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RESPONSIBILITY, SUBMISSION, AND POWER: SOCIAL FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE RURAL OUT-MIGRATION AMONG WOMEN IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

by

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This paper examines the circumstances that affect the decisions of young women living in rural southern Vietnam to move to Hồ Chí Minh City in search of employment. Issues of power, submission, and responsibility that underlie interpersonal relationships in Vietnam will be discussed with special attention to the way they affect the lives of Vietnamese women. It has been widely suggested that rural out-migration in developing countries is largely economically driven. My own field research in Vietnam during the summer of 1996 suggests that the migration of women in southern Vietnam is not simply an attempt to make more money. Rather, these decisions are embedded in a particular sense of responsibility, and can be understood both as acts of submission to and acts of resistance against a male-dominated society.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... ii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

   International Development in Southern Vietnam ......................................................... 1

   Rural Out-Migration ................................................................................................. 1

II. THEORETICAL ISSUES .................................................................................................. 6

III. A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S ISSUES ........................................................................ 10

   Southeast Asia ........................................................................................................ 10

   Vietnam .................................................................................................................... 11

IV. FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY ......................................................................... 15

   Personal History in Southeast Asia ........................................................................... 15

   The Fieldwork Experience ...................................................................................... 15

V. FINDINGS ...................................................................................................................... 22

VI. RESPONSIBILITY ......................................................................................................... 25

   The Tale of Kieu ....................................................................................................... 25

   Trạch nhiệm in Practice ......................................................................................... 29

   The Trạch nhiệm of Women and the Importance of the Family.......................... 32

   Trạch nhiệm and Migration ................................................................................... 45

   Migration as Subordination ...................................................................................... 50

VII. MIGRATION AS RESISTANCE? ................................................................................. 53
Table of Contents—continued

CHAPTER

VII. CONCLUSIONS ........................................................................................................ 60

ENDNOTES .................................................................................................................. 63

APPENDICES

A. Protocol Clearance From the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board .... 64

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................................. 66
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

International Development in Southern Vietnam

During the past decade - particularly since the United States lifted its embargo against Vietnam in 1994 - an increasing number of (a) outside businesses, (b) Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and (c) other special interest groups have become involved in Vietnam. National (Vietnamese) businesses and corporations are expanding to a significant degree as well. This has led to an increase in the number of jobs available in urban centers, not only working in national or international joint-venture plants and factories, but also in smaller, privatized businesses (restaurants, salons, etc.) These jobs attract large numbers of migrants from rural areas hoping to improve their financial situation.

Rural Out-Migration

The fact that large numbers of people from rural areas are migrating to Hồ Chí Minh City in search of employment is being seen by some as problematic. For one thing, the number of migrants is greater than the number of jobs available. This labor surplus leads to extremely low wages, nearly non-existent job security for the workers, and generally poor working conditions. Also, the large number of unemployed individuals is thought to be behind a general rise in crime, ranging from petty theft (e.g. pick-pocketing) to organized gangs, as well as a host
of social and health-related problems that typically accompany urban overcrowding and homelessness.

Because a large number (probably most) of the jobs becoming available in Hồ Chí Minh City are specifically for women (meaning that women are typically preferred by employers), a corresponding proportion of the migrants are also women. The large number of women moving in from the countryside is alarming for two reasons: First, it provides more opportunities for these women to be exploited by their employers, and second, because there are not enough jobs to go around, many of the unemployed and homeless in Hồ Chí Minh City are women. Many of these women turn to lives of crime, particularly prostitution in one form or another (director of the Vietnam Women’s Union in a Mekong Delta province, personal communication). The large numbers of exploited, homeless and unemployed women, and to a larger degree the problem of a growing sex industry in Vietnam is receiving more and more attention from the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Health, the Vietnamese Ministry of Industry Labor and Social Affairs (MOLISA). This is at least partly in response to a growing interest in these issues on the part of foreign NGOs and media (the latter, in many cases, being American).

While many current development and social service programs are targeting women already in Hồ Chí Minh City, most of the people involved in the planning and implementation of these programs agree that a more effective strategy would be to encourage women not to migrate in the first place (personal communication with program directors of several NGOs, both Vietnamese and international: 1993-5). During the period that I spent in the Mekong Delta town of Cà’n Thọ as a
representative of an NGO, I was actively involved in nearly all levels of the process of implementing programs, whose stated objectives included reducing the number of women migrating to Hồ Chí Minh City. My responsibilities included identifying and evaluating "needs" (variously defined as poverty, lack of education, or lack of access to resources of one kind or another) of rural people at particular sites throughout the Mekong delta, acting as a liaison between higher ranking officers of the NGO and local organizations like the Vietnam Women’s Union or the People’s Committee, writing funding proposals, and participating in final evaluations.

Through this experience in general, and specifically through countless conversations with Vietnamese women from rural areas, I became convinced that the ways that foreign NGOs were doing things did not effectively address the issue of migration.

As certain projects reached their interim and final phases I became aware, for example, of several project participants who had moved to Hồ Chí Minh City - in effect, doing the opposite of what we had been working to achieve. When asked why they had moved, the women’s answers overwhelmingly had little or nothing to do what we had assumed would be the prime potential sources of influence. Our projects had been designed around the ideas that migration was motivated, first and foremost, by the need for money. Moreover, we incorrectly assumed that decisions to migrate were made by individuals. I now know that we were off the mark in both instances. At the time we did not realize that we were proceeding inappropriately by trying to keep rural women at home through micro-enterprise/income generating projects, vocational training, and attempts to convince
individual women to stay in the provinces. As I shall argue in later sections of this paper, not only were the attempts to reduce the migration of women based on incorrect assumptions about migration, but the underlying assumption of the “stay at home” projects, that migration contributes to the health and social problems associated with urban poverty, was (and is) problematic as well.

My point is not to criticize international development or NGOs per se. Rather, a goal in writing this paper is to address the critique of international development as articulated by Warren and Bourque:

...Western development strategies have been insensitive to cultural differences in the significance of the family and kinship groups, the value of children, the devastating inequities born of class differences, and the economic realities of impoverished dependent countries (1991: 281).

Based on my experience in Vietnam, I assert that what is needed by NGOs at this point is a clearer understanding of the social and interpersonal forces that underlie the decisions of rural Vietnamese women to migrate. It is precisely this need which provides the rationale for this study. My intention in writing this thesis (and for conducting the study at all, for that matter), however, is not to give “the answers,” but instead to point out areas that may have been previously overlooked as potentially useful avenues of inquiry for program officers, proposal authors, and rural development consultants attempting to deal with issues of female migration in Vietnam.

In particular, my research links migrant women to their families, and I will argue that the Vietnamese concept of responsibility is crucial for understanding relationships between individuals in Vietnam. This concept of responsibility or trách nhiệm influences to a very large extent the ways in which Vietnamese people relate
to each other in general, and is an important consideration when an individual contemplates migration. In this thesis I will show how the concept of *trách nhiệm* in Vietnam systematically circumscribes the lives of women to the point that female migration may, in some cases, be analyzed as an act of submission to family demands. As I shall elaborate below, women who migrate are often submitting to a male-dominated cultural system. That is, the migration of women benefits primarily men, while benefits to the women themselves are often negligible. However, seemingly contradictorily, migration may become a means by which women resist the power that men often have over them. Women who migrate often stand to gain (or regain) a considerable amount power and autonomy. In some cases this system-resisting quality of migration is not articulated explicitly by migrant women, but in others it is premeditated.
Unfortunately anthropological literature on Vietnam, particularly that published after re-unification in 1975, is largely non-existent. However, there have been many studies conducted on rural out-migration in developing countries, of which a substantial portion have focused on various countries in Southeast Asia. In the absence of literature specific to Vietnam it is necessary to look to studies carried out in other developing countries for analogy. It has been argued that other Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries (particularly Thailand and the Philippines) provide a suitable analogy, due to expected similarities between them and Vietnam as Vietnam develops economically and modernizes technologically (Karnow 1983; SarDesai 1992).

This study is based on the assumption that, as in other developing countries, migration in Vietnam has some economic motivation. That is, migration is a means to better an individual’s and/or family’s economic position by earning cash income from wage labor in urban areas. It is further assumed that a recent (i.e. 1990 through the present) strengthening in Vietnam’s economy, due largely to a liberalizing of economic policies by the central government followed by more foreign and domestic investment, has and continues to be the major impetus for rural out-migration.
Bearing in mind the impact that economic factors clearly have on migration, it is also necessary to recognize the complexity of the migration process. As Trager puts it, "that process involves not only the individuals who migrate but also others with whom they have ties" (1988:2). Moreover, this process is not limited simply to interpersonal relationships, but is influenced by other factors as well. As Trager suggests, "structural forces shape and constrain the activities and decisions of individuals and households" (1988: 9). These structural forces include political systems (ranging from global to local), cultural systems of kinship, and gender identity.

Findley argues that the rural out-migration must be understood on two levels: first, the situation - a particular set of circumstances in which the actual or potential migrants find themselves (1987: 15-18). These circumstances involve a potential migrant's family, that family's financial situation, certain specific events which may give rise to migration (e.g. a lost job or the illness of a family member), the physical landscape, and so forth. ‘Situations’ occur in villages, hamlets, neighborhoods, or streets. Second, the setting - the overall social, economic, and political features of the social system in which the individuals are located. This multi-level approach suggests, again, that migration occurs in specific contexts that involve individuals and interpersonal and family considerations.

The impact that gender has on the complex decision to migrate, as well as the fact that migration patterns in developing countries differ according to gender has been commented on by a number of authors. The works of Radcliffe (1992), Momsen (1992), Brydon (1992), Nelson (1992), Pryer (1992), Singhanetra-Renard and Prabhudhanitisarn (1992), and Hugo (1992) show that in many documented
instances these altered patterns in migration often result in at least a partial redefinition of gender roles. The redefinition of gender roles then affects patterns of migration even further.

Chant and Radcliffe call for more study of gendered-specific factors involved in migration, arguing that while in many instances the gender of a migrant has a profound effect on the process of the decision to migrate (1992: 19, 20). In a later chapter of the same volume, Chant narrows somewhat the focus of Trager and Findley by acknowledging the larger socio-economic dimension of migration, but then arguing that the family or household is the most influential factor in determining mobility (1992: 198-200). Reasons for the strong influence of the household have to do with differences in the quality and quantity of participation in the household economy, indigenous values regarding the propriety of women working outside of the home or being away from home, cultural restrictions on the mobility of married women. Given the objectives of this paper and the ethnographic research upon which it is based, I will argue that it is the household that has the most immediate affect on individuals as they contemplate migration. While I do not dispute either Trager or Findley that large-scale forces impact the family, I have found that those social factors which influence individuals to migrate differentially according to gender are identified with greatest clarity when the household is the unit of analysis. In contrast, gender-specific factors that influence migration are more difficult to delineate when larger units of analysis are used. Moreover, while this paper focuses specifically on the ways in which household relationships affect migration, by no means do I mean to minimize the roles played by factors such as global and local economics, or national and regional politics.
Finally, because I am specifically addressing female migration, it is necessary to consider the ways in which migration is linked to gender. Elaborating on the idea of the household as the preferred unit of analysis in understanding female migration, Chant identifies a strong link between individual mobility and the role played by that individual in household survival (ibid:199). A general, unequal division of productive and reproductive activities places heavier responsibilities on the shoulders of women, while allowing men to be more mobile. This unequal division, often exacerbated by male absence (which forces females to do more domestic work), ultimately means that there is more at stake when women do migrate - for the woman herself to be sure, but even more for the household. If a woman already supports the bulk of the household economy, then it is not in the best interests of the household for that woman to migrate, unless the expected return is considerable. For this reason, the rural out-migration of women, cross-culturally, appears to be a group decision which potentially involves entire households. This is supported by a study of female rural-urban migrants in India which indicates that those who migrate nearly always do so in the context of the household and for the purpose of sending a portions of their earnings home (Shanthi 1993: 7-9). I will argue that those factors that most directly affect Vietnamese women regarding migration originate from the relationships that they maintain within their families and households.
CHAPTER III

A HISTORY OF WOMEN'S ISSUES

Southeast Asia

In order to understand the forces that motivate and constrain the decisions and actions of women in Vietnam, it is necessary to look briefly at some of those forces in historical context. In the case of Vietnam, historical events and conditions have impacted current gender ideologies and roles, and, like Vietnam's history, current ideologies of gender are often conflicted from within as well as from without.

Whereas other countries in Northeast or West Asia - e.g. China and India, respectively, have strong traditions of female subordination by males as well as elaborate cultural constructions which accomplish it, the low status of women compared with men in Southeast Asia is a relatively recent phenomenon which some authors directly associate with European contact and influence. For example, Van Esterik writes of British officials in colonial Burma who were astounded at the amount of respect accorded Burmese women (1995: 248). She then goes on to describe how colonial officials felt it necessary to overcome the "backwardness" of Burmese men by teaching them to "kill and to oppress their women" (ibid: 249).
Vietnam

In Vietnam, specifically, women have long occupied positions of importance and status. Literally every town in Vietnam large enough to have streets with names has a street called "Hai Bà Trưng" after the two Trưng Sisters who led Vietnam in a successful (although short-lived) revolt against China in A.D. 39 (SarDesai 1992: 12). The third century A.D. saw another female hero in Vietnam. Another period of revolt against Chinese imperialism, this time led by 23 year-old Trieu Au (Karnow 1983: 89). In this case the Vietnamese failed to gain independence from China, but because she died a martyr, Trieu Au is esteemed as a sacred figure and one can see her enshrined in pagodas throughout the country.

Women also played vital roles in the revolutions - first against the French and later against the Americans - which culminated in the rise of socialism in, and the reunification of Vietnam. Whether as regular combatants, guerrillas, or via a number of other supportive activities, contributions made specifically by women were used strategically and, in many crucial cases, pushed the balance in favor of the communist revolution (Dukier 1981: 69, 75, 192). Indeed, the contributions of women to all of the revolutions in Vietnam's history thus far are very publicly recognized. Museums which commemorate the women who participated in the fights against the French and, later, American forces can be found in several of the larger cities in the country. When I was last in Hồ Chí Minh City I saw several recently published books devoted entirely to accounts, photographs, and short stories by women significant in the last two revolutions.
Nowadays, however, the status of women in Vietnam is a multiplicity of conflicting messages. On one hand, one still sees evidence of an older tradition when, according to Marr, Vietnamese women, “had never been fully cowed, and men had never treated them as chattel” (1981: 199). In a comparison of present-day Vietnam and China, Frenier and Mancini further assert that,

Vietnam’s history of guerrilla warfare against China, its fierce nationalism, and its connections with the rest of South-East Asia make it distinct from China and help account for the higher status of Vietnamese women. (1996: 25)

On the other hand, it is important to realize that while women have obviously been important in Vietnam historically, this importance has never and does not necessarily mean equality, autonomy, or power for Vietnamese women. While Vietnam’s experience with the French and later the Americans certainly helped to solidify and enhance notions of male authority and female subservience, Vietnamese women were never totally equal to men to begin with. Moreover, in recent history the experience of other Southeast Asian nations is ringing true, once again, in Vietnam. That is, that outside influence, this time from the former Soviet Union in the form of socialist politics, has been accepted at the expense of women’s status. Barry, for example, notes that while the rise of Marxist socialism theoretically embodied equality for women, women’s issues as such were essentially lost in the larger struggle for national autonomy (1996: 10). This neglect of women’s concerns has amounted to a decrease in the status of Women in Vietnam that has not been seriously questioned in the years following the Vietnam war.
One event in Vietnam's recent past to which many of my informants referred was “đổi mới” or “the new change(s).” Đổi mới was a policy handed down from the central government which, among other things, supposedly place men and women on equal footing socially and economically. Many of my informants praised đổi mới because it had helped Vietnamese women gain access to education, employment opportunities, and so forth. Some even used the English term “women's lib” to describe the current situation. My purpose is not to denigrate đổi mới, because it has had some very positive effects on Vietnam in general and the lives of Vietnamese women specifically. However, like the socio-political movements which gave rise to Vietnamese socialism, đổi mới, by focusing on the contributions of some Vietnamese women to science, education, nationalism, etc. effectively masks the lack of autonomy that most women have in their personal/family lives.

In theory I can agree with Frenier and Mancini that, by some comparisons, Vietnamese women may have more recognition as being significant historically and that Vietnamese women currently enjoy a moderate amount of influence and representation in the public domain. However, what this means for the ‘average’ Vietnamese woman amounts to very little. Women in Vietnam are still responsible for the same tasks - most often domestic - as have been women for generations. Those women who work outside of the household in industrial or office settings are often overworked and underpaid. The “docile” female workers supposedly found throughout Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, are legendary among Asian and non-Asian industrialists alike (Ong 1988: 29). Additionally, women do not often benefit from the technological advances that more typically affect men's lives.
Vietnamese industries now produce more comfortable motorcycle seats and color television sets, but women, even those who are relatively well-off, wash the family's clothing by hand, carry foodstuffs from the local market daily, and cook over a clay stove not much different from those used by Vietnamese women around the turn of the century. Moreover, the fact that domestic work is still considered to be solely "women's work" is but another indication that deeper beliefs and assumptions about the roles of women vis-à-vis those of men have not been successfully challenged. Finally, like the association of women with domestic labor, female rural out-migration in Vietnam is one way in which the subordinate status of women is expressed and perpetuated.
CHAPTER IV

FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Personal History in Southeast Asia

My involvement with Vietnam began in 1991 while I was working as a volunteer English teacher in Bangkok, Thailand and spent two weeks visiting Hồ Chí Minh City and a few of the surrounding provinces. In 1993 (several trips to Vietnam later) I began working for an NGO - a position that kept me in Vietnam’s Mekong delta for nearly two years. During this time I had occasion to travel extensively throughout Vietnam (particularly the Mekong Delta) and to study the Vietnamese language through the university of Cần Thơ. I left my position in Vietnam in November of 1994 at which point I returned to the United States to continue graduate study in anthropology.

The Fieldwork Experience

The fieldwork upon which this paper is based was conducted in Hồ Chí Minh City between May 20 and August 19, 1996. In addition to conducting field research, I also taught English for four hours per day at a local, private foreign language center. This accomplished several things: First, it paid for the research project. My arrangement with the language center stipulated that in return for my services as an English teacher, I would receive a salary, necessary visa, and accommodation -
which, in this case, included a motorcycle. Thus, my only expense was return air
fare from the United States to Hồ Chí Minh City.

Second, the accommodation which the language school provided turned out
to be a room in the house of an “upper-middle-class” Vietnamese family. The family
had four children living at home, the oldest just a few years younger than I. This
family treated me as their fifth child. Although I ate most meals outside the home,
the family always made me feel welcome at their table and in their kitchen. I spent
many enjoyable evenings with some or all of the family watching foreign films in
Vietnamese on television (“Lassie” was the family favorite), helping the kids with
their homework, or just conversing with the parents. The mother, in particular, was
very interested in what I was studying as she herself had migrated to Hồ Chí Minh
City from Hà Nội shortly after Liberation in 1975, and was a wonderful help as I
struggled to comprehend what my informants were telling me. All members of the
family went to special pains to correct every mistake that I made while speaking
Vietnamese in their presence, and to impress upon me the importance of speaking
“beautifully”. To this end they helped me write down words and phrases
appropriate for a “teacher” to use, as opposed to the “low class” (their description)
Vietnamese slang that they laughingly accused me of picking up from informants.
All in all, I learned a tremendous amount about the language, the culture, and family
life in Vietnam from “my” family.

Finally, being employed as an English teacher legitimazed my presence in
Vietnam in the eyes of many. Although I usually tried to explain that I was a student
of anthropology in Vietnam to learn about Vietnamese culture (nearly everyone
agreed that this was a very worthy endeavor), most of my Vietnamese acquaintances introduced me to third parties as an English teacher. As time wore on I learned that being able to say I was a teacher made me respectable and trustworthy and allowed me to go places and have a depth of interaction with certain people that simply would not have been possible had I been in Vietnam in any other capacity.

My ethnographic fieldwork consisted primarily of informal, open-ended interviews with Vietnamese women, ranging in age from 19 to 60 years (although most were between 21 and 30). In theory, I included in my final analysis, interviews with any woman who had migrated to Hồ Chí Minh City from somewhere south of Huế. In actual practice, however, I “interviewed” anyone who would talk to me, and in many cases it was not even clear that I was the one conducting the interview! When possible I based the first interview on a list of questions that gathered basic demographic data such as: the woman’s age; the province she had been born in; the length of time she had been in the city; the sort of work she did. If the informant agreed I would then move on to a second list of questions which gathered information about her personal history: a description of her social/family circumstances; what she saw as her role in the decision to migrate; and how she felt about her current situation.

Altogether I interviewed 43 different migrant women. In the vast majority of cases I first became acquainted with those I interviewed, and actually carried out the interviews in their place of work. For example, I frequented markets where produce and goods were sold by migrant women, and as I became familiar they
would talk with me about their situation, and I became a regular customer at salons where migrant women worked as stylists. Although one can get only so many haircuts a week, I got some of my most useful information while having my face washed or my sideburns trimmed by a young woman from Đà Nẵng or Bạc Liêu; I became a familiar face in the sections of town where prostitution was visible along the streets and I was on a first-name basis with several of the "little sisters" (em gái - a Vietnamese euphemism for prostitute). In the cases when I talked with a "little sister," I would take her to one of the local coffee shops and talk as we sipped coconuts or Pepsi. This usually involved negotiating a "protection fee" with one of the "big brothers"\(^1\), although, later on, some of the "little sisters" trusted me enough to give me their home addresses and agreed to spend time with me during the day when they were not working. One exception to finding informants at their place of work was through my role as an English teacher. I was pleased to find that a number of my students were themselves migrants in hopes of improving their chances of finding gainful employment by learning English. In most cases they were very willing to talk with me about my research, and a few ended up being regular informants as well as close personal friends.

Approaching informants for interviews often seemed to "flow" naturally. We would exchange pleasantries, and chit-chat for a while. As a non-Asian in Vietnam, I found I could count on informants asking me where I was from and what I was doing in Vietnam. Explaining that I was a teacher who also happened to be studying Vietnamese culture served to pique interest in my potential informant, and she would often ask more detailed questions. When it came out that I wanted
specifically to talk to migrant women about their views and experience, I would typically get one of two reactions: she might completely clam up, in which case our conversation would be over; or she would openly volunteer information. In salons, for example, where quarters are close and no conversation is private, I often found myself interviewing several informants at once. These sessions were especially lively and in some cases my informants would end up arguing among themselves as to what the "real" reasons were for rural women to migrate! I found that women working in this type of situation often bonded, perhaps through their varied yet similar backgrounds, and seemingly had little trouble talking about their pasts, hopes and dreams for the future, analysis of their own situations, and so forth in the presence of their peers. If one woman was shy, others would break the ice, and as often as not the shy one would be putting her two cents into the conversation within a short time.

In most cases I did not invite an informant to go with me to another location. I felt that to do so would too easily be misunderstood by my informants as having meaning that I did not intend. As a single, foreign male I was suspect by default. I constantly had to deal with negative assumptions about foreigners, men, and foreign men. Moreover, dealing primarily with rural women meant that inviting a female informant for something as seemingly innocent as conversation over warm soy-milk in a nearby park could, I found, easily be misconstrued as an overture that carried much more meaning than I had intended. Even in cases where informants were absolutely clear as to what I wanted from them and why I wanted it, they were sometimes reluctant to "go out" with me in public for fear of what other people would think of them.
Having said all of this, there were a few informants who seemed to prefer meeting in coffee shops, parks, or some other public place to talk. These informants tended to either be university aged women whose underlying agenda was to practice English, or women who were obviously several years older than me and who considered themselves above the suspicion of any onlookers.

It did not take long before I began to discern what I call a “core” group of six or seven informants. That is, those informants who made it clear that they were willing to be interviewed more than once (these informants often went places with me un-chaperoned as well). For several of these women as well as those members of their social spheres with whom I became acquainted, I was in many cases the first non-Asian or even non-Vietnamese person that they could actually say they knew. While one may see large numbers of foreigners of various ilks in Hồ Chí Minh City, they typically limit their interactions with Vietnamese to those who speak English and who either live or work in an area frequented by travelers. With a few exceptions, my informants fit none of these categories, and prior to me, their impressions of foreigners came mostly from the Vietnamese media or from stories (some have almost become urban legends) that get passed around. Interviews with these informants often gave way to sessions where they grilled me with questions about my country, culture, family, etc.

As I imagine often happens during ethnographic fieldwork, some of my core informants also became my close friends. These special people allowed me the privilege of meeting their families - spouses, siblings, parents, or children, depending on who may have migrated with them. As they began to make me feel included in their lives and all of the ups and downs, the disappointments and hopes,
the comedy and the tragedy of Vietnamese rural-urban migrant life, the line between anthropological professionalism and personal relationships became increasingly blurred. In fact, most of the best information was shared after the tape recorder was turned off and we were all sitting around drinking coffee, talking about Vietnamese pop music, or playing with a new baby. In the end, I all but abandoned any attempts to maintain the so-called "ethnographic distance", and I believe the fieldwork was more successful as a result.

Besides those informants who were the focus of the study, I also discussed my ideas and research project in general with a wide range of people, including both men and women. While these individuals did not strictly fit the profile of the female rural out-migrant, they were invaluable for they helped me gain a broader understanding of Vietnam and Vietnamese culture in general. I did not actually interview any of these individuals for information specifically relevant to this thesis, yet it was often conversations with them that information provided by my "real" informants came to life. I feel that I should, in all fairness, say that my experience in Vietnam and subsequent analysis of rural out-migration among women could not possibly be said to have come solely from conversations with informants. Besides, to try to separate my informant’s “testimony” from my broader experience which included individuals of all stations in Vietnamese life would, in my opinion, be a mistake at any rate.
CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

38 of my 43 informants were single, and about half were either living alone or with people to whom they were not related. My informants came from a variety of backgrounds, but were typically from either rural (i.e. hamlet) areas, or from small district towns. Most had completed the equivalent of high-school, and a total of seven had either completed a college degree or were university students at the time. The vocations of my informants were as varied as they themselves, and included fruit-sellers, hair stylists, receptionists, construction workers, prostitutes, Buddhist nuns, housewives, accountants, singers, and students. The length of time since most recent migration ranged from over ten year to just a few days, though the average was less than two years. One final, common thread that I found among the women that I talked to was that all but a few were at least the second or third born in their families.

For the most part, the first interviews which focused on demographic variables seemed to support the economic model - i.e., that informants migrated as a result of individual choice for the purpose of earning more money. For example, one woman selling fresh fish in Binh Thạnh Market, said, "I only come up river [to Hồ Chí Minh City] because I need the money. I can make much more selling fish per kilo here than back home." However, there were some women who either hinted at other reasons or benefits of migration, or who were blatantly ambivalent
about the economic benefits, which led me to believe that there was reason to investigate non-economic factors which influenced migration.

Of the women upon whom I base my analysis, all but three sent money home to the provinces. This held true whether she was living hand to mouth, selling mangos one at a time on the street near the market, or if she was fairly well-to-do and her family at home really didn’t need the money.

Most of the women that I talked to had been in Hồ Chí Minh City for less than two years, and had only migrated once. All of the women that I talked to told me that they had migrated directly to Hồ Chí Minh City. That is, when I knew them they were still in Hồ Chí Minh City for the first time. The few that I interviewed who had been in Hồ Chí Minh City longer, had also been back to visit periodically. I learned that I had to phrase my questions carefully because a few, when asked how long they had been in Hồ Chí Minh City, would tell me the total amount of time they had spent there, including several visits prior to migrating for a period long enough to find and keep a job. I am aware of seasonal migration in Vietnam, but the women that I interviewed had either already stayed or were planning to stay for a period of time longer than the seasonal cycle. Moreover, what I have been told by non-migrant Vietnamese is that seasonal migration is characteristic of the poorest migrants, and few of my informants would qualify as such.

Finally, a small number (five, to be exact) of my informants were married women. Although much of what they said seemed to fit well with what I was learning from my single informants, the issues of responsibility that play a role in migration are distinct for married women. However, because of time constraints,
my analysis in this thesis is oriented towards single women who migrate out of their family of birth origin.
CHAPTER VI

RESPONSIBILITY

The Tale of Kiều

For as long as I have been going to Vietnam, I have heard women talk about what they called the “heavy burden of women” or “women’s lot in life.” These qualities of women’s lives - the “heavy burdens,” the “sorrows,” the idea that one must (if one is a woman) sacrifice all for the happiness of parents, husband, and children, are central to Vietnamese female identity. As one informant put it, “our suffering is what makes us women.”

The notion that these “un-happinesses” are integral to female identity has been rationalized, reinforced, and romanticized for generations, and continues to be a central theme in Vietnamese popular culture via novels, poetry, literature, art, and music. Perhaps the best example of this is the Vietnamese epic poem, Truyện Kiều, typically translated into English as “The Tale of Kiều”, by the Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du.

Truyện Kiều is the story of a young woman by the name of Kim Văn Kiều. Her family, though not rich, is highly respected in the community. Kiều herself, is not only beautiful, but is also educated in ways appropriate for the daughter of a scholar of the Confucian classics: she can improvise verse in beautiful calligraphy, she can play the classical music of China on the Asian lute, and she can speak
clearly and beautifully. She is dainty and delicate, carefully observes the lunar holidays, and feels things deeply. Her suitor, Kim, meets with approval from her father, and courts her respectfully and appropriately, and on a balmy, moonlit evening proposes to her. She accepts, and the two of them joyfully look forward to a happy future together.

Not long after, Kiều’s father is cheated by some men with whom he does business. Kiều comes into her house to find her family being beaten by these men because they cannot pay a sum of money that her family supposedly owes. In desperation she implores the men to stop beating her father, which they do after summoning their boss, the father’s creditor, a man by the name of Mâ Giám Sinh. Mâ Giám Sinh negotiates with Kiều’s father and an agreement is reached that if Kiều will marry him, the debt will be considered as paid. Unfortunately, Kiều’s family does not clearly understand who they are dealing with, and, after the marriage has been consummated and Mâ Giám Sinh has taken Kiều to a distant province, Kiều discovers that she has actually been sold into prostitution and is expected to live in a brothel run by Mâ Giám Sinh’s wife.

The remainder of the story is of Kiều’s life of escaping from one terrible situation after another. Once, she escapes from a brothel only to be captured and sent back. She captures the heart of one client (of another brothel) and agrees to marry him, but this plan is thwarted by his wife. At one point she is freed from prostitution and becomes the mistress of a famous warlord. However, just as she begins to love him, he is killed in battle, leaving her alone again. Eventually Kiều is able to return to her home and reunite with her family. Even this happy ending is
bittersweet, however, when she finds that Kim is still waiting to marry her. Her shame for not being able to save herself for him only makes her consider taking up life as an ascetic - a choice which Kim talks her out of. In the end Kim and Kieu do get married.

To say that Truyện Kiều is influential would be a gross understatement. Truyện Kiều is considered to be the epitome of beautiful, multiple-meaning, cultured, language. The poem itself can be read easily in one sitting, but entire volumes have been written on interpreting relatively short passages. Vietnamese universities offer semester-long courses on Truyện Kiều. Those educated in the “old days” sometimes sit around and try to have entire conversations comprised of nothing but lines from Truyện Kiều. By some it is used as an oracle for divining the future and telling fortunes. And, it is said that the young man who is truly serious in his attempts to woo a young woman will certainly have appropriate passages of Truyện Kiều committed to memory. As one university student put it, “The right line from Truyện Kiều at the right time can make any woman love you.”

In addition to setting the standards for poetic speech in Vietnamese, Truyện Kiều is also said to most perfectly articulate the qualities embodied in a virtuous woman - one who is long-suffering, self-sacrificing, does whatever necessary to keep the home together, looks after her husband and children with no thought of herself, and so forth (Phạm 1996).

Kiều is the quintessential woman. She is supposedly (and often actually) a role-model for the ideal daughter or wife in Vietnamese society. For one thing, Kiều
repeatedly suffers deep, emotional pain, often as a result of the actions of men towards her. This is a theme which, as alluded to previously, continues to be prominent in the literature, currently popular music, drama, and film of Vietnam. More importantly, Kiều’s reflections on her own suffering nearly always bring her to a realization that her predicament is ultimately the result of her own filial piety. For example, on the night of her marriage to Mèo Giâm Sinh, Kiều, lamenting the fact that she had been taken sexually by force, rather than giving herself freely to one she loved, took out a dagger with the intent of committing suicide. At the last second she thinks to herself, “But what will become of my parents? ...Since this concerns only my person, I must behave more reasonably... (Nguyễn Du 1962:132)” At the end of the same passage, Kiều cries out,

Oh, Creator! Why are you so cruel toward those who wear red trousers? Why persist in adding to my life further misfortunes after inflicting on me so much ill treatment? Since the unexpected event which compelled me to leave my family, I had already accepted my fate even when I was still at home. So young in age, what crime did I commit to have to suffer anew after sacrificing more than half of my life as a rosy-cheeked girl? (ibid: 300)

Had she made a “selfish” choice and not married her father’s creditor, she would never have had to endure the suffering that she now knows, yet in spite of the fact that her choice played a part in bringing about her misery, she views herself (and is viewed by others) as a victim of circumstance. She had no choice but to make the choice(s) that she did, or as Kiều herself say, “Oh! Destiny! I have known very well that I cannot escape from it! (ibid:301)”

As I will argue below, the destiny that Kiều speaks of is not simply some ethereal, metaphysical idea of predestination. The “myth” is also real. While being
sold into prostitution is by no means the norm for Vietnamese women, the ways in which Kieu identified herself and her responsibilities - those which led Kieu to do things which she knew would amount to her suffering - are the same as those behind many of the decisions that women make in Vietnam today.

_Trách nhiệm_ in Practice

My study of women's migration in southern Vietnam eventually led me to ask broader questions about the nature of interpersonal relationships, as well as perceptions of men's and women's roles in various familial configurations, in non-family relationships, and in society at large. While there is no single "key" to understanding the dynamic forces in Vietnamese relationships, there is one concept that is of particular relevance here. That concept is responsibility or _trách nhiệm_. In this chapter I shall show that _trách nhiệm_ often is behind decisions that Vietnamese women make. The need for these decisions to be made at all, most often occurs in the context of conflicts which pit the economic and/or social livelihood of a woman's family against her own free choice, dreams for the future (education, marriage, etc.), personal health, and in extreme cases, her own survival. To make this point, I will use examples from Vietnamese sources, followed by relevant observations made during my fieldwork in Vietnam, including the stories of individual informants.

Without trying to make an exact translation of a Vietnamese concept into English, I assert that the idea of _trách nhiệm_ as it relates to interpersonal relationships in Vietnam, can be understood as the pressure that one feels to
behave a certain way within a given social or relational context. *Trách nhiệm* is a noun in Vietnamese, and it may be phrased as "having responsibility" (*có trách nhiệm*) or "agreeing [to accept] responsibility" (*chiếu trách nhiệm*). Someone who grows up to fit more or less the basic mold of what a "good" person is (i.e. one who shows proper respect for her or his parents, isn’t given to too much alcohol or carousing, and so on) may be described as one who has *trách nhiệm*. On the other hand, one whose parents live in poverty, who abandons or shows little concern for her or his family, who loses money gambling, or who doesn’t work "hard enough" may be labeled as one who does not have *trách nhiệm*.

Further, *trách nhiệm* is a reason that people in Vietnam often give when asked (by nosy foreigners like me) why they do some of the things that they do. For example, one well-to-do woman used *trách nhiệm* to explain to me why she continued to care for in-laws who mistreated her, even though she could easily have afforded to hire someone else to deal with the unpleasant chores that their care entailed. At the scene of a motorcycle accident *trách nhiệm* was behind a young man’s agreement to pay damages, even though the other driver (who was injured quite badly) was technically at fault. And it was because of *trách nhiệm* that the young woman was selling lacquer-ware at her ailing mother’s shop in *Chợ Bến Thành* (Bến Thành Market) instead of attending the university (like she wanted to do) at the expense of her relatives in California.

*Trách nhiệm* can be very fluid and what having *trách nhiệm* means is highly variable, depending, among other things, on the relative ages, status and
relationship of the individuals involved, as well as the specific circumstances under consideration. Children have different trách nhiêm to their mothers than to their fathers, and different trách nhiêm to their parents than to their grandparents, which is different again from the trách nhiêm that they feel towards their teachers at school. More importantly - in fact crucial to my argument - is the idea that women have different trách nhiêm than do men. Returning briefly to Truyện Kiều, there are two important point to make: First, Truyện Kiều illustrates the existence of a system of trách nhiêm; Second, it powerfully articulates the trách nhiêm of Vietnamese women, and all of Kiều's the self-sacrifice for the good of others is part of that understanding.

The fact that trách nhiêm differs along lines of gender is by no means a startling revelation, and in fact is a point of regular and open contention by Vietnamese women. What makes it a point of contention is the fact that many Vietnamese women see their trách nhiêm as being “heavier” than that of men. In the words of a 22 year-old woman who sells souvenirs to tourists in district 1, “Everyone knows that women work harder than men. We expect that. Men do the basic things like going off to work. We have do everything else. Most women in Vietnam work harder and more hours in a day than their husbands.” A 45 year-old housewife who also manages her husband's notebook factory said, “Basically we women are expected to do whatever the men don't do. They [the men] choose fancy-sounding careers and talk about important things, but it is the women who keep everything together at home. A man may go off to work in nice clothes
everyday, but even at the office it is the female secretaries who really know what’s going on and who get things done.” Finally, one woman in a candid moment opined that, “It’s not fair! It should not have to be the wife’s job to do all the housework! You know, many Vietnamese men, when they come home from work, only read the paper or watch TV.” While it is true that many migrant families cannot afford TV’s for men to watch, nor are women likely to be factory managers, the point has still been made: Women certainly have different (and arguably heavier) *trách nhiệm* than men.

The *Trách nhiệm* of Women and Importance of the Family

In the discussion that follows I will begin to explain what I see as the “primary” areas in which *trách nhiệm* affects, circumscribes and defines the behavior of women in southern Vietnam. Again, although my point is to discuss the lives of women, it is sometimes necessary to contrast their situations with those of men. Rather than casting the respective roles of men and women in terms of complementary opposition, I find it helpful to examine gender in Vietnam using the model posited by Kathleen Barry which states:

...the family in Vietnam today is charged with feudal (in the Marxist sense) relations of power, and is structured around the veneration of elders and filial piety. Family feudalism is a stage in the historical development of the patriarchal family, just beyond slavery, where the lord, or in the case of the family, husband, holds complete control and authority over the household, whose members, children and wife, serve him. He may be ruthless or beneficent, but he is not held accountable outside his private fiefdom: ‘each man’s home is his castle’. ...Exposing feudalism as the form of family power relations exposes deeper levels of men’s domination of women in the home. (1996: 11)
Without disagreeing with Barry, I would simply add that as Vietnam is modernizing and women are becoming active in politics, education, and economics, men's attitudes towards women in familial relations are now being expressed in government offices, university classrooms. The reproduction of familial gender roles in the public sphere results in a conflict of values... Socialist ideology which ostensibly encourages sexual egalitarianism is juxtaposed with traditional values that recognize the importance of women historically and currently, but, nonetheless, restrict the quality of women's autonomy. What this means in real life is that Vietnamese women are often praised because they occupy very public positions of power and influence. For example, women make up a significant part of the national assembly, head branches of government, are active in provincial politics, and make recognized contributions to the arts. On the other hand, traditional patriarchal values still pervade in many arenas. For example, equal pay for men and women in comparable positions is still a long way from being universal. Less obvious, but more importantly, in university departments or corporate offices, interpersonal relationships and office politics still favor men. Women with considerable education in high positions use the same tactics to get their way or see their ideas implemented as are used by rural housewives to get what they want from their husbands.

For this reason the most important arena in which the power of trích nhiệm can be observed is the family. The importance of the family in Vietnamese society has been commented on by a wide range of Vietnamese scholars, including historians, sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists. For example, the Vietnamese Professor of Philosophy, widely published author, and Director of the
National Center for Women's Studies, Le Thi, describes the Vietnamese family as an autonomous unit of production which has responsibilities to the state (1996: 61-63). These responsibilities include, paying taxes, raising children to be morally upright, economically productive, and socially responsible citizens. Further, there exists what she calls a "division of labour" between the family and the state. This division of labor, she says exists because...

Society is not able to take over from the family those functions which are fundamentally its responsibility, such as procreation, the reproduction of the labour force, the realization of a balance between psychology and feelings, and of the happiness of every individual. (1996: 61-63)

Acknowledging this division of labor, it is not surprising, then, that during this era of modernization in Vietnam an increasing amount of attention is being paid to the family, particularly it's role in Vietnam's social and economic development (Le Thi 1996: 63).

Considering the importance accorded the family, for the individual and for Vietnamese society, it is not surprising that the strongest trách nhiệm an individual - particularly a woman - may feel originates with her family. Moreover, it is in the family that we can see the most marked differences in trách nhiệm according to gender.

Within the family, however, there are arenas where trách nhiệm affects individual choices more than others. For example, the trách nhiệm that a young woman feels for her siblings is different from that which she feels towards her husband, which is different again from that which she feels toward her parents. One way of putting it is that trách nhiệm is defined by what is considered moral behavior in those relational contexts.
Children from the age of five or six through the completion of the equivalent of grammar school must study a subject called "Đạo đức" (Morals). As I looked through đạo đức textbooks, I found that they promoted many of the behaviors such as caring for aging parents, being properly respectful (especially towards elders), or helping to care for siblings. All of those behaviors which informants explained to me in terms of trạch nhiệm. This led me to the idea (an idea with which my informants overwhelmingly concurred) that trạch nhiệm is part of đạo đức, or as we might say in the West, trạch nhiệm is a moral issue. To fail or abandon one's trạch nhiệm is to be immoral.

A recurring theme in Vietnam is the morally obliging trạch nhiệm a woman has to her parents. My observations in Vietnam strongly indicate that trạch nhiệm to parents has the strongest influence over the Vietnamese individual, and among my informants it accounted for the decision of single women to migrate. Additionally, trạch nhiệm to one's parents and the effects that it has on individual decision making is a subject that I was aware of in nearly every relationship that I had with a Vietnamese person that went beyond that of casual acquaintance.

O'Harrow describes this parental trạch nhiệm as a continuing sense of moral debt an individual has to her parents. This sense of debt, he asserts, is one which parents foster in their children and expect children to continue even after the parents themselves are deceased, via the veneration of their spirits. (1995:174). In the đạo đức textbooks that I have looked through, a surprising amount of space was devoted to respect for one's parents, especially after they are older and are no
longer able to care for themselves. Extreme examples of this include what I call the Vietnamese "modern myths" about people who have supposedly cut out portions of their own flesh to feed to ill parents with the hopes that it would bring them back to health. This practice has been noted both in anthropological and popular literature as an extreme expression of filial devotion in other areas of eastern Asia (Hsu 1981: 82, 83; Tan 1989: 40, 41).

   Additionally, there are countless films, plays, novels, songs, and short-stories in Vietnam that revolve around trách nhiệm to one's parents and re-iterate the theme that to shirk trách nhiệm is immoral. For example, the short story, Ba, by Nguyễn Hưởng (1996) tells of a young man, Thuận, who wants to study English. His father, a xích lo (a type of pedicab) driver, also wants to study English so that he can make more money by driving English-speaking foreigners who come to the city. Thuận's father enrolls in the same English class as Thuận, but Thuận is embarrassed to sit with him because of his obvious lack of education and shabby appearance -- traits considered typical of xích lo drivers. Thuận does exceedingly well in the English class (the attractive young teacher praises him often), while his father does quite poorly and finally receives a failing grade in the class. Thuận tries to keep his friends in the class from finding out that the slow learner in the corner is his father. Throughout the story there are instances where the father demonstrates his love for Thuận by working extra hours so that his son attend the class in the first place, and eventually he buys a cassette player for Thuận so that he can listen to conversational English tapes and thereby improve his skill. Finally, Thuận's father is robbed and killed by thugs (a not improbable fate for xích lo drivers). The story
ends with Thuận finding no consolation for either his grief or for his sense of guilt and remorse for having been ashamed to acknowledge his father to whom he owed so much.

This pervasive morally binding children to parents through trách nhĩệm came out repeatedly as I talked to my informants as well. For example, all but three of the migrant women that I talked to sent money home to parents. One woman - a single, 28 year-old clerk, put this particularly well: "My personal responsibility to my parents is to never forget them. No matter what happens, I have a responsibility to be a part of their well-being. Even if they have enough money, I will still give at least a portion of my salary each month." "...Since I am the youngest in the family [of eight], I have less responsibility than my other siblings... There are so many of us to take care of my parents that my personal responsibility is relatively small. However, I will always have some responsibility. I'll never 'get out of it', and I could never forget my parents."

For women in particular, trách nhĩệm for one's parents goes beyond simply seeing to their physical health. Women's trách nhĩệm also involves deferring to parent's wishes regarding other aspects of the women's own life. In the words of a 22 year-old receptionist, "...trách nhĩệm affects nearly every decision that a woman will make in her life." The 28 year-old clerk quoted earlier elaborated this by saying, "If I want to buy a house or maybe a car, I have enough money and all other conditions are favorable, I will still ask for my parent's advice. It would be out of the ordinary for them to not allow me to make my own decision or to try to force me one way or the other. However, if I know that they object ...then that will strongly affect
my final decision." After a brief pause, she added, "On the surface women are free to make their own decisions and do what they want."

Although Vietnamese women usually sacrifice more as a result of trách nhiềm than do their brothers, Vietnamese men are not wholly free to do as they choose. This point was made quite clear by a young Vietnamese male sales representative for a Korean company who told me that all but the most mundane choices have to be made in the context of the family. "About the only thing a Vietnamese person can decide on his [or her] own is what to wear to work or how to take coffee." This young man studied medicine, even though he hated it, because his parents wanted him to be a doctor. It was not until both his mother and father were dead that he was able to pursue the education and subsequent career of his preference.

An example of how trách nhiềm often affects the lives of women specifically has to do with marriage. Harkening back to Truyện Kiều, the woman who gives up her "true love" out of deference to her parents is another of the classic recurring themes in Vietnamese drama, poetry, literature, folk and popular music, films and so on. As in some other patrilineal societies, one could conclude that marriage in Vietnam amounts to the economic exchange of women. While I do not know any Vietnamese person who would use terms of commodity relations to describe the relationship with her or his daughter, everyone knows that having a daughter is likely to cost more than having a son. Parents of a daughter must pay for her wedding and provide a dowry. On the other hand, the bridewealth is often paid in kind, and is not typically comparable to the combined value of the dowry and the
cost of the wedding. For a variety of reasons, keeping the daughter single is often to the advantage of the parents. While other authors have discussed the dynamics of kinship and marriage within Asian patrilineal societies (Friedman 1970: 165, 166; Smith 1970: 227) there are two things that need to be clear at this point: First, parents (and to a lesser extent, families) have a vested interest in who young women marry. Second, this is one area where nearly everyone defers to parent's wishes. I do not personally know any Vietnamese woman who has defied her parents regarding the choice of a marriage partner, and I have heard of only a very few.

Not surprisingly, this subject came up often in conversations that I had with Vietnamese women as well. For example, one 19-year old mournfully told me that she was engaged and would be getting married during the coming Têt (the Vietnamese holiday season which coincides with the lunar new year) to a man that her parents loved, but who she couldn't stand. She complained that, "they [her parents] care more about him than they do about me!" Speaking bitterly about having to get married, she said, "I'm still young. I want to go out with my friends and have fun, but I can't... My parents want me to marry this guy and it is very difficult - nearly impossible - to refuse, as this would make them very sad. ...I can't stand this guy! All he thinks about is business and making money. And he tries to control me. He always wants to know where I went and with whom." However, I was interested to note that she then told me that, "everything will be all right. He loves me very much. I know that he does, and that's the important thing... In my
heart I can still love my boyfriend from Hà Nội, and I'll have a happy marriage because I'll have a husband who loves me."

The fact that Vietnamese women have tráչ nhíềm to their parents regarding marriage was something that every woman I questioned was very willing to discuss at length. Something that came up as often as conversations on tráչ nhíemacs and marriage was this well-known Vietnamese saying:

*Lấy người thương mình...*  
*Dũng nên lấy người mình thương.*

This saying can be translated into English as: “Marry the one who loves you... Don’t marry the one you love.” As it was told to me, this is specifically a “woman’s saying”, and the logic behind it was explained by a 23 year old hair-stylist in this way. “This saying means that if a woman were to marry a man that she loved, she would live a life of sadness and heartbreak, for her husband, knowing she loved him, would feel free to take advantage of her, by spending too much money, having affairs with other women and so on. However, if she were to marry someone that she doesn't really love, but who loves her, she will, in the end, have a happy life. Her husband will spend the rest of his life trying to please her and convince her of his love for her. That's why it's much better for a woman to marry someone who loves her, rather than to marry one who steals her heart.”

Other informants, however, put a different spin on this saying. One told me that, “we [women] really marry who our parents allow us to...that saying might be true, but it’s not how we decide who to marry!” Another woman cut right to the
chase by saying, "that saying is just a way of getting young girls to do what their parents want them to do."

While this illustrates how a Vietnamese woman can emotionally justify marrying someone whom she does not love out of trách Nhiệm to her parents, it also brings up the issue of unequal trách Nhiệm in the marriage relationship. While inequality in terms of the expectations and demands made on daughters compared with that of sons by parents appears to go more or less unnoticed, differential trách Nhiệm of husband and wife is a subject of much discussion in Vietnam. For example, during the summer of 1996, a Vietnamese women's magazine called Phụ Nữ Chù Nhật ran a series of articles on a popular form of prostitution called Bia Ôm. This series stressed the importance of the wife and mother as the one responsible for keeping the family together. In fact, one the authors even used the word trách Nhiệm to describe the duties of the wife (keeping the house clean, making sure the kids are well-behaved, taking care of her own personal appearance, etc.), which, if carried out, would reduce the possibility of the husband going to prostitutes (Nguyễn 1996: 5,6).

The propensity of Vietnamese men to be unfaithful to their wives is legendary. While this is decried by many different Vietnamese feminist authors and journalists, the behavior of the men has not been seriously challenged, and the responsibility for keeping the family together continues to rest squarely on the shoulders of women. In talking about this with Vietnamese women, a saying that came up over and over again was:
"What chili pepper is not hot? What woman is not jealous of her husband's lover?"

My informants used this to underscore what they had come to accept as a “normal” part of married life. Their trách nhiệm was to keep the husband happy, or at least give him no legitimate grounds for complaint. As one woman told me, “I’ve known for seven years that my husband has had a mistress. But I don’t say anything. I don’t want to be anything but the perfect wife, so that he will never have any reason to divorce me. It’s difficult because he doesn’t know that I know about his affair. Also, many other people know that he has a mistress - that makes it a bit embarrassing for me when I meet them. However, everyone also knows that I am doing nothing wrong. My husband hurts me very much, but I must still act responsibly.”

It is very important to note that while the trách nhiệm which structures the lives of Vietnamese women is highly defined, specific, and stylized, trách nhiệm for Vietnamese men is quite general. What this amounts to, is that no matter how you slice it, women have to do more work than men. That is, women have a larger number of specific tasks for which they are responsible, and in many cases women’s tasks are as physically strenuous or even more so than those of men. Says Le Thi, “The wife is responsible for the heaviest load of work and most of the phases of agricultural production. As for domestic chores, she is the sole doer” Yet, “If the woman does everything, what is gender equality in the family” (1996: 72, 73)?
As I see it, the sexual division of trach Nhiễm places upon a woman the responsibility to provide for the immediate physical needs of the family. This can involve providing food, earning wages, or performing domestic duties. This is true whether she is single, in which case she provides for her parent’s needs, or if she is married, in which case she will work to provide for her husband and children.

In contrast, the trach Nhiễm of men lies primarily in two general areas: First, to venerate the family’s ancestors; second, to see that the physical needs of his family are being met one way or another. It is important to realize that in both cases a man’s responsibility is to see that the tasks get done, but not necessarily to do them himself. While it is technically the Vietnamese male who must be the one to perform the rituals which venerate deceased ancestors, it is often women—a man’s wife or sisters, who actually buy the necessary items, clean the ancestor’s graves, maintain the ancestor table and so forth. The man’s duty, as I have said, is to see that someone does the preparations, and then to show up at the proper moment and put the incense in the proper place. Similarly, in providing for the family, the man simply has to see that it gets done. No one will fault him for essentially living off of what his wife makes. As one Vietnamese woman put it, “we [women] have to take up the slack in the family. Our husbands can do as little or as much as they want, but if our children don’t have enough to eat or clothes to wear, we are the ones who are told to work more.”

A popular western belief about Vietnam (and perhaps Asia in general) is that the elderly are honored and cared for by their children. Here again, while a Vietnamese man may be looked down upon or gossiped about if his parents are not
living comfortably, it is not necessary for him to shoulder the burden for them himself. In fact, several of my informants told me in so many words that, if possible, elderly Vietnamese prefer to be taken care of by their daughters. Sons are expected (and usually do) help financially, but it is usually a daughter who actually cooks and serves the food, washes the clothing, cleans the house, and is basically at her parent's beck and call as they live through old age. These disparities are not lost on Vietnamese feminists. As Le Thi complains:

There are comments about 'the wholehearted devotion' of the Vietnamese woman. But she is really over-taxed in her burden of work. Public opinion, relatives, husbands are prone to praise one-sidedly, to underline the woman's responsibilities, and make light of her interests and her right to enjoyment, both materially and mentally, and her need for social activities and contact.” ... “It is not enough to appeal to only one side, to make demands only on the woman who is praised as the centre of family life, as the pillar, as the living soul of the family, etc., who must make sacrifices, be resigned, kind-hearted, good mannered, do-all, and taking care of everything in the family to ensure a full life for the husband and children. (1996: 72, 73)

_Trách nhiệm_ and Migration

What I will outline briefly below is the story of no one Vietnamese woman in particular, but at the same time it is essentially one that I heard over and over while I was there.

Considering the degree of control that parents have over their daughters via _trách nhiệm_, it should not be surprising that the rural out-migration of unmarried women is often ultimately traceable to _trách nhiệm_ to parents. I call this a "process" because the decision to migrate is not one that is made easily. Rather, this decision is drawn out and may be considered with increasing resolution over a
period of months or even years. When asked to detail the circumstances that led to their migrations, many of my informants began by describing economic (that is, economic within the household) and/or personal events that had occurred two or more years prior to their actual move.

Moreover, once the decision to migrate has actually been made it is not simply a matter of getting on the next bus, boat, or train to Hồ Chí Minh City and migrating. Relatives or acquaintances living in the city must be contacted about the possibility of finding work and providing accommodation for the soon to be migrant, and any past debts (financial or otherwise) owed by those in the city are, of course, brought up. Whether or not the family has connections in the Hồ Chí Minh City a woman’s relatives who are still living in the hamlet will likely contribute something to the pending migration in hope of securing their own future connection in the city. Working out all of the support, local and distant, requires the participation of the entire family, and takes considerable time.

A typical migration would start with a rural family of modest means. This family would live in a house constructed of woven bamboo, a thatched roof and a mud floor. While they may own the land that their house is standing on, and perhaps a few meters in front or back, they are essentially landless. They do not have enough land to produce much surplus, but with every member of the family contributing to the household economy - working on other people’s land, small resale in the local market, etc. - they have food on the table two or three times a day.
A family like this would be likely to have between five and eight children, spanning about twelve years. Older sons and daughters are already married with families of their own, and whether or not they contribute to the extended family income, migration for them is probably out of the question. If there are younger sons who showed any scholastic aptitude at all, the family is probably pooling resources and sacrificing to provide secondary or college education for them. Because, as in other patrilocal societies, women join the families of their husbands and contribute to it’s resources after they marry, and because an eldest son is necessary to carry out the veneration of the parent’s spirits after their death, the remaining younger daughters will eventually be an economic and spiritual loss. They have most likely heard, like everyone else in the district, that young, strong, diligent country girls should be able to find respectable employment in the city as domestic workers or perhaps in one of the many new foreign companies. It is also believed (and this is somewhat true) that expanding businesses, especially foreign ones, prefer qualified female workers to male staff of comparable ability.

As other families in the hamlet begin to improve their lives (possibly because of remittances from a migrant daughter), this family wants to follow suit. When the neighbors across the canal, for example, come home one day driving a brand new Honda Citi 100 motorcycle (everyone knows that the Korean-built Citi 100 is not quite as good as the Dream II imported from Japan, but still... 100cc’s!) the third-hand Cub 50 and the motley assortment of bicycles in various stages of disrepair that this family owns suddenly look mighty shabby by comparison. Or, when the neighbors three houses down come up with the money for a new Samsung television and a karaoke machine (and as if that weren’t enough, it seems that the
whole hamlet is now over there all the time whooping it up when decent people would be busy with something productive...), our family can think of nothing that it needs more than a karaoke machine.

Probably no one will actually order a young woman to move to the city in search of work, but it will be clearly suggested. Everyone knows that she knows what she should do. For someone to tell her to move would be to suggest that she is not living up to her trách nhiệm on her own. As illustrated in Truyện Kiều, knowing what sacrifice needs to be made and offering to make it, are as important as actually making it. Keenly aware of her family’s financial situation and feeling that as a single woman living at home she is a financial burden, she will be anxious to do whatever she can to make a contribution that will help her parents and justify her existence.

She probably knows several people, including relatives, who have migrated to the city, and migration is talked about commonly enough that she clearly knows it to be an option. There are lots of stories being told and retold in the villages of poor rural folk who go to the city and become fabulously rich ... “So and so’s cousin went and came back able to buy her parents a new house after just three years!” She may entertain dreams of becoming rich herself, or having a job in an office with a supervisor from Holland or Australia, or meeting the perfect man - one who will take good care of her and not mind if she sends some money to her parents back in the village. In the end - often after weeks or months of family discussion and deliberation - she convinces herself that migrating to the city to work and sending
money home is the best way that she can fulfill her *trạch nhiệm* of taking care of her parent’s physical and economic needs.

An informal survey that I conducted led me to believe that the lower the socio-economic status of my informant, the more likely she was to envision her *trạch Nhiệm* in economic or financial terms. Conversely, those migrant women with more substantial material and/or financial bases at home tended to view *trạch Nhiệm* as requiring a certain activity - the amount of money actually sent home was relatively unimportant. For example, several informants of the former type told me of a specific monetary amount which, when accrued, would be sufficient, at which point their *trạch Nhiệm* would be met and they could return home. Those in the latter category described their *trạch Nhiệm* in more vague, ambiguous terms.

I do not want to give the impression that people in Vietnam are overly materialistic or that Vietnamese parents simply see their daughters as potential resources if they migrate. On the contrary, I know from being acquainted with the parents of migrant women that they miss their daughters deeply and worry about them often. However, the reasons that women gave me for migrating almost always included something to do with specific situations of need at home in the provinces, such as a sick mother who needed an expensive treatment of some kind, a brother who wanted to attend a university but was unable to afford the tuition, a married sister living at home with children was more expense than the family’s combined cash income could cover, or some material need like a cement floor for the house or a family motor-cycle.
As these women described the circumstances surrounding their decisions to migrate, several things became clear. First, I was able to corroborate the assertions set forth by the authors cited earlier that migration is complex, multi-faceted, and certainly not an individual decision. While many of my informants stressed that the final decision to migrate was theirs, it was their trách Nhiệm to “take up the slack” in providing for physical family needs that motivated their decisions. Secondly, the decision to migrate often had little to do with the skills or education that a woman had. Her status relative to that of those in her household, on the other hand, had everything to do with her migration. If she had any sisters - married or not - still living at home to take care of her parents, it became very easy to justify her move to the city.

I also want to avoid giving the impression that Vietnamese women, by default, do not want to migrate and must necessarily be manipulated into migration. Many young people living in Vietnam’s rural areas believe that Hồ Chí Minh City is absolutely the pinnacle of civilization, a veritable paradise of culture and modernity, and a place of unlimited opportunity for anyone willing to work diligently. These same people - both male and female - often see migration to Hồ Chí Minh City as a means of escape from the thankless labor of agriculture and the dead-end monotony of rural life. Unfortunately, once their migration is complete what they often find is crowded, squalid living conditions (I have been aware of cases where three nuclear families occupied a single one-room flat), vicious competition for menial (and often dangerous) jobs that pay a pittance, extortion by local thugs, and sometimes forced prostitution.
A few of my informants were married women who were sending money back to husbands and children living in small towns or villages. As far as the circumstances leading to a decision to migrate, the only difference that I noticed between the married women and the single women was that, in the cases of the former, circumstances tended to be more extenuating. Whereas single women may have migrated as a result of circumstances ranging from social needs (the karaoke machine) to absolute necessity (matters of survival, such as simply not enough food for everyone in the family). The migrant married women that I listened to had, without exception, migrated in response to extreme situations of absolute necessity.

Migration as Subordination

As I have argued above, Vietnamese women who migrate most often do so because it enables them to live up to what they perceive as their trách nhiệm. Because of the differences in trách nhiệm on the basis of gender, this system of trách nhiệm in Vietnam effectively places and keeps women in positions of subordination to men. This idea comes through clearly in the Vietnamese saying

Tai gia, tung phu.
Suot gia, tung phu.
Phu tu, tung tu.

The essence of this saying is that a daughter is owned by her father; after she gets married and moves out she becomes the property of her husband; after he dies and she is a widow she then must answer to her son.

The fact that the system of trách nhiệm has it’s base in a larger system of beliefs about morality, naturalizes and legitimizes the subordination of women that
occurs. Any attempt to challenge the legitimacy of trach nhiём or to work outside of the system may seen as anything from a breech of propriety at best, to downright immoral. When women migrate in response to trach nhiём it is literally an issue of propriety.

It is clear that large numbers of Vietnamese men migrate. It is also clear that trach nhiём circumscribes the lives of men. To what extent my analysis up to this point applies to both women and men I cannot say with any certainty. However, I suspect that men are not manipulated into migrating to the degree that women are, but rather that they are pressured to become educated, marry, and have children - all things which may or may not involve migration, but which theoretically will bring material return to the parents in the future. On the other hand, it is very clear that the migration of women is highly trach Nhiём driven.

Once the connection has been made between migration and propriety, it becomes legitimate to ask whether the women who migrate do so as an act of free will, or if they are in essence being controlled by a larger system of beliefs and values? One answer is that they are being controlled. The ways in which Vietnamese women respond to trach Nhiём most often ultimately benefits men, and rural out-migration is no exception. I am not trying to say that there is some kind of conspiracy in Vietnam which aims to keep women subordinate. Rather, I am saying that female identity which is intertwined with trach Nhiём has made the subordinate status of women in Vietnam seem "natural". Whether the individuals involved articulate it explicitly or not, female migration in Vietnam effectively continues a tradition of female subordination which benefits primarily men.
The next question that can be asked is, what do women get out of this? Are they completely powerless, or do they have ways of subverting the power that men assume over them? In the next chapter I will detail the ways in which Vietnamese women can benefit from migration motivated by *trách nhiệm*. 
CHAPTER VII

MIGRATION AS RESISTANCE?

Based on observations made during my fieldwork, I believe that the act of migration has simultaneous, multiple meanings for those women who actually migrate. While I do not presume to know all the meanings that migration can possibly hold for these women, there are two in which I am specifically interested. For many women who migrate, migration at once constitutes (as I have argued above) an act of submission and (as I will argue below) a bid for power. Where migration becomes a means of empowerment there are cases when increased power is a welcome but unexpected side-effect, while in others it is a premeditated outcome.

To reach a conclusion that every subversive or potentially subversive act is "resistance" is problematic, as pointed out by Brown (1996). This recent trend in anthropology, he argues, is often a means by which we "reassure ourselves that the pursuit of what might seem to be esoteric ethnographic detail is really a form of high-minded public service" (ibid: 730) which often results "ethnographic thinness." I am not arguing that Vietnamese women are plotting the overthrow of patriarchy, using migration, nor am I asserting that the benefits in store for women who migrate are necessarily anything more than temporary forms of empowerment which are usually limited to a single migrant individual (as opposed to structural revolutions that benefit Vietnamese women as a whole). Gal notes that resistance does not
always actually amount to the subversion of authority, and may, in fact, simply reinforce that authority (1991: 183). Gal's assertions ring true in light of what I observed in Vietnam. By only resisting familial male authority when they are physically separated from their families but not when they are home, migrant women do not challenge the structural basis of that authority. Rather, by being "good" wives and daughters at home by not challenging male authority, migrant women reinforce it's legitimacy.

For lack of a better term I use the word "resistance" to describe those things that migrant Vietnamese women do which may contradict the accepted values or "norms" of the family back in the hamlet. An important additional feature of this resistance, is that it is possible primarily because the woman has migrated and is spatially removed from traditional sources of authority and control. Additionally, when I talk about the "power" that a woman may gain by migrating, I am referring to the autonomy that she has, both socially and economically, the control that she has over the use of her economic resources, or a combination of both.

I am also aware of the problems of applying Western assumptions to Vietnamese situations. In particular, the concept of autonomy may be problematic because of the Western tendency to associate autonomy as something generally positive and desirable. While I would not go so far as to say that the Vietnamese view of autonomy is diametrically opposed to the Western view, I believe there is reason call into question any model that tries to apply Western values regarding autonomy across the board. As a young receptionist from the Mekong Delta put it, "No one wants to be different! If you're different then you're alone. No one supports you or backs you up." Clearly, there are disadvantages to being
completely autonomous in Vietnam. Having said all of that, I will now proceed to argue that there is a certain amount of room for increased autonomy within the lives of Vietnamese women.

Arguably, Vietnamese women hold a considerable amount of informal power with or without migration. O'Harrow argues, for example, that women in Vietnam already control the bulk of the nation's economy (1995: 164, 165). My own experience living in Vietnam and being quite close to several Vietnamese families makes it clear to me that, at least in the home, the wife exercises some control in some aspects of domestic life. While husbands have the right to make physical and financial demands of their wives, women can (and often do) employ a variety of tactics which control their husbands and fathers as well. "An unhappy wife," one sales representative explained to me, "can make you unbelievably miserable!" I have personally observed instances where by simply being quiet and not saying anything, a Vietnamese woman has (for days) kept her husband milling about like a whipped puppy as he apologized for everything that he could think of that may have offended her, implored her to tell him why she was upset, and promised her anything she wanted just to have her conversational again. The point is that Vietnamese women are not powerless, but that their influence is not legitimized. With the balance of control tipped sharply in the favor of men, women in Vietnam find subtle ways of working around that control in a continuous game of bluffing and feigning. While women may often "win" the match by getting what they want in a given situation, thus far there have been no serious attempts to re-structure power in the public domain.
Power

Rural out-migration among women means a change in both the quality and quantity of power that they have. Since it is true that many migrate to conditions of unbelievable squalor or are severely overworked in sweatshop factories, one may still ask why so many continue to migrate. As I talked with my informants I came to realize that, while trách Nhiệm most certainly does influence migration (in fact, I would assert that it is the single most influential factor), it sometimes does not account for everything that is going on. Moreover, while it seems clear that trách Nhiệm-influenced migration amounts to submission on the part of women to Vietnamese patriarchy, many migrant women told me that they did experience some benefits as a direct result of migration.

Aside from the experiencing the excitement and culture of the city (something which many people from rural areas find attractive), I found that migration for many of my informants was a form of resistance, resistance primarily against the authority of parents or husbands. By migrating and removing themselves spatially from familial authority they gained a certain amount of autonomy. Remember that in a rural setting Vietnamese identity derives largely from the family. If so-and-so is a Ly, then she or he will be identified by others first as a Ly, including whatever is known or believed about the Lys. If the Lys are known to be a certain way, a Ly who acts uncharacteristically will be talked about - and no one wants to be talked about! Once a woman’s migration to Hồ Chí Minh City is complete, however, her familial identity means little in terms of the relationships that she begins in the city. The people that she has to deal with don’t
know her parents or relatives, and she can basically form her own identity as she chooses.

What this means practically, is that she can wear what she wants - any color, any style, any cut. At home her appearance would be a matter for discussion by anyone who may not have liked it for whatever reason. But in the city, away from opinionated brothers or uncles and busy-bodied neighbors, she answers to herself alone. The same goes for what she eats and when, who she socializes with, when and in what context, whether or not she has a boyfriend and whether or not she goes out with him, and if she goes out with him, whether or not anyone chaperones. She can use her free time “wisely” or she can spend it in a cinema and no one else has to be concerned.

This power to forge a new identity was brought home to me quite vividly one evening as I sat in a safe-house for women in Hồ Chí Minh City talking to women who had become pregnant out of wedlock and had migrated to escape the sideways glances and gossip back home. In the city they acquired a measure of anonymity, or, as one put it, “no one wants to be different. At home I stood out as strange... here I am just another nobody.” In addition, by taking charge of their own lives, migration for these women was a marked break from the tradition of women essentially being at the disposal of men.

A migrant woman gets real power through her role as cash provider, as well. Even though she sends the bulk of her salary home, here she is still in control. Were she to live at home and work, her earning would automatically become part of the family’s collective resources, but alone in the city she has control over how
much or how little gets sent home. The family back in the village assumes that they are getting most of what she makes, but she is the only one who knows this for sure. More than a few of the women who talked with me told me of a feeling of exhilaration and independence that came with controlling money for the first time in their lives.

Additionally, this creates a dependence by the family on the migrant woman which gives her a further measure of power. Suddenly the brother at the university or the partially finished addition to the house depend on the work of a sister in Hồ Chí Minh City for their continued existence. If the migrant sister doesn't get the kind of moral support or affirmation that she wants, she can simply report a slow month and send less money as a means of protest. In the same way she now has something to say about how things are managed at home - whether a sister-in-law should be allowed to move in, what school the younger siblings should attend and so forth.

One woman told how she had received a raise, but continued to send the same amount of money home each month, hoarding the rest or spending it on herself. Another woman explained that one thing she enjoyed was wearing orange - a color which her husband hated and would never allow her to wear at home.

Something that many women told me about were their relationships with men - "boy friends" - which parents at home would never approve of.

When I speak of migration as resistance, I do not mean that Vietnamese women get together and plot to overthrow male dominance by migrating to the city. Rather, my point is that Vietnamese women, first, are often aware of the inequalities
that they face, and second, do have ways of working the system for their own benefit. By submitting to the male-dominated system, and responding to trách nhiệm many of my informants placed themselves into positions whereby they could - albeit on an individual, "micro" scale - undermine that very system.
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSIONS

In this thesis I have shown that Vietnamese women are not alone in their decisions to migrate. Rather, they migrate as a response to complex circumstances which involve not only economic or financial concerns, but familial and social ones as well. These familial and social concerns center around the Vietnamese concept of responsibility, which is embedded in a larger system of values that make responsibility, particularly to family, exceedingly difficult for an individual to avoid. Living up to one's responsibility literally becomes an issue of propriety, and for women in particular, it constitutes the basis for gender identity. What this ultimately means is that when women migrate, they do so in response to a feeling of responsibility to their families such that to not migrate would be to fall short of being a proper, "real" Vietnamese woman.

Second, I have argued that, the authority to which women submit by migrating is not necessarily totalizing. While by migrating Vietnamese women may be submitting to male authority and acting according to a version of propriety that primarily benefits males, migration presents them with opportunity to undermine those very same elements. By physically distancing themselves from the males who exercise authority over them, women in Vietnam are able to gain a certain amount of independence, autonomy, and control over mundane aspects of their personal lives that they would not necessarily have otherwise.
My interest in this topic began as I worked with migrant and potentially migrant women in the context of NGO projects which aimed to reduce migration. Rather than focusing on convincing individual women to stay in rural areas, NGO personnel need to investigate more fully the social/familial contexts from which women migrate, and plan programs which address those issues. Additionally there is a need for project officers to recognize that there are advantages for women who migrate as well as those who are able to stay in rural areas. Finally, migration is a much larger phenomenon than any NGO or coalition of NGOs can reasonably expect to address within the span of a three or four-year project – even at the district level. As I have shown, the forces that motivate rural women to migrate have points of origin much deeper and more diffuse than can possibly be addressed by the methods currently being used by the international development industry.

In addition to acknowledging the complex phenomenon of migration, my study of migration and the women who migrate has caused me to question the validity of addressing migration as a problem in the first place. While it may be true that many of the current problems in urban Vietnam affect or involve rural women living in urban areas, I do not believe that these problems are the result of female rural out-migration. Informal observations in Vietnam as well as personal communication with other researchers interested in migration in general, and social and women’s issues in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, have led me to believe that the likelihood of migrant women to become involved in petty theft, prostitution, or to become homeless has more to do with the social networks they are able to establish in the city than with the fact that they are migrants.
The seemingly simple act of migration originates in complex, relationship oriented circumstances in which a woman's sense of responsibility both motivates and mitigates her actions. Therefore, the complex social, health, and economic problems of a large population of urban poor should not be mistakenly assumed to have their origins in either the equally complex phenomenon of rural out-migration, or with the migrants who are responding to a concept which is ultimately a source of their identity.
ENDNOTES

1 The “big brothers” are often migrant or vagrant men who work with prostitutes. Usually xích lo or motorcycle-taxi drivers, they take a cut of whatever the prostitute makes. This is usually in return for transportation back after entertaining a client, for protection from abusive clients, and to use the threat of force to extract payment from clients who try to get away without paying.

2 It should be noted that the plot of Truyện Kiều was not original with Nguyễn Du. The story of Kiều was originally a Chinese novel which he set to verse in 1813.

3 In traditional Chinese culture, young people from good families were referred to as those who “wear red trousers.”
Appendix A

Protocol Clearance From the Human Subjects
Institutional Review Board
Date: March 12, 1996

To: Jeffery Wright

From: Richard Wright, Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 96-03-11

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "Rural out-migration among Vietnamese women in the Mekong delta" has been approved under the exempt category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you must seek specific approval for any changes in this design. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 12, 1997

xc: Ann Miles, ANTH
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