his own expectations of his future wife. He revealed his own significant doubts about the feasibility of his ‘feudal’ proscriptions around premarital sex
by jokingly pointing out the problems in all men expecting to marry young virgin women, and also the inexactness of the physical evidence for women’s virginity per se:

Men think the hymen is evidence [of the woman’s virginity], but I know that it can be broken very easily. Some men think that it can only be broken when a penis is inserted into the vulva ... but the thing is they don’t think of gymnastics or sports that can break it. [And] sometimes we cannot recognise that it is broken. There are medical procedures that can sew it, which cost only 2,000,000 VND. So even if the man wants to have a virgin woman it is sometimes a false one. To fix a hymen nowadays is very easy (để và màng trinh đối với bây giờ quá đơn giản) ... No one can recognise [that]. No one can understand. How does a man really know if he is with a virgin? It seems that these days virginity is just a feeling. Do you know what I mean?

Anh’s notion that women’s bodies were unreliable markers of sexual morality and previous activity was shared by a number of the other young men with whom I spoke. Binh, also a virgin, presumed a widespread inconsistency between young women’s narratives and their actual sexual experiences. He said that he had started to think about this issue after his girlfriend had told him that some of her single female friends had had sex without having serious boyfriends. Binh mused that ‘although many young women have had [sexual] relationships with men, many will still seem the same as before ... in sex, a woman can act passive (bị động) to make you think she has preserved herself (giữ gìn) for you even when she hasn’t.’ Hieu, who had earlier explained that he had ‘no experience in being with a girl’, still opined that ‘girls are often passive in sexual relationships [because] they still want to keep the appearance (rất là muốn đấy) that they are virgin.’ I noted that Duy had cited the changes in women’s height, weight and skin colour as evidence of his familiarity with changing attitudes towards sex and sexuality. But he also said that if he was having sex with women who were not his wife, it would be very difficult for him to know whether he was with a virgin, due to the availability of hymen reconstruction surgery. Citing an article in a men’s magazine about this, Duy said, ‘Now, because this surgery is cheap, we cannot identify which girls have had sexual relations before.’

However, while such sentiments might be regarded as symptomatic of these young men’s limited sexual knowledge and experience, similar statements also emerged among the more sexually experienced men with whom I spoke. Hai, who had earlier lamented the difficulty he
had finding women who have ‘long and thin legs’, stated that he had nonetheless had three sexual relationships with girlfriends. Reflecting on the beginnings of his second sexual relationship, during his early twenties, he said that:

> At that time I thought I was with a virgin and had broken [her hymen], but she is now married and her husband thinks she was a virgin [when they married]. So how can I say for sure that she was a virgin with me? Or that my wife will be a virgin? ...
> If you marry a child, maybe it will be a virgin.

I asked Hai whether after this experience the issue of his future wife’s virginity was still important. He replied with the rhetorical questions, ‘Well, if your wife doesn’t tell you that she had sexual affairs with another guy, how can you tell? And is it important? To most men in Hanoi I think it would be very important, but maybe not to me’, before musing that ‘I’m twenty-five years old, and even now I cannot recognise who is a virgin’. I tried to push him further on the issue and asked him whether I was expected to believe that his personal uncertainty alone about a woman’s sexual experience meant that virginity was no longer very important to young men in Vietnam in general. He responded by dividing Vietnam into ‘traditional’ and modern’ epochs and placing himself in the latter:

> Traditionally, in a family, the man was the backbone; he forced his wife and children to listen to him ... [But] the modern man is more open-minded; he marries a woman, but does not care much about her history. The most important thing is how she lives with you now ... [Virginity] is not so important, but [they] must treat me well and understand me to live with me.

Hai’s comments anticipated a much later conversation I had with Truong, aged twenty-six, who also inferred that the practical difficulties of assessing women’s sexual experience made that issue redundant. He said of his first sexual experience when he was nineteen:

> It was with my closest classmate, not my girlfriend, at home when my parents were away ... I recognised that even though she was only one year older than me, that maybe she had (had) prior sexual affairs ... because, from what we learnt at school, [if she
was a virgin] she would have been in very great pain ... [However, the sex] seemed quite painful, [but] not extreme.

Truong said that his uncertainty around whether his first sexual partner was also a virgin had initially caused him to feel ‘cheated’ (lừa), ‘because if I think in the old ways, (virginity) is still very important’. Paradoxically, however, he also suggested that the ambiguity he felt about his first sexual partner’s prior experiences had demonstrated to him that ‘a woman may lose her virginity, but she is not a hussy (đĩ). Indeed, Truong responded to the probability that his first girlfriend was already sexually experienced not by casting aspersions on her character, but by questioning his own expectations and prejudices. Almost apologetically, he added: ‘I came from the countryside, and it affected me a lot. In Vietnam, country men are the traditional men (đàn ông nông thôn theo kiểu truyền thống), but here (in the city) I have a more objective way of seeing things’ (có ra ngoài này thì có cái nhìn khách quan hơn). He explained that as young men and women in Hanoi had more ‘contact with the internet and westerners, and learned more about sex issues’ in the late 1990s than people from the rural areas had, and with the ‘original natural instinct of the human being’ it was ‘inevitable’ that sexual relations would become more common among young men and women in the city. Although he had earlier stated that he had felt somewhat cheated by his first sexual partner, he now ridiculed other men who expected their future wives to be virgin.

Cohabitation is happening more and more in Hanoi, but after that kind of sexual relationship, after that cohabitation, a [Vietnamese] man still often asks for a virgin to be his wife. What is the reason? ... Are they still affected from the past? ... Have these men ever thought to themselves: do they want to make the women feel satisfied (thoả mãn)? In that way of thinking men are so selfish, they only think of themselves. Are their wives satisfied or not? ... I think that these days, men need to be more sophisticated when making love. Some men just orgasm and then go straight to sleep. That will lead to the wife having extramarital affairs.

Almost four weeks after Truong’s statements to me about the importance of shared satisfaction between male and female sex partners, as well as his ‘positive’ ‘urban’ views on the issue of women’s virginity, we bumped into each other at a mutual acquaintance’s family celebration. I briefly met Truong’s girlfriend Van, who, among other things, said that she was aware that I
was an Australian research student who had asked Truong about ‘economic issues in Vietnam’. Unprompted, she stated that she thought Vietnam’s impending accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) would produce rapid economic benefits for her country and that young people should be getting ready for the new opportunities in international trade. We also briefly discussed Van’s studies at the University of Technology in Hanoi, and I made an appointment with Truong for the following week, before we all rejoined our respective tables. The gathering party was very large, and we did not see each other again that night.

At my subsequent meeting with Truong, I asked him whether his girlfriend really did think of my project as being solely related to economics in Vietnam. Truong responded that he had only told his girlfriend that we were talking about economics and employment opportunities for young men because she would be mad with him if she knew he was talking to others about their sex life. I said to Truong that I understood his reasons, but that I had also assumed from our earlier conversations that he and his girlfriend spoke quite openly about sex. I explained that at the wedding I had been somewhat surprised when I realised that he had kept Van unaware about any of the personal aspects of our discussions. He replied that even though he saw their relationship as ‘very open’, they didn’t speak about sex ‘freely’. He elaborated that while he saw the ‘sex issue’ as very open in America and Australia, ‘Vietnamese girls do not like it, and Asian men cannot be [open] like that [either]’:

Sex is different for westerners. For example, on the street the westerners can hug and kiss each other very freely. It is normal for men to touch the bottom of the women. But this behaviour cannot be accepted in Vietnam … [So], compared to a western man I don’t have much experience with sex. In my life I have only had sex with a couple of girlfriends and prostitutes sometimes; it’s very random.

I mentioned to Truong that he had not earlier told me about his experience with prostitutes. Truong responded that I had never explicitly asked him about them and, also, that he could be in ‘great trouble if anyone ever found out’. Presuming that he was referring to his girlfriend, I reminded Truong of our confidentiality agreement and reiterated the fact that he would appear in my research stripped of any characteristics or experiences that would make him identifiable to a third party. Truong haltingly explained: ‘I do not go to see prostitutes now … I sometimes used to go with friends to restaurants or karaoke with prostitutes’.
I suggested to Truong that we could change the topic, as he seemed to be uncomfortable talking to me about his experiences with sex workers. But he persisted:

It’s nothing very bad. But I was thinking about our [earlier] conversation, about my classmate … After that, I was with one virgin, who was a prostitute. As a kind of sexual affair I bought her ... [but it was] terrible. She was sixteen, a virgin, so it cost me a lot ... more than one million [dong]. She didn’t know what to do. I had to do everything. So boring, a lot of energy ... If someone knows this information, I will go to prison ... It is very important in our conversation that we just use a pseudonym.

This information made me question both the truthfulness of his earlier assertions about having an increasingly ‘positive attitude’ about women’s ‘modern’ sexual practice, as well as his motives in relaying to me those sentiments. I pointed out to Truong that it contradicted his statements that he knew about how ‘painful’ sex was for a virgin woman only from school textbooks and that he was particularly interested in women’s sexual satisfaction. Accordingly, I suggested that I might have trouble believing his future statements about his sexual experiences. Truong seemed surprised by my scepticism:

You said that you wanted to know about my sex life, about Vietnamese men’s sex lives. And I have told you ... [that] we cannot talk about it like westerners. Everyone has secrets ... I used to go and see prostitutes in the countryside, but I was young and stupid [and] did not now know what women were like ... One reason was that at the end of the night, the girlfriends were always home in bed. But now girlfriends can stay out late, so my attitude has changed ... It is the same with virginity. I learnt that the girl who has had sex before is better, and [these days] many girls in Hanoi have had sex before. Now you don’t have to think about such old fashioned (lỗi thời) things [as virginity].

To conclude this section I return to Anh. Although Anh had earlier suggested that he wanted a virginal bride as it would be a ‘source of happiness in the family’, he also conceded that ‘the more western our society is getting, the more open the opinions on sex are getting’. While he expressed his ‘feudal’ antipathy toward some of those changes, Anh’s comments suggested that
his belief in women’s increasing ‘desire’ for sex with men before marriage (and the technologies
to conceal it) had also diluted his commitment to rigid proscriptions on premarital sex. Anh’s
ideas around the uncertain evidence for a woman’s virginity appeared to combine with the ‘fact’
of women’s increased post Đổi mới sexual identities to overcome his ‘traditional’ reticence about
premarital sex. I told Anh that a female Vietnamese friend had once told me that she knew of a
man’s family who had insisted on a friend of hers being medically examined in order to verify her
virginity prior to marriage, and asked him whether he had ever considered this option. He replied:

No, I would not check her virginity, but we will have a full health check-up because
then we can identify any diseases early and find good treatments for them ... If she
complains that I am trying to find out about her virginity, then I will tell her: if,
because you have lost your virginity or have a disease, I run away, then I am not a man.

I commented that if he were really the feudal man that he suggested, he might indeed leave
a non-virgin fiancé. He responded, ‘But as you can see, that’s just what I said, not what I do’.

Anh’s earlier comment that virginity was ‘these days just a feeling’ suggested that he had
little faith in mores about the cultural importance of women’s virginity and ‘correct conduct’
for marriage. Indeed, it seemed that for Anh and most of the men whose lives I discuss in this
section, the process of recounting popular discourses of women’s increased sexual desires and
behaviours since Đổi mới and the informants’ own memories of the clinical knowledge and
cultural proscriptions on sex taught by schools and parents laid bare a gap between what they
felt they should feel about women’s appropriate sexual behaviour and the men’s actual expecta-
tions. Even when young men stated explicitly that they wanted a virgin wife and were keeping
themselves virgin also, they were nonetheless ambivalent about such expectations. This section
has thus argued that to be a young urban Vietnamese man today is to at least in part negotiate
(ideas about) young women’s changing sexuality.

Renovating privilege

This chapter has so far argued that popular discourses of women’s changing sexuality after Đổi
mới meant that for my sample of young Vietnamese men the validity of ‘traditional’ expectations
of gender roles within intimate heterosexual arrangements seemed increasingly unclear. Young
men were unsure about their own abilities to detect any sexual impropriety by women and were increasingly unconvinced by ‘traditional’ proscriptions around female sexuality anyway. The (im) practicality of ‘traditional’ gender ideas and narrow expectations about sex and sexuality have given way to young men’s own sense of urgency for, or ambivalence about, acquiring sexual experience.

For example, instead of further entrenching cultural ideals about female chastity and servitude, (the prospect of) young women’s ability to imitate sexual inexperience and cosmetically reproduce their hymens provoked informants to think twice about the value and role of female virginity. However, with some informants there also appeared to be varying degrees of ambivalence or anxiety about their own abilities to negotiate women’s ‘new’ expectations about sexual relations. As noted, some of the young men acknowledged the ‘inevitability’ of the modern society where young, unmarried women increasingly are able to negotiate sexual identities. As we shall now see, however, some informants also appeared to fantasise about a realm of hegemonic masculinity where they controlled the terms and practices by which women’s bodies were viewed, used and consumed. This last section will focus on two situations: young men who enjoyed watching heterosexual pornography in groups with their male friends, and men who visited female sex workers for the purpose of watching their friends and colleagues have sex.

Duy’s earlier assertion about young women being increasingly exposed to sexually explicit media was subsequently cited by him as a key motivation for him to watch pornographic films with his male friends. Duy illustrated his belief in the relative freedom of young women by discussing a recent scandal involving a popular singer:

My [twenty-three-year-old female] colleague told me there was one [girl] who was sent to a kind of retraining camp ... Yen Vi, [who is] very famous because she is a model and a very famous singer ... she was having sexual affairs before turning eighteen ... And there are [sexually explicit] photos on the internet which my colleague has already seen ... Women my age would never admit to seeing these things.

Duy was concerned that younger women’s relatively open discussions of sex and sexual behaviours were probably shared by women his own age, albeit more privately. He asserted that young men these days must ‘talk about how to make love, and watch [pornographic] films’ so as not to be ‘left behind’. In response to his anxieties about the knowledge and expectations of increasingly sexually active and assertive young women, Duy asserted that ‘men watch..."
[pornographic films] together because they help us to understand the other sex and so we do not seem ridiculous when we first do have sex.

Sinh (twenty-one) suggested that it was ‘natural’ that he and his male friends regularly watched pornography together because, as men, they share common desires and anxieties about sex. He explained that ‘sex education in school makes sex so scientific’, so sex ‘is hard to talk about’ even though ‘[sex] is something that men always want’. He said that Vietnamese men have a long history of sharing sexual stories and that amid dramatic changes in marriage laws and customs relating to female sexuality they should maintain this important cultural trait:

In the past twenty or thirty years, we have books with candles on the cover (denoting pornographic material) sold everywhere on the sidewalk ... My father shared with me that his friends sometimes still watch sex films. It is natural in Vietnam ... Men sometimes just want to experience the [sexual] feelings away from women, and this will never change.

Additionally, two of my informants had visited (or had friends who had visited) female sex workers for the purpose of watching their friends and colleagues have sex. Their stated reasons for doing so ranged from ‘drinking and having fun’, to competition and rivalry, to seizing available educational opportunities. Phuc, for example, told me that he and a male colleague had twice visited a female sex worker specifically to determine which of them was the better lover. Phuc stated:

With the sex workers, [sex] is their job, so we could easily ask questions about sex ... Many men will watch and want to act on what they see on the [pornographic] films, but they are too afraid to ask their girlfriends. [Because] with your girlfriend [sex] is about emotion and love, and not just about sex. With my girlfriend I ask ‘Are you happy? Are you ok?’, and if she is not, I stop. But [by going to a sex worker with a friend] men can learn what other men know and practise without caring about [women’s] expectations.

Similar themes emerged in a discussion with Tuan, who said that he knew that his closest male friends were sexually active because he had visited a brothel with them: ‘From my dorm I have a group of five friends. [Once,] when we were drunk, one went home and four of us went for a callgirl. Three of them had sex with her and I just watched them.’ Although Tuan explained that he
had wanted to have sex with the woman and was very aroused and ‘uncomfortable’, he also stated that ‘at that time [I] had a girlfriend already; I would have felt terrible if played with other women’:

I was so young at that time, only twenty or twenty-one years old, it was true love and I did not want to betray or tell her a lie. We used to tell each other everything, [and] I do not like to have sex with a callgirl.

I admitted to Tuan that I found it unusual that although he had a girlfriend, and did not like the idea of having sex with a commercial sex worker, he had ‘accidentally’ found himself in a room where three of his dorm mates were ‘playing with’ (chơi) a woman for whom they had paid. Tuan said that he had been aware of other men his age having visited sex workers with friends only to watch, and thought that it might be a good way for him to learn. He explained that at the time of his visit he had not yet had a discussion with his girlfriend about sex, and although he did not want to betray her he had decided that it was time for him to ‘improve’ himself:

At that time I was a strong and healthy man, but I had no idea about sex. But after I had stayed in the dormitory for one week, where the older boys told a lot stories about sex ... inside my body a lot of sexual desire appeared. I couldn’t stand it—I wanted to go to the dormitory where there was a girl who sold sex, to try it, but I was really shy ... It is hard to tell you the truth ... First year students like me are afraid of having sex because we don’t know what it is ... But the second year students can have sex easily because they are far from home, they have saved the money that they received from their parents and because of the influence of their friends.

Although Tuan would not elaborate further on the details of the evening he shared with his dorm mates, he suggested that visiting sex workers with other men was ‘reasonable’ (biết điều) if one considered that ‘now women appear the same as before, but many have changed a lot [and] have had contact with men a lot, and have had sex already’. Tuan appeared to regard watching his dorm mates having sex with a commercial sex worker as a sensible hedge against women’s secrecy about their own sexual experiences and expectations. He said, ‘I think that people who have more experience can show the less experienced ones “what is good and what is a mistake.” In this way you can believe that you will also be able to satisfy your girlfriend’.
It appears that for some young Vietnamese men, watching pornography or visiting commercial sex workers in groups might be understood as a way to manage the messiness, confusion and perhaps anxiety of their intimate relations with women in general. This last section suggests that relationships between young Vietnamese men in the context of the consumption of pornography and sex work might be understood as the temporary assertion of male potency, desire and confirmation in a period of changing discourses on women’s situation in Vietnam in general, and female sexuality in particular. For the young men watching, vision arguably produces and reproduces systems of representation that create certain information about femininity and masculinity and might be closely connected to ideas of building community and relationships between men. Determining who could look at whom, and in what way, can be interpreted as a way of framing differences and forming boundaries to delimit young men’s anxieties about the prospect of female sexual insubordination endemic in popular social and cultural practice.

Discussion

The ethnographic vignettes and quotes used in this chapter suggest that Vietnamese women’s bodies were understood by my informants’ as productive, communicative, and invested with powerful capacities for changing social and natural worlds. Popular discourses and my informants’ beliefs and fantasies about women’s increasingly overtly sexual identities had prompted these young men to critically re-evaluate their expectations of women fulfilling ‘traditional’ gender ideas, especially in relation to (perceived) ‘proper’ sexual morality. My informants doubted the trustworthiness of women’s ‘sentiments’ while questioning the reliability of (women’s) bodies to demonstrate their sexual history. Accordingly, they were increasingly ambivalent about the reliability of morality being somehow embodied by women in general and the significance of female virginity in particular. In this way, my informants perceived that in the course of changing their sexual attitudes and practices ‘modern’ young women also are resisting and changing the ‘morally defined patrilineal world’ (Harris 1998).

This is broadly in line with some recent scholarship on Vietnamese women, which suggests that in their new relations with bodily pleasure women are generating social transformation and subversion of the government’s dominant ideology of bodily denial. According to Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas (2004, 141), where ‘formerly women’s bodies provided images of control and embodied service to the state and the socialist revolution’, they might now provide a
'cartography of a nation passing through a phase of critical re-evaluation'. My argument in this chapter extends these earlier arguments, however, by suggesting that changing ideas and beliefs about women’s sexual practices and identities have also produced for young men particular types of meanings and justifications about their own sexual behaviours and expectations. My informants appeared to deduce that as young women today have changing fashions and bodies compared to those women who grew up prior to Đổi mới, they must also have changing sexual needs and expectations. As such, my informants’ presumptions about young women’s post Đổi mới bodies and desires destabilised the men’s own dominant notions of ‘traditional’ (hetero)sexual moral codes.

In this chapter I have argued that discourses of women’s increased sexual energies and activities since Đổi mới appear to have influenced my informants’ beliefs in ‘traditional’ masculinist advantages and ideologies within heterosexual sexual relations. My informants’ narratives about the unreliability of physical evidence for female virginity resulting from hymen reconstruction surgery, the importance of mutual sexual pleasure in male–female relationships and their own sexual naïveté revealed a series of particular uncertainties around the reliability of gender roles determining the nature of (hetero)sexual relations in contemporary life. However, as the last section suggests, some young men appeared to negotiate the meanings of their (sexual) relationships not in distinction to the unreliable morality of sexed bodies per se, but in response to the loss of those expectations and sureties. At least in some instances, some young men appeared to use commercial sex workers or consume pornography as attempts at temporary (re)assertions of male potency, desire and confirmation in a period of changing discourses on women’s roles.

Conclusion

My informants’ beliefs about women’s changing sexual identities and habits during Đổi mới appeared to have accompanied some reflection about their own (hetero)sexual abilities and potency, while revealing the inefficacy of sexed bodies in determining the meaning of rules governing sexual relations. Young men’s narratives about the unreliability of physical evidence for female virginity given the increasing use of hymen reconstruction surgery, the importance of mutual sexual pleasure in male–female relationships and their own sexual naïveté all revealed uncertainties about the reliability of accepted models of ‘appropriate’ gender relations in Vietnam to provide a guide to heterosexual relations in contemporary life.
This chapter has emphasised the ways in which informants negotiated sexual relations in direct relation to the changing ways they perceived women to be representing, consuming and reproducing femininities, and in relation to other dramatic social transformations. It therefore challenges some sexuality and gender research in Vietnam predicated on the understanding that women in Vietnam have little power and can thus exert little control in their sexual relations with men (Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong 1998; Gammeltoft 1999). As such, this chapter indicates new theoretical approaches to the understanding of young Vietnamese men’s experiences of sexuality in Vietnam. As I have argued, these informants were caught up in a process of attempting to reconcile the microprocesses of identity creation and negotiations around sex between men and women with the broader structural and ideological systems which favour men over women in general (Barbieri and Bélanger 2009; Trang Quac 2008; Vu Song Ha 2008).
CONSIDERING THE ‘SELF’ IN SOCIETY

Introduction

In chapters 4 and 5 I argued broadly that my informants recognised that Confucian ‘traditions’ provided important guiding principles for their public statements of themselves and that practical examples of Confucian influence were practically absent in their memories and experiences of changing relationships with women and other men. In chapter 6 I explored the ways in which this paradox of male privilege was further complicated by informants’ narratives about sex and sexuality, where narrow expectations about gender appropriate behaviours and relations were giving way to young men’s own sense of urgency for, or ambivalence about, acquiring sexual experience.

In summary, the young men I have discussed in this thesis appeared to believe that Vietnamese women through Đổi mới have been changing their attitudes towards and practices of education, consumption, professional and entrepreneurial labour, domesticity and sexuality and thus may have also destabilised their own ideas about ‘traditional’ gender codes and roles. In making this argument I have drawn attention to situations where the informants appeared to be coping with, or adapting to, the dramatic change in ideas about gender not by considering their interests and defending themselves qua men, but by suggesting that their individual practices of negotiation, cooperation and compromise were outgrowths and variations to an otherwise resilient ‘traditional’ organisation of gender relations. I have thus proposed a gap between what informants felt that they should feel about ‘appropriate’ gender and sexual identities and their actual behaviours and signifying practices ‘as men’. I also suggested some of the ways that the confounding implications of this gap often appear to be ignored in informants’ Confucian social imaginings.

In this, my final empirical chapter, I focus on some of the ways in which informants thought that the new opportunities for ‘self-making’ that accompanied the emergence of the market economy had influenced their practices and attitudes ‘as men’, especially intergenerational relationships with their fathers. I argue that the young men’s stated ambivalence about ties of familial obligation suggests that blood relationships were increasingly being displaced during
Đổi mới by processes of self-making that had to be worked out in relation to new market opportunities, globalising horizons and changing social forces. I draw particular attention to those informants who emphasised consumption, grooming and style, personal and career development and romantic love in their memories and practices about ‘being a man’. As I discussed in chapter 1, similar issues and practices are described in other scholarly writing on the emerging middle classes in Southeast Asia and the effects of globalisation on developing countries (King et al. 2007; Rofel 2007; Ruddick 2003; Abdul Rahman Embong 2002). Unlike some of this scholarship, however, I do not suggest that such practices necessarily indicate the emergence of new types of ‘autonomy’ or ‘individualism’ amid ‘globalising conditions’ (as argued by Weedon 1987, 32; cf. Budgeo 2003, 67–8; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Nor do I point to them as evidence that ‘consumption is of special relevance’ (Vann 2012, 163) to informants’ processes for self-making per se (Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012; Chua 2000; Lett 1998; Li 2006). Instead I argue that informants’ pronouncements of detachment from ties of familial and cultural obligation can be understood as fundamentally different to the separation of the individual from his/her relations that is implied in recent scholarly accounts of ‘processes of individuation’ (through consumption and lifestyle practices) during ‘modernisation’ and transition in Vietnam and elsewhere. As evidence for this claim I present ethnographic vignettes and quotes in which the informants appeared to represent their changing consumption practices, pursuit of new knowledge, skills, expertise and qualifications and notions of human capital and status not as a source of disturbance within intergenerational relationships (King 2008, 40; Wée 2002; Dussel 2002) but as processes of self-making within given social contexts.

Theoretical considerations from the literature

As I introduced in chapter 3, descriptions of autonomy and individuality operating through globalising processes of self-making (consumption, pleasure, and so on) are common in some recent literature on gender and change in East and Southeast Asia (Öjendal 2005; Vervoorn 2002; Williams 1998; Liechty 1995) and can also be found in studies of women and ‘middle-class’ youth in Vietnam during Đổi mới (King 2008; King et al. 2007; Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas 2004). Arguably, the most unusual aspect of the recent social transformation in Vietnam lies in the perceived rise of the ‘individual’, rather than changes in household size or family structure, although the latter have changed significantly as well. As I described in chapter 3, studies dealing with these
changes appeared to deal with them in one of two ways. On the one hand, some scholars argued that the triumph of ‘economic individualism’ in Vietnam has tended to undermine the social authoritarianism of the neotraditional patriarchal family and given rise to a new libertarianism for women, which undermines ‘traditional’ relations and other masculinist cultural forces through an emphasis on individual advantage and consumption, or through what Ungar (2000, 313) labels the creation of ‘their own modern images’ (Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas 2004; Fahey 1998).

On the other hand, the idea that changing lifestyle and consumption practices connected to globalisation have liberating and destabilising effects constitutes a kind of datum and needs to be analysed in relation to state attempts during Đổi mới at social authoritarianism: at restoring traditional values through appeals to the ‘traditional family’, thereby reinscribing women’s unequal roles at the household level. As we have seen, a number of scholars have argued that it would be a mistake to presume that women’s new and different practices of self-making mimic a notion of transition from neo-Confucian or Marxist conditions towards a single neoliberal modernity, or that changes in the Vietnamese political economy consist of micropolitics that are either certain or predictable (Werner 2004; Drummond, 2004).

This chapter, then, focuses on young men’s experiences of and understandings of the changing conditions and opportunities for remaking ‘the self’ during Đổi mới. I explore some of the ways in which informants discussed their relationships with their families and society with me. I pay particular attention to the ways in which informants’ explored ‘traditional’ structures of meaning in relation to their experiences during Đổi mới. As I will now show, informants demonstrated significant diversity of thought and action about questions of masculinity and choices they made ‘as men’. While emphasising the ‘newness’ of their behaviours and attitudes and the ambivalence they felt towards their families and ‘traditional’ social structures, however, informants also pointed to the ways their practices were similar to, or complimentary with, ideas about ‘being a man’ they believed characterised their father’s generation. These ethnographic vignettes thus draw attention to the ambivalence informants feel about contemporary practices of economic individualism amid the ongoing processes of growing up ‘as a man’.

On different ways of thinking the same thing

In the prologue and chapter 4, I discussed Thanh’s feelings about the importance of having a stable family during periods of dramatic social change. As we saw, however, even though Thanh
initially described ‘the husband’ as the ‘backbone’ of the Vietnamese family, he also drew specific attention to the ways in which he felt that his own father had failed to keep up with the changing and increasingly competitive society emerging during Đổi mới. According to Thanh, his father lacked the decisiveness, objectivity and flexibility required in business today. Thanh also described these deficiencies as being typical of ‘normal’ Vietnamese men in general: they were ‘not particularly skilful in life’ and generally earned ‘only enough to live and feed [their] families’. Thanh’s disappointment with his father stood in stark contrast to his proud memories of his mother’s influence and increasing level of economic contributions to the family during Đổi mới. Thanh suggested that he would like his father to resume a more powerful role within his family, but also made the interesting remark that he, Thanh, would not seek to recreate (such) ‘traditional’ gender arrangements within his own future family.

During a subsequent meeting with Thanh, I explained that I remained confused about the ways in which he saw his relationship with the (patriarchal) traditions (unsuccessfully) embodied in his father. I proposed to Thanh that by advocating his father’s ‘return’ to power within the family while also rejecting such an unbalanced configuration of relationships for his future self, he appeared to consider himself a fundamentally different ‘type’ of man to the men of his father’s generation in general, and to his father in particular. Attempting to clarify and strengthen my own thoughts about the significance of Đổi mới as a trope that young men used to denote a cultural fracture in the transference of (patriarchal) privilege from their fathers to themselves, I urged Thanh to outline the ways in which he felt his life was fundamentally different from his father’s. He responded immediately, ‘Well, first, I am drinking juice with you, but my father when he was twenty-seven years old, he did not have juice to drink’ , but then paused for some time before answering further:

In general, now everything is better, but in the past our parents were saving more [money] than young people are now. The young people now have better incomes, so many people don’t need to save ... and people these days are easily attracted to rubbish things ... For example sitting here and having breakfast can cost a maximum of 11,000 or 12,000 VND, but some young people who have low incomes still like to go to luxurious places where this glass [of juice] can cost 50,000 VND.

Even when they don’t have much money in their pocket, they still go there to be stylish ... People in the past entertained more quietly, more gently and better than
now. In the past, our fathers went out at night for only a few drinks, or they drank cheap home-made products. In contrast, now if you want to be stylish you need to drink western wine, even if it makes you vomit.

While Thanh seemed sentimental about the simpler, less consumption-oriented lifestyle of his father before Đổi mới, I suggested to him that his description of changing priorities and consumption habits among young men today might also be revealing a shift in the ways that young men understood themselves. I reminded Thanh that he had earlier told me that Đổi mới had produced ‘changing ideals and ways of living’. I explained that I understood him to mean that with Đổi mới there perhaps emerged new opportunities for young men to understand themselves in distinction to their society and families. During our tour of the Bảo cấp exhibition he had specifically drawn my attention to the meagre possessions on display and contrasted them to the new opportunities to consume and profit after the advent of Đổi mới. I explained that when he first invited me to the exhibition he had suggested that better I needed to understand the different market opportunities and patterns of consumption in the Bảo cấp and Đổi mới periods in order to comprehend his life. Thanh responded, ‘Well, in one way you are right: [because of Đổi mới] I am taller than my father, I eat better food than he did and am better educated, so my thoughts are different, but otherwise we are the same’. I expressed surprise that Thanh appeared to regard differences in physique, consumption and education between his father and himself as minor. Thanh explained:

Maybe I don’t value the differences enough, but I feel that people born in the [19]60s, 70s, 80s and 90s are basically all the same, except that now young people have greater chances to learn and expand their knowledge. But you must remember that our fathers’ and [elder] brothers’ generations are older, so they can always see things better than us; they have more experience in their lives. That is why we have different ways of thinking.

In general, each generation has differences and it is not right to measure each generation just by those differences. Right now, the people who grew up in the 1980s can be considered to be the most advanced generation, but the generation that will replace them will be better again—the 90s generation. I think that the young people will change many things, such as politics. No one can be sure about that, but there is a new trend of excellent young people joining state companies; and in politics—there will be a big change in the policies our country adopts. Now [the current policies]
are suitable, but they will need to change in the future in order for the country to develop more comprehensively, not too quickly, but not too slowly; comprehensively.

Thanh identified numerous significant differences between the material and ideological conditions his father had grown up in prior to Đổi mới and those that he had experienced in his own life, suggesting that these constituted differences in the ways that they each thought. However, adopting a teleological perspective on life and the ‘nation’, he appeared to consider these otherwise noteworthy differences as consistent and banal. Thanh’s earlier comments suggested that he considered Đổi mới to be a modification or discarding of an ‘old’ order of doctrines and institutions and a proposal or inauguration of some type of new order. But his later comments suggested that this change was characteristic not of cultural interruption, but of continuity. He surmised:

When I started working, I began to think of myself differently, because before that I was financially dependent on my parents. [But] with my own money I could buy different things and travel with my friends more and be more independent ... But this is just the same as any other man. For example, when I was young, my father told me to study seriously and not to cheat others in life ... If I got bad school results, I would be spanked, like other boys. I obeyed all ... [his orders] ... until I got to high school. When I was in my high school, I would choose what to obey. And then when I was at university, I had debates with my father about everything. It is the same for everyone.

As we shall see in the next section, similar comments were made by Anh, who also suggested that his lifestyle was significantly different from that of the men of his father’s generation, as well as the men of his own age who remained in rural and regional centres. But he then went on to question the significance and meaning of those differences.

On careful choices

Whereas Thanh discussed, and then discounted, the significance of changing consumer choices and habits for his practices ‘as a man’, a number of my other informants drew attention to the increasing options for young men in personal grooming and styling. Anh stated that his ability to choose to wear his hair past his collar best demonstrated his significant nonconformity to
'the expectations of others'. Anh said that whereas men who 'dye their hair and wear earrings' were in the past considered to be 'eccentric persons' and 'probably gay', now such affectations demonstrated only 'their special character', recognising that 'each of us have individual points'. Recalling an earlier visit to his family, Anh explained:

My father and uncle said that I should not keep this [long hair] style but I think that I have the right to, and I do not care about [other's] opinions, and these days there is no rule in the university that says that I must have short hair, right?

Though Anh stated that his hair had grown past his collar because 'at first I did not have time to have it cut, but then I thought that it looked fine, so I just kept it', he subsequently asserted that 'it is the trend these days to no longer live by the expectations of others'. Just as an earlier conversation with Anh seemed to lay bare a gap between what he felt he should feel about women's appropriate sexual behaviour and his actual expectations (see chapter 6), Anh's discussion of the differences between his family's expectations of his hairstyle and his own preferences appeared to signify strong ambivalence about what he perceived to be (pre-)existing cultural and moral conditions. Anh explained that his ‘open-mindedness’ about personal style and ability to exercise choice in this area came from his experience of living away from his family since his late teens:

By living independently, you get more advantages later in your life: you can take care of yourself and you are not controlled by other people ... Of course, living in a rented house is [also] very hard. I cannot afford good food, or good conditions, such as hot water to take a bath ... [But] I am not controlled by my father or my uncle. If I lived at home and wore my hair long, my father would always complain and I would not be able to develop my independent character ... For example, I would have to be home by this time. I would have to obey my [father’s order] telling me that I have to be home by 10.00 pm; everyone would be worried about me by now.

While Anh suggested that by living away from his family he had developed 'individual habits', he said that his friends who remained living in Lang Son remained ‘very traditional’, as ‘they just stay in the countryside and [on the] farm’. I asked Anh what he meant when he said ‘very traditional’:
It means that if you have long hair they say you are like a girl, and if you have a short hair cut then people said that you look like you just came back from the gaol ... Men in Lang Son live only in a limited circle [of relationships] and cannot break [out of] this limited circle; they can only learn what is new for their friends, even if it is old to the society. City men are more dynamic and they have to spend more time on different social relationships than the rural men, so they know about many kinds of clothes and hairstyles and we can choose what style we like.

Anh appeared to see his ability to choose ‘individual habits’ as a result of both having lived away from his family and his exposure to urban lifestyles. In his view, men who grew up in the countryside remained limited to relationships with only a few other people—which meant that they ‘gossiped’ (ngồi lê đôi mách), would spend time socialising ‘only in pairs’ and ‘would take turns to pay when they went out together’. Anh explained that, unlike men from the country, the ‘Hanoians’ in his university class ‘socialise in large groups together’ and although they too are poor they more readily ‘share money for picnics ... [because] they are rich[er] in love’.

Anh’s statements suggested that the increased number and variety of opportunities for socialisation with others in Hanoi produced a culture which was for him more charitable, supportive and interesting than the limited social relations that he remembered from Lang Son. By developing more ‘individual habits’, Anh considered himself better able to participate in urban sociality. In contrast, he described his father and elderly uncle as situated within interdependent relationships with a small group of people and suggested that they were bound to outdated concepts of ‘citizenship’ (dân).

That is why I prefer to live in the city now. My father says that a good citizen today is someone who can build up society, bring up the family, be calm in all situations (diểm tỉnh) ... They have a balance ... and he thinks that I’m not balanced. He says that I am reckless (ăn chơi) but this is only because our ideas of a good citizen are different ... In the city you can be the person who contributes to society and builds up a family. But before, in the country, you must be the one who contributes to society and builds up the family ... While Anh repeatedly asserted his autonomy of style, thought and even mode of ‘citizenship’ in regard to other men in Lang Son, and his father and uncle in particular, he subsequently suggested that his choice not to ‘contribute to society and build up a family’ at present was ultimately a shrewd strategy to ensure
his ability to better do both in the future. His 'traditional' family and friends would not understand this, however, because, 'they always have their stubborn opinion, which they do not want to change' (cổ cá ít tôi riêng của họ):

They do not understand that Vietnamese men now want to break free from the things that tied them down before. Young men these days have the will to rise up; they also are aware of the importance of study and want to catch up with the world ... I want to work and study now so that I can keep up with the work in the future and have more work so that when I have a wife, I will please her more than other people, [and] I am better than normal people because I will have a university degree ... I suggested to Anh that despite his autonomy, assertions of urban dynamism and choice of hair style, he seemed to be seeking a destination in life that sounded very similar to the one that his father also sought for him. Appearing somewhat incredulous, he responded that, ‘Of course the modern man still must have a family, right? My father and uncle want me to follow their way, but I don’t want to do [things] like that; I have my own way, but the result will still turn out well’. Like Thanh, Anh appeared to consider some of the differences between his father’s lifestyles and choices and his own as significant. But he also stated that such differences did not greatly influence the ‘life goals’ of Vietnamese men across generations.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Hai, whose ideas about changes in young women’s bodies and fashion choices I discussed in chapter 6. Hai said that he had also noticed many changes in the fashions of men his age and had read in magazines that some young men were even having cosmetic surgery (phẫu thuật để làm đẹp rồi). According to Hai, men now ‘dress to look like women and women dress the same as men (con trai thì ăn mặc như con gái và con gái ăn mặc như con trai) ... [I]t is normal for a man to dye his hair or have an earring and for no one to think he is gay (là gay cả). I asked him whether he thought that these changing fashion and grooming habits indicated an increasing emphasis on the ‘individual’ or ‘special’ character of people in Hanoi (cá tính riêng biệt của mỗi người). Hai responded, ‘No, I don’t think so ... Each of us has our special points, it is normal’ (mỗi người đều có cái riêng thì theo anh việc đó cũng bình thường).

In the methods chapter I briefly discussed Tung’s MBA studies, his schemes for making money, his fashion sense and his work on his body at the gym. Tung also suggested that fashions among young men in Hanoi were changing, only to then describe those changes as fairly unimportant. Pointing to his own clothes, a dark suit that I had presumed to be de rigeur for men who
worked in finance, Tung drew attention to his ‘mottled’ (lốm đốm) tie and tight-fitting (khít) pants. He said that these colours and features were characteristic of the ‘Korean style’ (kiểu Hàn Quốc), which was currently popular in Vietnam. But he also said that this style was only the latest ‘uniform’ that the Vietnamese had adopted. Tung explained that, from ‘mandarin’s clothes’ (quần quan) to ‘military uniforms’ (quân phục) and the early years of economic reform, when ‘all people went out with the same clothes, a uniform of coats, soldier’s hat, rubber slippers for men and black silk shirts with the lotus collars for women’, Vietnamese fashions had always been changing. He conceded that there were now ‘more ways to dress’ (nhiều hơn trong ăn mặc) but appeared to reject the notion that these choices were in any ways formative, or even very ‘new’.

In the next section I broaden this discussion to look at the comments made by another of my informants, Truong, who reflected on the role of his brother in complicating his own life goals.

On the power of love

Though Truong initially described himself to me in ways that suggested he enjoyed his familial obligations and felt proud of the important role that he inhabited as the eldest son in his family, he also communicated significant dissatisfaction with the increasing responsibilities that he was expected to fulfil. Truong stated:

When I was five I was the only grandson in my big family because my father has one older sister and one older brother, but his brother did not have a son at that time, only four daughters, and my parents only had me, so all my relatives liked me a lot, [although] I did not understand why … But then my parents had my brother and my uncle had a son, so I was not the only grandson in the [extended] family any more.

Truong explained that when he was younger he enjoyed the special status that he said his parents gave him, even though he had ‘no special responsibility, only studying’, and ensuring that his brother also undertook his studies:

It was very simple: I just had to teach him what was good and what was bad, what he was not allowed to do. For example, after playing games I would tell him that he should play less and spend time studying ... Of course, he respected and liked me very much.
However, while Truong enjoyed his elevated status when he was younger and was nostalgic about his once-close relationship with his brother, he also stated that he felt subsequently constrained by the expectations that his extended family now placed on him:

Many of my aunties and uncles have told me that they want me to get married because they all now have great-grandchildren, but my grandmother still has none. My grandmother has never said anything to me about it and she told me that I must pay attention to my study and career first, but I know that she really wants to have great-grandchildren.

Truong suggested that fulfilling his relatives’ desires for a great-grandchild was incompatible with his own desires to finish university and, before settling down, ‘to travel, to just look for new thing in new places, [and to] absorb things from around the world, from foreigners, from the local people, the older people, the younger and my friends’. However he also conceded that he was much more likely than his brother to accede to their expectations, stating that ‘My brother makes trouble all the time. He does not listen to my parents, so my parents and relatives must invest in me so that I can study better and may have a better future’.

Truong also inferred that family hierarchies based on age and gender meant nothing in the labour market. He said that ‘Of course the oldest son can be respected the most when they are still at home and have not yet got a job, but outside the family, when they do go to work, [respect] depends on their abilities and themselves’. During another conversation, Truong was emphatic that increased familial attention and support would in fact be counterproductive and decrease the likelihood of him succeeding in future professional endeavours.

I have a friend who is also the oldest son, but could not study well because he always had to cook and do the housework for his family when he was growing up [and] his parents were shift workers ... But his [younger] brother was much freer. He studied away [from home] at the bilingual class in Chu Van An High School and learnt that the normal Vietnamese way of studying is not useful (là cách học của người Việt Nam thì thật ra thì cuối). He had to read a lot all things that I think were helpful for his future; that these days we have to think carefully, have our own opinions and not learn by heart, doing exercises. At university he also studied well and became
a manager of a company and [now] makes a lot of money. Actually it seems that sometimes people who are less involved with their family become more successful.

Truong experienced his family’s expectations for him as an unwanted inconvenience: ‘I think that in the future, when my brother Viet finishes his studies and he gets married, then he can share this burden with me’. It emerged in another conversation, however, that he also considered strong familial support to be both more reliable and advantageous than other nonfamilial relationships. He had said that he considered his own family ‘a burden’ and thought that his friend’s brother had succeeded in business in part due to being out of his family’s reach. But Truong also suggested that ‘for me, the family is the most important thing in my life—they can encourage me when I meet difficulties and a girlfriend sometimes makes you sad’. To illustrate his point, Truong stated:

I told Van that she was the fourth most important person to me. She was upset and said that people should always say that their lover is the most important person for them ... I told her that she must come behind my family because now we are students and if we have a fragile thing like love as the most important thing [in our lives] then we may get very disappointed and we will fall down in our studies and in life. I do not want this to happen to us ... My goal is to strive for a successful career, and I know that my family supports this. I have to think very carefully about my girlfriend and make sure that she can understand me and can make herself suitable (có sự phù hợp) for me and the family.

It appeared that Truong increasingly experienced his status as the eldest son in his family in terms of unwanted expectations about his producing a great-grandchild for his grandmother—expectations that threatened his ability to ‘enrich [his] life and expand [his] thinking’. But he also prioritised his (nuclear) familial relations above all else, specifically in order to achieve the emotional stability which he expected could help him complete his studies and commence a successful career.

However, that is not to say that only informants from ‘happy homes’ reflected on the usefulness of their families in providing emotional and financial stability for their sons’ studies and early careers. In the next section I turn to the case of Nhung to discuss the ways in which the emotional instability of his family life could be seen as significant in fostering the individualism required of the market economy while demonstrating to Nhung the value of self-sacrifice for the family.
On self-help

In contrast to Truong’s family, Nhung’s family could afford to support the relatively expensive education of their only child by employing private tutors: his father ‘earned a lot of money in the early 1990s’ as a company officer for a cargo ship. In spite of this, Nhung remembered being ‘very lazy’ and uncooperative as a student. He recalled that his father would bring ‘luxury equipment to Vietnam from the US, Germany and Japan’ and became ‘one of the richest men in the neighbourhood where we lived’. His father’s extended absences from the family, however, resulted in his parents divorcing when Nhung was thirteen.

My father was often away, and then one day he came back and made a decision to divorce my mum. Even though my mum knew that he was with another woman, she did not want the divorce to happen, but in the end my father brought some money to bribe the court in order to help him to make [the divorce] happen earlier than it was supposed to … That is what my mum told me about that, but I don’t know exactly what he did.

Nhung’s initial comments about the breakdown of his family and his father’s actions suggested that he harboured little resentment towards his father. He later told me that ‘even at the time, it was hard to say whether [the divorce] was good or not’ because his parent’s marriage had previously been ‘so bad, and then it was better, and then it was the best, and then it was worse’. Focusing our conversation not on the emotions that he felt but the events that he remembered, Nhung said that after the divorce his father continued to travel overseas a lot and he and his mother moved to Thai Binh, where ‘my mum’s family is high ranking: her father is a high-ranking state officer and chairman of the district, and her mum—my grandmother—stayed at home looking after her husband and then me’. However, despite moving with his mother into the home of his grandparents, Nhung described himself during this time as increasingly ‘living with only myself’. Nhung stated:

First I had to live in hard conditions in Thai Binh, and then it was embarrassing because people would say ‘Oh, he is sad because his mum separated and he doesn’t have a dad’. But it is hard to say whether I was happy or sad … I did not make any friends with other people, and it was not because of them but because of me. I drew myself into a corner; all I used to do was read and think.
Rather than perceiving that his parents’ divorce had had a negative effect on him, as his extended family had at the time worried, Nhung suggested that the break-up of his family ultimately made him more ‘autonomous’ and ‘ambitious to ... be a lawyer’. Telling me about the acrimony and violence that characterised the splitting of property between his parents, he suggested that while he felt some sympathy for his mother, his memories of the period were dominated by the sense that family affairs are ‘complicated’ (phúc tạp). Nhung explained that his father had purchased tools and farm equipment overseas ‘for the whole family and for himself to work’ on his mother’s family’s land. However, some months after the divorce Nhung’s father either took away or smashed this property. Nhung explained:

He destroyed everything that was left. He didn’t want my mum to use it and he thought that maybe my mum’s future husband will use the good things, so he smashed all of them.

Nhung continued to live with his mother and grandparents until he was eighteen. He said that this period in his early teens convinced him of the need to be self-reliant when he grew up.

During this time I read a lot of newspapers and books about successful men in the world, books about how to develop myself such as Đắc nhân tâm,¹ which help you to achieve success and teach you how to live your life ... [When I was younger] I saw how much my parents struggled and I did not want to end up in a situation like them.

I had to deal with so many closed-minded people when I was in Thai Binh [who] thought that I must have a mum and a dad, and I watched the movies and I saw a lot of lawyers in the movies and saw how well they argued and how open-minded they were and it attracted me to [want to] be a lawyer.

However, while Nhung had finished his law degree in 2005, he had not been able to subsequently find work in the field. He explained:

After graduating from my law school at university, I learnt that it is very hard to earn money just based on your educational background. I have no connections or relatives

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¹ This is the Vietnamese title for Dale Carnegie’s (1937) famous self-help book, How to Win Friends and Influence People.
who work as lawyers, so I had to find work as an editor, then as a salesman, and this is not related with the law at all ... Now I am a student again. I tell myself ‘Oh man, you are stupid. You have made a bad decision to pursue a career as a lawyer’. Sometimes I feel it is a pity that I did not follow my father into trading.

I expressed some surprise that, after recalling the embarrassment and difficulties that he encountered in Thai Binh as a result of growing up with no father present, Nhungh would want to follow in his father’s footsteps. I explained to him that our conversations had given me the impression that he had specifically sought to develop his education and career so that he could be independent of his ‘complicated’ family. Nhungh confirmed that this was the case, but added:

My parents divorced when I was young but they are still the greatest influence in my life. They worked so hard when I was a child because they could get no help from their relatives. They had a poor family in the home town that could not provide them any support between [19]85 and [19]89 ... At that time my father had to travel to make money for the family. Because of my parents’ sacrifice I am a lawyer now.

In return for his parents’ hard work and sacrifice, Nhungh said that he could expect a future which, while not assured, would probably not see him end up working in agriculture in Thai Binh. I asked Nhungh whether, if he were married and in a similar position today, he would be willing to leave his wife and child for months at a time to provide for his family. He responded that:

It is normal. When my grandfather on my mother’s side was nineteen years old he joined the army, and at twenty he became a Party member. He was away from home fighting with the French and the Americans for so long. Whenever he came home from fighting, his wife had more children: they are my uncles, mum and aunties ... My father had to stay away from home because he wanted me to be educated, so I would not have to work on the family land in Thai Binh. I think my generation needs to be more like them: we should learn from them their willingness to work to overcome difficulties for the family.

In these ethnographic vignettes I have traced some of the strategies that Thanh, Anh, Nhungh and Truong described using in their attempts to emphasise their individual self-expression and
material wellbeing in distinction to conventional family loyalties. I also discuss the cases of two other informants more briefly. Each of the men discussed in this chapter drew attention to their respective abilities to readily make choices which they considered to be unimaginable both to generations that grew up prior to Đổi mới and to rural men their age. They also (re-)conceived those new choices and practices, however, in terms that emphasised the ways upon which the ‘success’ of their ‘autonomous choices’ was contingent on and measurable through the support or recognition of their families, or the realisation of particular life goals in creating their own family networks. In the next section I look at locating these narratives in relation to the broader theoretical literature.

Discussion

In this chapter I have focused on some of the ways that six informants described the changes that they perceived were connected to types of selfhoods. I saw the development of these selfhoods as linked directly to memories of supposedly historically grounded cultural values, typically exemplified in their (ideals about) families. Many of the new economic, social, sexual and familial relationships and practices that informants cited as legacies of Đổi mới indeed appeared to be considered by them as explicable in terms of (the inevitability of) ‘traditional’ ways of being and understanding. For example, Truong loved his girlfriend and was heavily critical of the ways in which his family placed pressure on him that made it difficult to succeed in the market economy. But he nonetheless appeared to be making choices about his love life, studies and future travel plans that prioritised what was important for his family rather than his own stated desires. Truong explained that he was indeed making these sacrifices in order to create suitable conditions to begin his own family.

The ethnographic cases thus present us with apparent tensions around the articulation of the informants’ memories and experiences of and desires for emerging ideas and practices of autonomy in their lives. In regard to their own lives, informants each criticised the value and relevance of ‘traditional’ relations based on blood, citizenship and culture as being more or less outdated, embodied only by their fathers and other men born prior to Đổi mới, or some rural men today. Yet, these informants also described their ambitions, achievements, personal style and fashions in relation to their usefulness in supporting their desires to create their own families, impress their parents, or conform to processes and ‘traditions’ they imagined had long characterised Vietnam.
Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the local meanings of globalisation and consumption in Vietnam cannot be presumed to be consistent with ‘global’ practices and ideas about ‘modernising selves’. Informants generally believed that because of Đổi mới they had access to a range of intellectual, social, commercial and emotional resources that offer them opportunities beyond the cultural horizons of their fathers. Still, they also remarked on the similarities between the ‘new’ sets of aesthetics and behaviours that developed in response to these changes and the ‘old’ sets of that went ‘before’. Put another way, informants acknowledged changes in their practices and attitudes ‘as men’ emerging in relation to new possibilities for consumption, fashion, love and self-development, and they often pointed to Đổi mới as the source of these changes. But they also appeared to understand these changes in practice as only the latest in a long history of change in the ways of constituting the ‘self’ in Vietnam and more or less unremarkable for that reason.

All this is not to say that informants considered themselves (in Hegelian terms) to be inhabiting a period of ‘post-history’, or that they were not aware of the nuances and continuities of history. Clearly the rapid appearance of a consumer society in the same time and space as the contemporary socialist state in Vietnam means that informants developed their aspirations and explanations in relation to revolutionary and local cultural models, as well as what came after. I described the ways that informants (re)negotiated their accounts in relation to the changes they perceived in the political, economic and cultural influences governing personal, familial and social lives in Vietnam. These negotiations seemed to indicate that their ideas about the supposed ‘norms’ and constants of Vietnamese life were also constructed and revised against multiple and changing interpretations of the past.

The cases recounted in this chapter thus suggest that informants’ statements contrasting ‘traditional’ webs of relationality with their own relative autonomy and choice in the fields of education, employment, consumption and love might not necessarily have meant a reduction of their personal involvement or participation in relations based on blood, citizenship and ‘culture’. They may instead have revealed some of the ways in which informants understood and experienced the Đổi mới transitions in familial terms, citing life goals towards which they had seen their parents work and so imagined were important.
CONCLUSION

The conditions for the maintenance of masculinist ideologies and identities in Vietnam appear to have been changing during Đổi mới. The aim of this study has been to explore some of the ways in which young urban Vietnamese men have redefined their self-image in relation to those changing conditions. I asked, ‘In what ways have urban Vietnamese men’s perceptions of gender while growing up during Đổi mới intersected with their experiences, memories and understandings of processes of cultural, economic and social change?’ I have answered this question by exploring the life narratives of seventeen young, educated, heterosexual Vietnamese men from Hanoi, paying particular attention to the ways in which they negotiated their experiences, expectations and memories about ‘being men’ while growing up. The ethnographic vignettes presented in this thesis emerged from my informal discussions with these men about their social relations with peers, family and intimate partners, their experiences of gender practices and social and familial expectations, and other issues they deemed pertinent in regard to wider social, economic and cultural change during their lifetimes.

I employed qualitative methods of taking oral life histories and narrative analysis in order to explore the states of uncertainty and ambiguity that I argued in chapter 3 have been absent from studies of Vietnamese men. These methods allowed me to explore aspects of my informants’ lifelong meaning construction and to create a picture of their present sensibilities that is situated within historical as well as social contexts. Feminist research on women has shown that these methods also locate indeterminacy at the centre of social life and that such ambiguity provides opportunities to negotiate social identities (Guttmann 1996). I argued throughout this thesis that approaching the question of the construction of Vietnamese masculinities requires ongoing attention to the ways in which dominant or idealised identities mask or guide ideas and imaginings of empirically existing men, and I found these methods to be essential to my task.

I developed a loose theoretical framework for this thesis, including framing concepts of ‘transactionalism’ and ‘affect’. I used this framework to focus my attention on particular negotiations and decision-making processes that young men remembered as important amid wider processes of building and sustaining gendered understandings of themselves. This area of focus
allowed me to explore some of the ways in which young urban Vietnamese men’s gendered self-identities emerged in the context of particular and named social relationships which often seemed to change, sometimes in unpredictable ways.

In keeping with this framework, my analysis of my informants’ narratives focused on some of the mundane dealings that my informants remembered as significant in growing up ‘as men’. It also focused on the ways in which my informants described themselves as being participants in multiple, complex and changing webs of power relations.

I also drew attention to the practical limitations of these framing devices when confronted with men who did not easily describe or remember their decision-making processes, or who appeared to redact and revise their memories through preferred models and vocabularies. So, while concepts of ‘transactionalism’ and ‘affect’ encouraged me to emphasise how my informants remembered negotiating and transacting their actual relationships, I also used the idea of ‘social imaginaries of masculinity’ to highlight and emphasise situations in which my informants’ imaginings of what a man should be and do appeared to guide and filter their memories, experiences and expectations. In doing so I tried to orient my examination of my informants’ actual experiences and ‘transactions’ in relation to social understandings, identities and practices (Guttman 1996, 14). I was motivated to do this by feminist criticisms of poststructuralist anthropology which, while celebrating poststructuralist accounts for their anti-essentialist shift, criticise their focus on difference and complexity abstracted from social relations and social structures, including political economy (Gross and Levitt 1998; Fraser 1997, 186).

The ethnographic vignettes in this thesis thus present portrayals of masculinity and men that are significantly different to those common in previous studies of gender in Vietnam, particularly feminist scholarship focused on women’s experiences. This is, of course, not surprising. While I situated my study into the life-narratives of young urban Vietnamese men within the broader context of gender studies in Vietnam, and the large volume of research on Vietnamese women’s lives, I was highly critical of the manner in which some of these studies seemed to have posited men’s experiences as a mirror image of that of women; and because some studies on Vietnamese women’s experiences appear to have extrapolated their findings rather too quickly to claim insight into men’s lives. I further argued in chapters 1 and 3 that most studies on gender relations in Vietnam have neglected the ambiguities within men’s experiences of and expectations about masculinity. To provide evidence of this I reviewed literature in which the lives of Vietnamese men, their relationships with their families, and their relationships to men and women in both
private and public spheres all appeared to be grounded in terms of intergenerational Confucian traditions and patrilineal kinship systems or benefited in fairly straightforward ways from those ideological and structural frameworks.

Key findings

Perhaps my first distinctive finding, then, is that my informants’ observations of women’s changing practices in their families and in society during Đổi mới greatly affected their conceptions of ‘traditional’ masculinity and signifying acts ‘as men.’ This finding indicates an alternative to thinking that in Vietnam contemporary social ideals of masculine authority exist as anything like coherent totalities or that urban men are subjects within powerful forces of cultural reproduction, rather than agents of social change. Chapter 4 provides one example of the ways in which my informants’ observations and memories of their households’ increased vulnerability to market forces and their mother’s changing economic practices and responsibilities appeared to result in the young men dramatically reassessing the relevance of their father’s symbolically powerful roles as ‘head of the family’. Minh said that he now wanted to ‘take risks, like my mother (did), because men are sometimes too cautious, and can’t achieve their goals; women are able to make riskier decisions, and thus be more successful.’

This finding is also borne out by other quotes and ethnographic vignettes presented in the thesis. Duc wondered about how men with the ‘renovation knowledge’ will share housework with women, and Truong emphasised the growing importance for men of sexual pleasure with women. As another example, in chapter 6 I explored the ways that changing ideas (and individual men’s fantasies) about women’s bodies and sexual appetites may have undermined my informants’ faith in the validity of ‘traditional’ expectations about gender within intimate heterosexual arrangements. I argued that these changes held particular significance in relation to young men’s expectations (about young women’s attitudes) towards virginity. For example, Anh stated that ‘I think that as society changes, people’s expectations change ... Now, if you love and you do not have sex with a girl in high school, she thinks that you are silly or outdated’. Each of my informants indeed appeared to be in an ongoing process of rethinking their attitudes and practices towards women.

My second distinctive finding relates to the various ways that some of my informants rationalised and represented the changing social conditions during Đổi mới, and changing gender
relations in particular, by invoking ideas of ‘traditional’ Confucian codes and masculinist cultural forces. The literature that I discussed in chapter 3 emphasised the powerful socialising influence of Confucian codes and patrilinial kinship systems, and the passivity of socialised individuals. I pointed out, however, that such codes and forces were generally less operative in my informants’ own life experiences. For example, in chapter 5 informants suggested that ‘Confucian’, ‘Oriental’ or ‘Eastern’ models underlined their identities as men and enabled a sense of general masculine assertiveness or entitlement in their relationships with women ‘in general’. But when they reflected on their often messy relationships with the young women they knew and interacted with, informants acknowledged that the power and effects of Confucianism were apparent only in (abstract) cultural ‘traditions’. In this way my informants appeared to seek to retain ideas about the power of the Confucian system in structuring gender relations in Vietnam in general, while simultaneously reducing their own importance in it. In contrast to these arguments about the passivity of socialised individuals in the face of masculinist cultural forces, my ethnographic evidence suggested that my informants consciously reflected on the gaps between ideals about masculinist cultural forces and their actual experiences. This finding raises questions about the usefulness of assumptions about stability and structure amid processes of social transition: radical disruptions in the conditions for the maintenance of masculinist ideologies and identities appeared to be dealt with by my informants through apparently stable ideas about men and masculinity which did not actually accord with their everyday experiences; ideas about the strength and power of men nonetheless held an enduring appeal as a world ordering device.

My first two findings suggest that my informants (re)negotiated their ideas and practices surrounding masculinity by consciously reflecting upon the changes in their families and society during Đổi mới, and on the utility of Confucianism and ideas of masculinist cultural forces in their own lives. While all of my informants were reflexive about changing gender relations and practices, some of them suggested that ultimately they were seeking to be more assertive and more dynamic in the market economy in order to attain life goals that appeared consistent with the familial ‘traditions’ exemplified by their fathers and grandfathers. Others suggested that young women’s changing sexual practices and expectations motivated them to increasingly seek out female sex workers and to create all-male communities for the enjoyment of pornography.

My third finding is, therefore, that while my informants appeared to consider some of the masculinist ideas and forces that they perceived in their families and society as outdated in relation to women’s changing work, lifestyle and sexual practices during Đổi mới, they also often appeared to
conceive of their fates in the market economy as inherently interrelated with that of the country and the values of their parents. This third finding significantly extends and adds nuance to my first two sets of findings, and draws this thesis back into a dialogue with the feminist scholarship on Vietnamese women and gender inequality that I discussed in chapter 3. For example, in a number of the studies reviewed earlier, women’s risk-taking in economic undertakings and their adaptability and flexibility in the face of difficult odds are considered enduring aspects of Vietnamese femininity for most of the twentieth century, and perhaps much earlier (Beresford 1988; Kabeer and Tran 2000; Long et al. 2000; Rama 2002). But according to the literature, such flexibility and change in women’s situations did not alter many ‘patriarchal attitudes’ on the part of men, because the kinship system was, and remains, predicated upon male descent and the Vietnamese state is a ‘patriarchal institution’ that reinforces certain types of masculine behavior and a type of market patriarchy (Werner and Bélanger 2002, 22; Drummond 2004, 167).

Consistent with these arguments, my ethnographic vignettes suggested that my informants were sometimes nostalgic for ‘traditions’ pertaining to the continuity of men’s power in the household and society, even as they actively renegotiated them in their daily interactions with women and other men. Certainly some of my informants regretted their fathers’ diminished family authority or the difficulties they faced in contending with young women’s apparently increasing expectations of men. And, while the informants discussed in chapter 4 were vocal in their admiration of their mothers’ changing economic responsibilities, this still could be interpreted in terms of ‘traditional’ filial piety rather than a radical new gender order. Along similar lines, it even appears feasible to suggest that my informants could actually be contributing to new kinds of ‘market patriarchy’ in Vietnam. The lessons that informants took from the experiences of their mothers, sisters and girlfriends were that they possibly needed to be more assertive and more dynamic in their own families and households, in line with what market economies supposedly demand of masculine endeavor.

In summary, the young men whose experiences I have discussed in this thesis variously admired their mothers for their economic capabilities, their sisters for their autonomy, and young women in general for their changing sexual attitudes and practices. This does not mean that these men necessarily behaved in ways that were consistent with such views; but neither did they necessarily behave in ways that cancelled out such values. In other words, informants’ positive attitudes toward the changing practices of women within and beyond the household may reveal little about empirical change in gender relations per se. What they can reveal, however, is that informants’ conceptions
have been changing about ‘masculine’ practices and attitudes and masculinist social forces such as ‘patriarchy’, and that these changes are ongoing. A claim that can be made about my informants, then, is that they appeared adept at (re)combining discursive conventions and signifying practices about being ‘a man’ in ways that motivated among them reflection, interpretation and reinterpretation about gender relations in general, thereby indicating the possibility of social change.

Reflections and notes forward

The informants discussed in this thesis appeared to display an array of what are increasingly considered in scholarship as quasi-universal sensations: an urban sensibility, an interest in consumption, education and self-improvement, and heightened feelings of irony and impotence. Such sensations are commonly thought to be connected to the rapid, unexpected changes that characterise the ‘modern’, globalizing world. As we saw in chapters 1 and 3, similar sensations have appeared in scholarship on Southeast Asian middle classes, youth, and men and masculinities as presenting new challenges and emotional and psychological disturbance for young men undergoing ‘transition’. My informants did not, however, appear particularly concerned with the speed and content of the changes in their lives. Further, my informants’ increasingly messy situations and relationships—with women, their families, the job market and other men—did not in their narratives appear to provoke any real sense of anxiety or crisis, or a conservative backlash. Instead my informants seemed to consider endless gaps and contradictions between their imaginaries about ideas of masculinity and their actual memories and experiences to be very normal. The question is: why?

Perhaps the most straightforward explanation is that both informants’ expectations about the power and effect of Confucian and other masculinist systems in their lives and the models commonly used in scholarship for framing and understanding gender and change were overly functionalist-static, and that ‘alternative ways of thinking about the world certainly persist’ (Connell 2007, xi). Such an explanation is, of course, not ‘new.’ Anthropologists have long confounded ‘universal’ theories of gender, power or subjectivity by focusing their attention on small units of generalization: regional, subregional, local, sublocal (Steedly 1999), and on the lived realities associated with ways of representing and understanding social processes connected with gender (Brenner 1998). Anthropological and sociological work has also posed questions about the applicability of analytic systems and approaches developed in (metropolitan) centres of capital and power to peripheral or indigenous knowledge systems (Connell 2007; cf. Asante 1987, 165; Atkinson and
Errington 1990, viii). This explanation recognizes the internal complexity and historical specificity of social and imagined domains like Confucianism, and the variety of motives and positions of social actors and observers (Brettell and Sargant 1992; Collier and Yanagisako 1989). It also recognizes the incompleteness of knowledge about, and problematic truthfulness of, the popular metropolitan frameworks commonly used to understand gender and change. The explanation offers little of immediate analytic value, however, for understanding the social experiences of informants.

A more nuanced explanation is that the supposed ‘norms’ and constants of Vietnamese life were constructed and revised by informants against multiple and changing interpretations of the past, and that Đổi mới had come to function for my informants as a theme, or trope, around which to organise their ambiguous narratives (cf. Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001, 4). Sometimes my informants appeared to suggest that the dramatic changes they described as characterising their lives emerged almost immediately after December 1986. At other times they described Đổi mới as a (sometimes gradual) process of change instead of a ‘moment’. There was also some uncertainty about and fluctuation in their views as to whether Đổi mới was a period that finished during the 1990s or is ongoing.

Such a wide variety of interpretations and uses might raise questions about whether the changes in my informants’ lives and attitudes can, after all, be sourced to Đổi mới. For example, my informants often described Đổi mới as a more or less abrupt cut-off point in recent Vietnamese history, a ‘moment’ when gender relations in the family started to change significantly. But wider scholarship suggests that this is not the case. As I suggested in chapter 3, research has shown that Vietnamese women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries undertook a repertoire of important practices in the household, keeping the ‘family’ together and bringing up children while making important economic contributions to the household (Kabeer and Tran 2000; Long et al. 2000). Such scholarship suggests that what my informants described as changes in household gender practices brought about by Đổi mới were actually not new, at least not in the ways they were thought to be.

Other scholarship has also suggested that the source of many recent changes in the lives of young Vietnamese people might not be Đổi mới per se, but rather globalizing conditions and emergent market practices (Nguyen Bich Tuan and Thomas 2004; Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012). But changing practices of work, study, consumption and self-making were described by my informants primarily in terms of changing historical periods in Vietnam rather than, for example, globalising practices. There was indeed no doubt among my informants that Đổi mới was important, if not instrumental, in inaugurating the processes of change from the socialist
period. This leads me to three rather ordinary observations: that broader state and media attention to the dramatic change in society during Đổi mới might have indicated to my informants that their experiences were historically unusual, even if they were not; that my informants were only able to remember experiences from within their own lifetimes and may have been unaware of many of the nuanced ways in which their parents’ and grandparents’ lives differed from their idealised histories of life ‘before Đổi mới’; and that, unlike the grand neoclassical narratives of ‘modernity’ or transition popular with some evolutionary economists and sociologists, my informants’ memories and representations of transition were not weighed down by the need to unify pictures of the past or the future (cf. Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001). As I flagged in the Introduction, a common theme running throughout much of the anthropological literature on historiography is indeed the divergence and discord between official representations of history and vernacular expressions of memory (Faubion 1993; Herzfeld 1991; Verdery 1991; Cohen 1994; Connerton 1989). Where research tracing the interconnections between official history and public memories has emerged in Vietnam, it has pointed to the ambiguity of experience, the emergence of other actors besides the state trying to occupy the space of memory, and the destabilization of the symbolic potency of state discourses (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001; Giebel 2004; MacLean 2008, 283). Writing more than twenty years after the Sixth Party Congress in 1986, former member of the Party Central Committee and assistant of the Party General Secretary Hà Đang (2007, 3) reflected that Đổi mới remains a process of ‘eliminating the old way of thinking and replacing it with the new … although it is unclear as to what is old and what is new’. I have pointed to the ways in which the reversals and contradictions documented in my informants’ memories and experiences of growing up during this period also suggest that Đổi mới was understood in inconsistent and changing ways. Nonetheless, it clearly functioned in my informant’s narratives as a kind of primary trope for describing and negotiating the change they saw in Vietnam.

A more radical explanation of ‘why’ my informants appeared to consider ‘normal’ the uncertainty about men’s situations and practices that they experienced growing up, following Connell (2005, 848), might be that crisis tendencies in men emerge most plainly when the ‘legitimacy of patriarchy’ is under threat. From this perspective, my (heterosexual, educated and, thus, privileged)

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1. At times, this presented challenges for my data analysis. For example, some of my informants represented their responsibilities as eldest sons in their households as indicative of patriarchal norms, even when it may be common in Vietnam for both eldest daughters and sons to do such things.
informants’ composure amid change could be read to indicate that in Vietnam their dominant position in gender relations was still guaranteed. As I argued in chapter 1, however, such a position appears to rest on presumptions that men in general try to emulate particular styles of ‘being a man’ or typically seek to maintain their privileges over women. It seems obvious from that the empirical evidence in this thesis, however, that my informants memories, attitudes, practices and choices often lay outside the gender ideals, needs, interests, rights and responsibilities such a vision inscribes. This evidence indicates the value of analysing the differences arising from, and between, a small group of young men’s encounters and social (and imaginary) relations in time instead of, for example, analysing men’s performances primarily in relation to an imagined structural regime, such as patrilinial kinship systems, Confucian family types or hegemonic masculine hierarchies.

Another explanation for informants’ apparent comfort with the speed and content of the dramatic changes in their lives might be that my informants were displaying similar ‘modernising’ tendencies to the Asian men who increasingly appear in scholarship demonstrating ‘global’ and/or ‘middle-class’ behaviours in relation to work, study, consumption and intimacy. Such changes have been said to emerge in men’s lives in response to the increasing economic independence of young women, forces of globalisation, changing consumption and grooming practices, and the near universality of primary education, among other transformations over the last thirty years (Louie and Low 2003; Iida 2005). But in light of the empirical evidence in this thesis it appears that such a view may well mistake, or at least overstate, potentially heterodox practices and attitudes in more orthodox terms of evolution and ‘modernity’, a state into which the society and subject grows in more or less predictable ways. But the contradictory narratives among my informants clearly indicate that it is impossible to rank their various signifying practices, attitudes and behaviours in the chronological hierarchy of advancement (and retardation). Informants certainly expressed uncertainty, complexity, diversity, fragmentation, paradoxes and ambiguities in their narratives, but there was little sense that informants considered these as evidence of a ‘modern’ transformative dynamic of what it meant to ‘be a man’. Nor did informants appear to consider their absence as a type of cultural stasis. As I argued in chapter 7, the processes of rationalising and representing such schisms may indeed have occurred quite separately from the sense of historical ‘discontinuities’ (Beck 1992, 12) and personality ‘fractures’ (Lee 2001, 95–116; Kasian 2001, 153–65) commonly thought to accompany social, political, and economic modernisation (Weedon 1987, 32; Giddens 1992). In what follows I thus propose a fifth explanation that attempts to deal more thoroughly with these issues.
Informants clearly conceived of themselves as negotiating new and relatively uncharted realms of (gender) flexibility, cooperation and compromise with women and other men. They were also very adept at negotiating those changes and reversals in the condition of ‘being a man’: in particular, informants recognised that ongoing reconfigurations of society meant that ‘advantages’ in their lives did not exist in the abstract realms of Confucian family structures or ‘traditional’ male roles but primarily in the context of particular and named social relationships which were themselves changing. Upon reflection, it appears that the incongruity of the coexistence of ‘traditional’ ideas about masculinities in my informants’ narratives and their descriptions of new and ‘modern’ changes in gender relations during Đổi mới was often expressed through a critical and self-reflexive attitude toward social, political and economic change per se. In chapter 5 I quoted Tho as saying that ‘Maybe I am a man half in the present and half in the past’. In chapter 6 I discussed Anh, who reflected on the naivety of his own sexual expectations after hearing a friend’s story about a woman who ‘had different styles of making love’.

Such reflection also appeared to lead some informants to try to find a suitable aesthetic form to obviate some of the incongruities that they noticed in growing up ‘as men’. In chapter 5 Duc said that his attitudes were somehow consistent with the ‘Oriental style’, and Tho described his beliefs as ‘half-feudal’. Although these young men appeared to be not unaware of the powerful global forces affecting change in Vietnam during this era, it is perhaps not surprising that some ideas about ‘traditional’ conceptions of stability and change continued to shape their apprehensions of social transformations. I have reviewed the relevant literature on gender in Vietnam in this thesis, suggesting that ideas of Confucianism have long provided frameworks for many Vietnamese (and scholars) to explain, and perhaps cope with, ordinary and unexpected fluctuations in their lives. I have argued that some of my informants’ apparent preoccupations with ideas of Confucianism and ‘traditional’ masculine forces might indicate an effort by them to mine Vietnamese tradition for a means to domesticate and make sense of the unpredictability and change in their lives during Đổi mới.

But this is not to suggest that my informants’ narratives of Confucian arrangements are necessarily intended to serve as a form of pressure against the threat of women’s changing social positions. It is indeed too early to assess how effective my informants’ positive ideas about women and of the changing possibilities for self-making during Đổi mới were in changing gender relations during Đổi mới. I have also come to reflect, however, that it may not actually be possible to answer the question about the extent to which many of the factors identified in the thesis are
going to play out in relations between men and women. To me, the flexibility and ambiguity in my informants’ constructions of their experiences, memories and imaginings indicate the powerful, mediating and under-theorised role of ambivalence in the processes through which young urban Vietnamese men rationalise their ideas about ‘being a man’. For example, at many stages during the research for and the writing up of this thesis I have been confronted by the ways that my informants’ narratives describing how gender relations in Vietnam were supposed to appear often seemed to triumph over their everyday knowledge and experiences, a common enough manifestation of the workings of ideology. As I have argued, informants suggested that in Vietnam masculine privilege was culturally sanctioned but often struggled to identify specific examples in their lives that convincingly bore out this belief. To me, the notion of culturally sanctioned, automatic masculine privilege in Vietnamese gender relations (or traditions) appeared to bear so little resemblance to informants’ daily experiences as to be almost irrelevant. Yet when I pointed this out in conversation with them, I found that informants nonetheless appeared to believe it, or wanted to believe it, or thought that it was a good idea to believe in it. And thus it was not ineffective in contributing to the aesthetic, personal meanings and memories that informants made of themselves and their social interactions. When some informants said that their fathers’ positions as hegemonic patriarchs had maintained structure and order in their households through the 1990s, I was indeed inclined to think that this could be true, even though their memories of growing up often invoked their mothers’ authority. Further, it appeared that even if informants knew from personal experience that not all Vietnamese men were powerful in straightforward ways, they clearly imagined that some really could be. As I suggested in my introduction, in writing up my field notes and the analysis I have kept returning to the stark contrast between informants’ imaginings of masculinity and their other, certainly more tangible, realities.

For my informants, the personal experience of gender and gender relations was bound up with power and political relations in complex ways that thwarted any straightforward analysis. For example, the ethnographic evidence in this thesis cannot easily be read to suggest that young Vietnamese men are complicit in overarching gender orders, or that those orders are constituted in straightforward ways through powerful, masculinist cultural forces. Neither does it suggest that young men are struggling to adapt to changes in Vietnamese society during Đổi mới, or that new and changing practices of consumption and personal and career development are transformative for young men. I am also not arguing that such forces and processes were unimportant in constituting for my informants’ particular ‘ways of being’ young men. Informants were clearly already
materially advantaged by the structures of domination that they may have already inhabited and upheld. They also, at times, worked manifestly to trivialise women’s attitudes and experiences even while resisting ‘male-friendly’ social policy and familial traditions. But informants’ attachments to such mechanisms of both gender replication and modification appeared to depend crucially on the ways in which they responded to other people within everyday spaces of inhabitance, constructed their own histories through memory, affect and emotions, and positioned themselves within wider, more public histories. The ethnographic evidence discussed in this thesis indeed alerts us to the slippery, contested and ultimately ambivalent nature of young urban Vietnamese men’s experiences and expectations of male privilege during a period of significant change in the material and ideological conditions of individual and family life in Vietnam.

Summary

As I flagged in the introduction, both Woodside (2006) and Marr (2000, 2003) have emphasised in their historical scholarship the role among Vietnamese of thought and critical self-reflection in the formation and pursuit of an ‘autonomous life’ while absorbing or accommodating significant social and economic change. The processes of ‘normative ambivalence’ that Marr (2000, 2003), Woodside (2006) and Zinoman (2002) have identified in the history and literature of Vietnam have not previously emerged in anthropological studies of men and masculinity, however. Until now, the gaps and contradictions between ‘real’ Vietnamese people’s lives and prevailing ideological conditions appear to have been understood in some scholarship dealing with gender and change in Vietnam as evidence of tensions, perhaps between an inner sense of self as an autonomous subject and an external performance of self in changing social relationships (O’Harrow 1995, Glewwe and Jacoby 1998; Nguyen Phuong An 2005, 2007; Phinney 2008; Bélanger et al. 2012). Changing social relationships and systems have in turn been understood to prescribe discursive models of (gender) practices and relations (Jamieson 1995; King et al. 2007). As I have argued in this thesis, such understandings appear to be broadly consistent with ideas about the disruptive affects/effects of ‘modernisation’, and have intersected in scholarship with ideas that Vietnamese men and women are distinct groups that gain and lose in different ways through ‘change’ in gendered social orders and ‘traditions’ (O’Harrow 1995; Le Thi Nam Tuyet 2001; Werner 2003). In contrast, I have drawn attention in this thesis to some of the deeply ambivalent ways that young men negotiated changing practices and memories, and emphasised their multiple and
contradictory narrative strategies, imaginative dimensions and affective relations. I have suggested that these processes are all characteristic of a profound ambivalence among my informants about ideas about being a man, ideas that have previously been thought to be central to the ways that males come to occupy signifying positions ‘as men’.

One key contribution from this thesis to the wider literature on young men and ‘change’, then, is that what appears ‘new’ or ‘modern’ in my informants’ behaviours or attitudes ought not to be assumed to mimic either the modernisation processes or masculinity crises previously thought to characterise men living through transition. I have argued that my informants appeared to perceive disjuncture in their lives as elements of a kind of permanent and ordinary existential condition. For example, while informants pointed to the advent of Đổi mới as a period of profound cultural and economic break and renewal, they also typically reflected on the dramatic periods of change and renewal that characterised the lives of their fathers and grandfathers. The seventeen young men whose life experiences I discuss in this thesis saw themselves as active subjects in the process of radical change that framed their lives—and their fathers as outside it, by virtue of the latter’s age, generation and experience. But they also viewed the radical changes in their experiences and expectations of ‘being men’ as (only) another episode within an uncertain historical trajectory, marked by constant transition in gender relations.

In conclusion, while some discriminatory practices between genders in Vietnam may continue in apparently similar forms across time and generation—in education, employment and mobility, for example—the empirical evidence presented in this thesis suggests that they are not necessarily reflective of either ‘continuities’ or ‘ruptures’ in young men’s assumptions and practices about masculinity, even though they might be claimed as such. Instead, my informants managed conflict about ideas and contradictory practices of masculinity during Đổi mới through a deep, mediating, and previously unrecognised ambivalence about ‘being a man’ in Vietnam.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. Plain Language Statement (Vietnamese)

ĐẠI HỌC MELBOURNE
KHOA LỊCH SỬ VÀ KHOA HỌC GIỚI TÍNH

BẢN TÔM TÁT ĐỀ TÀI

TÊN ĐỀ TÀI: Quan niệm về Nam tính thời kỳ hậu đổi mới ở Việt Nam—Những trải nghiệm & hình mẫu nam tính hiện đại trong lớp nam giới thành thị

Dự án này là một nghiên cứu về các vấn đề và những mối quan tâm riêng của lớp nhân thanh niên nam giới thành thị Việt Nam trong bối cảnh đất nước có những biến đổi về kinh tế, văn hóa và xã hội. Đây là luận án tiến sĩ của anh Philip Martin tại Khoa khoa học giới tính - Trường đại học tổng hợp Melbourne.


Dự án nhằm tìm hiểu các quan điểm cá nhân về đặc trưng giới tính, tiêu chuẩn nam tính, và vai trò của nam giới thời kỳ hậu đổi mới ở Việt Nam trong giai đoạn hậu đổi mới (1986) dựa trên những trải nghiệm cá nhân của từng người. Mỗi đối tượng tham gia sẽ được yêu cầu thảo luận về các mối quan hệ xã hội với bạn bè, gia đình, người yêu và những trải nghiệm cá nhân về vai trò giới, yêu cầu của gia đình và xã hội đặt lên nam giới. Cũng phải nhấn mạnh rằng các đối tượng cũng có thể thoải mái đề cập đến nhiều vấn đề liên quan đến những thay đổi của văn hóa và những biến đổi khác có ích cho nghiên cứu. Sẽ không có những câu trả lời đúng hay sai trong các cuộc phỏng vấn. Đơn giản mục đích của chúng ta là lắng nghe những ý kiến đóng góp của đối tượng được it hay nhiều. Chúng tôi hoàn toàn tôn trọng những ý kiến cá nhân của đối tượng và tuyệt đối không sử dụng bất kỳ thông tin mà họ cung cấp. Với sự cho phép của họ chúng tôi xin được sử dụng các phương tiện ghi âm để lưu lại các thông tin trong quá trình thảo luận nhóm và phỏng vấn cá nhân. Đối với việc sử dụng giấy phép lại các ý kiến đó trên giấy tờ. Thời gian thảo luận nhóm là 90 phút và phỏng vấn là 60 phút.

Người được phỏng vấn có thể sử dụng bí danh cho bản thân hoặc cách những người hay địa điểm mà họ có thể để cấp khi thảo luận và phỏng vấn. Để tái nghiệm cuối phỏng vấn tuyệt đối tôn trọng giới tính, tư tưởng, và thông cảm. Do số lượng người tham gia thảo luận và phỏng vấn rất giới hạn nên việc giữ kín
bí mật hoàn toàn là điều khó thực hiện triệt để. Các băng ghi âm và bản ghi lời thảo luận và phỏng vấn sẽ được lưu giữ bí mật và an toàn ít nhất 5 năm. Rất có thể các thông tin họ cung cấp sẽ được chú để tại nghiên cứu sử dụng trong các bản báo cáo khác, nhưng những thông tin gốc thì không bao giờ được gửi tới những người nghiên cứu khác nếu không có sự cho phép của đối tượng nghiên cứu.


Thay mặt những người nghiên cứu, tôi chủ đề tài này xin chân thành cảm ơn sự tham gia của các đối tượng. Nếu bạn có bất cứ yêu cầu liên quan đến dự án này xin vui lòng liên lạc với chủ sự nghiên cứu hay giảng viên hướng dẫn chính.

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APPENDIX 2. Plain Language Statement (English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY/GENDER STUDIES

Plain Language Statement
PROJECT TITLE: Renovating Masculinity: Urban Men’s experiences and Emergent Masculinity Models in Đổi mới Vietnam

This research project is a study of issues and concerns unique to urban Vietnamese men in relation to changing social, cultural and economic contexts. It is being undertaken by Philip Martin as part of a PhD in the School of Gender Studies at the University of Melbourne.

The field research is being conducted by Philip Martin in the form of small focus-group discussions and face-to-face audio recorded interviews, and has been approved by the Melbourne University Human Research Ethics Committee, in line with the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans. As part of the research process, each participant will meet informally with the interviewer for a briefing meeting, before joining a focus-group discussion. Focus-group discussions are estimated to take up to ninety minutes, and involve four research participants. Each participant will be invited to join a subsequent one-to-one interview with the researcher (at an agreed upon location), which is estimated to take about one hour. If required, there is a possibility of a second interview if the participant consents.

This research project aims to explore ideas of identity, masculinity, sexuality and self in relation to post 1986 state policies of renovation (Đổi mới) in urban environments in Vietnam, and in the context of your specific experiences. You will be asked to informally and broadly discuss social relations with peers, family and intimate partners, experiences of gender roles and social and familial expectations. I would like to stress that you should feel free to discuss any other issues you deem pertinent in regard to wider cultural change, or feel would be useful for this study. There are no right or wrong answers in this project, and everyone can contribute as much or as little as they like. Please respect the opinions of others and the absolute confidentiality of the discussions in which you participate. With your permission, group discussions and one-to-one interviews will be recorded on digital audio recording devices. Notes will also be taken. Focus-group discussions will take up to 90 minutes, and one-to-one interviews 60 minutes.

Interviewees have the option to adopt pseudonyms for themselves or any people or places referred to, and if this option is selected, the researcher will respect and maintain the participant’s confidentiality. However interviewees must be aware that there is a small sample size that may make it impossible for them to remain completely anonymous. Audio material and transcriptions will be kept confidential (subject to legal limitations) and will be housed in locked storage at the University of Melbourne for a minimum of five years. There is a possibility of the research forming part of future publications, however the raw data will not be made available to other researchers unless participants request otherwise.
As some of the questions may raise issues of an emotional nature for the participants, it is imperative that the participants are aware of the wholly voluntary nature of the interview process. Participants are free to withdraw consent and withdraw unprocessed data at any time. Details of counselling and relevant information services will be made available to participants at the time of the interview. An informal debriefing session can be arranged with the interviewer should the participant request it.

I thank you for your involvement and encourage you to contact either the Student or Supervisory Principal researchers should you have further queries about the project.

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Ph. +613 8344 5970

If you have concerns about the conduct of this research project, please contact:

**Executive Officer**  
Human Research Ethics  
The University of Melbourne  
Ph: 03 8344 2073  Fax: 03 9347 6739
APPENDIX 3. Pre-discussion questionnaire (Vietnamese)

Mã phỏng vấn (người nghiên cứu sử dụng):

PHIẾU ĐIỀU TRA TRƯỚC QUÁ TRÌNH THẢO LUẬN NHÓM

| CHÚ Ý: Tất cả các câu hỏi trong phiếu điều tra này đều không mang tính bắt buộc. Bạn có thể bỏ trống thông tin nếu không muốn trả lời. Bạn có thể đưa ra câu trả lời chân thành. Chúng tôi tin tưởng bạn sẽ cung cấp thông tin chính xác nhất. (Tất cả các câu hỏi sau không bắt buộc bạn phải trả lời. Đối với những câu hỏi có nhiều phương án lựa chọn, bạn chỉ cần khao cho một trong số các phương án bạn đã chọn.) |

1. Tên, bí danh bạn muốn sử dụng trong quá trình nghiên cứu: ...........................................................
2. Địa chỉ: ........................................................................................................................................
3. Điện Thoại: .......................................................................................................................................
4. Tuổi (số năm): .................................................................................................................................
5. Nơi sinh: ..........................................................................................................................................
6. Thu nhập hàng tháng:
   - < 100,000 VND
   - 100,000 - 200,000 VND
   - 200,000 - 300,000 VND
   - 300,000 - 400,000 VND
   - 400,000 - 500,000 VND
   - 500,000 - 600,000 VND
   - 600,000 - 800,000 VND
   - 800,000 - 1,000,000 VND
   - Không biết
   - Không trả lời
7. Tình trạng công việc
   - Không nằm trong độ tuổi lao động
   - Sinh viên
   - Lao động bán thời gian
   - Thất nghiệp
   - Lao động toàn thời gian
   - Tính trạng khác (ghi rõ)
8. Nghề nghiệp (nếu có):

9. Tôn giáo/tín ngưỡng (bạn có thể chọn hơn một câu)
   - Không tôn giáo/tín ngưỡng
   - Đạo hội
   - Đạo Phật
   - Đạo do thái
   - Đạo khổng
   - Các tôn giáo/tín ngưỡng khác (ghi rõ)

10. Trình độ học vấn
   - Tiểu học
   - Trung học cơ sở
   - Trung học phổ thông trả lời)
   - Cao đẳng/trung học chuyên nghiệp
   - Đại học
   - Các trình độ khác (ghi rõ)
   - Không biết/Không trả lời
11. Các mối quan hệ giới tính hiện có
   - Có (thời gian quan hệ: .............. )
   - Không
   - Không biết/Không trả lời
12. Bạn đã từng có con, hoặc làm một người phụ nữ mang thai chưa?
   - Có
   - Không
   - Không trả lời

Mong bạn sau khi hoàn tất câu trả lời hãy bỏ phiếu điều tra vào 1 phong bì và trả lại cho người hướng dẫn của nhóm.

Chúng tôi xin chân thành cảm ơn bạn đã tham gia cuộc điều tra này!

Chú ý: Bạn có thể rút khỏi cuộc nghiên cứu này bất cứ khi nào mà không cần giải thích lý do. Thậm chí bạn có thể rút lại bất cứ thông tin nào chưa được xử lý mà bạn đã cung cấp.

Người điều hành phỏng vấn nhóm

PHILIP MARTIN | RENOVATING MANCYLNNITY
APPENDIX 4. Pre-discussion questionnaire (English)

Code Number (Researcher’s Use Only):

Pre-Discussion Questionnaire

**NOTE:** All questions on this form are optional.
Please feel free to leave blank any details you would prefer not to provide.
These may include your name, address and telephone number.

1. Name or Pseudonym you wish to use during the research: .................................................................

2. What is your age (in years)? ..............................................................................................................

3. In which city were you born? .............................................................................................................

4. What is your current monthly income?
   - Less than 300,000 VND
   - 300,000–500,000 VND
   - 500,000–800,000 VND
   - 800,000–1,500,000 VND
   - Above 1,500,000 VND
   - I’m not sure
   - I don’t wish to say

5. What is your current labour force status?
   - Not in labour force
   - Unemployed
   - Student
   - Employed full-time
   - Employed part-time
   - Other (specify) ..........................................

6. If you are employed, what is your occupation? ..................................................................................

7. What is your religion/belief system? (you may tick more than one)
   - None
   - Buddhist
   - Confucianist
   - Catholic
   - Protestant
   - Anglican
   - Muslim
   - Jewish
   - Other (specify) ...........................................

8. What is the highest level of education you have received?
   - Some primary school
   - Some high school
   - Completed high school
   - University degree / some university education
   - Other qualifications (specify)
   - Don’t know / aren’t sure

9. Are you in a relationship at the moment
   - Yes (if you ticked this one, how long have you been in this relationship? ..........................)
   - No
   - Not sure / don’t know

10. Have you ever fathered children or made a woman pregnant?
    - Yes
    - No
    - Not sure / don’t know

Now, please place this sheet in the envelope provided and hand back to the focus-group facilitator

**THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE**

Reminder: You are free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied

RENOVATING MASCULINITY | PHILIP MARTIN
APPENDIX 5. Consent form for persons participating in research project (Vietnamese)

ĐẠI HỌC MELBOURNE
KHOA LỊCH SỬ VÀ KHOA HỌC GIỚI TÍNH

Phiếu cam đoan của đối tượng nghiên cứu

QUAN NIỆM VỀ NAM TÍNH THỜI KỲ HẬU ĐỔI MỚI Ở VIỆT NAM:
Những trải nghiệm & hình mẫu hiện đại của giới nam thành niên thành thị.

TÊN ĐỀ TÀI

Tên người tham dự: Mr Philip Martin

Người hướng dẫn: Associate Professor Maila Stivens

* Tích vào câu trả lời mà bạn chọn:

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Sau khi đã kiểm tra lại những thông tin tin đó, tôi ước nguyện cho chủ sự nghiên cứu hay người trợ giúp sử dụng những thông tin này trong nghiên cứu trên

CHỦ KỸ CỦA NGƯỜI THAM GIA

NGÀY

CHỦ KỸ CỦA NGƯỜI LÀM CHỨNG

NGÀY

Cảm ơn bạn tham gia nghiên cứu này. Nếu bạn có bất cứ yêu cầu gì liên quan đến dự án này xin vui lòng liên hệ với chủ sự nghiên cứu hay người hướng dẫn chính.

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APPENDIX 6. Consent form for persons participating in research project (English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY/GENDER STUDIES

Consent form for persons participating in research project

PROJECT TITLE
Renovating Masculinity:
Urban Men’s experiences and Emergent Masculinity Models in Doi Moi Vietnam

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

NAME OF PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER: Mr Philip Martin
NAME OF SUPERVISORY RESEARCHER: Associate Professor Maila Stivens

* Please tick to indicate preferences:

1. I consent to participate in the project named above, the particulars of which have been explained to me  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
2. I would like to be known in this research by a pseudonym  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
3. A written copy of the information has been given to me to keep  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
4. I have been informed that this project is for the purpose of research  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
5. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to legal limitations  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
6. I have been informed that upon request a pseudonym may be used in place of my name in the final thesis  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
7. I would like to remain anonymous in this study and thus would like my contributions to be credited to a pseudonym  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
8. I acknowledge that I have the option of being referred to by a pseudonym but understand that due to the small sample size this will not guarantee anonymity  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
9. I consent to the use of audio-recording equipment in my focus-group discussion  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
10. I consent to the use of audio-recording equipment in my one-to-one interview  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
11. I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
12. I acknowledge that I will be provided with transcriptions of the relevant sections of each interview for verification before inclusion in the final report  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
13. Upon verification, I authorise the researcher or his or her assistant to use the interviews for the project as named above  [ ] Yes  [ ] No
14. I nominate the following location for the interview to take place:
   [ ] Participant’s home  [ ] Interviewer’s office  [ ] Other: ...........................................................

SIGNATURE  DATE  (Participant)

SIGNATURE  DATE  (Witness to consent)

I thank you for your involvement and encourage you to contact either the
Student or Supervisory Principal researchers should you have further queries about the project.

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Phone: +613 8344 5970
Author/s:
MARTIN, PHILIP

Title:
Renovating masculinity: urban men’s experiences and emergent masculinity models in Đì mi Vietnam

Date:
2013

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Publication Status:
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Renovating masculinity: urban men’s experiences and emergent masculinity models in Đì mi Vietnam

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