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CHAPTER ONE

The Traditional Family

This chapter is about the family from the beginning of this century to 1945. The task of studying family change entails looking at the traditional family, but that is not simple for the reason that to date there have been very few studies about the topic. Moreover, the question of the validity of available data and evidence is difficult to resolve.

Based on fragmented evidence from different sources, chiefly studies by historians' and ethnographers as well as literary works, this chapter is designed to give a general view of the family during the period under consideration, a basis for comparison to find out the changes that the family has undergone. This chapter attempts to place the traditional family in the context of the French influence on the one hand, and the long-standing traditions on the other hand. In so doing it seeks to analyse and explain why the traditional family was criticised by a great many participants in the liberation movement that was well under way at the end of the period, as well as the new government established later.

However, the chapter does not exhaust the comprehensive evidence about the traditional family. A more detailed view follows in the subsequent chapters. Here we shall first examine the French influence on the family, then evaluate it in relation to the family form shaped by long traditions. From this general view of the family in this period we go on to examine how it later changes.

THE FRENCH INFLUENCE

The establishment of French rule at the end of the nineteenth century brought about some changes for which the Vietnamese paid a heavy price, especially between 1915 and 1925 (Buttinger,

1967: 160). These were the construction of roads, railways, and coal mines; the establishment of small-scale industrial enterprises; the peasant migrations; and an increased economic dependence on the world market. Under French rule, the old civil service examination system that recruited the members of the Vietnamese bureaucracy was eliminated, and replaced by the new education system based on the French curriculum and the romanised script (*chu quoc ngu*), not the Chinese characters (Nguyen The Anh, 1970). All those changes led to fundamental transformations in the social structure.

The traditional society is often said to have consisted of the following four categories: Confucian scholars, peasants, artisans, and traders. The scholars and peasants were of prime importance; artisans and traders were small in number, occupied low ranks, and played an insignificant role in social life. However, like many other agricultural societies, the traditional one in Vietnam consisted of mainly two categories: upper and lower classes. As Buttinger (1967: 160) has put it, precolonial Vietnam was a society consisting of a single class ruled by an educated bureaucracy. There was no middle class like in modern Western societies (Dao Duy Anh, 1938/1992: 373; Buttinger, 1967: 116). Under the impact of French rule, the Confucian scholars lost their predominant role, though their prestige was still maintained to some extent. As a result of the French colonial economic policy, since the beginning of this period, two new social categories gradually appeared in urban areas: the middle class and the working class (Dao Duy Anh, 1938/1992; Nguyen The Anh, 1970).

TWO NEW FAMILY TYPES

In terms of the family, this period saw some remarkable changes. The extended family ideal began to break down; the concept of romantic love blossomed among some young, French-educated people in urban areas; a new form of marriage (between French men and Vietnamese women) appeared; and some distinctive small groups – for example the Vietnamese women who served as wives, mistresses and prostitutes to French soldiers, and administrators – emerged (Woodside, 1976). Nevertheless, the most significant change was the appearance of two absolutely new types of urban family: the middle class and the working class.

According to the historian Dao Duy Anh's (1938/1992: 374–376) vivid description, middle-class families were wealthy (by middle class he meant senior officials, landowners, big traders, businessmen, contractors, medical doctors, lawyers and engineers). Many members

received a French education and enjoyed a high social rank. They adopted a Western style of dress and housing, and had Western facilities in everyday life. They followed Western practices (greeting each other by shaking hands, embracing, etc.) in social communication. Many of them married freely, and lived separately from their parents after the wedding. A limited number of women from this class were French-educated. They adopted a Western style of dress which showed off their bodies; they freely embraced their male friends, or even danced with them – all this was previously unheard of in a society where the Confucian maxim *Nam nu thu, thu bat than* [Men and women should remain physically distant] was still powerful. Some of these women had jobs; so they were no longer under the control of their mothers-in-law and their husbands. The children of this family type were often sent to France for their education.

As for working-class families, they were a totally new phenomenon. Nonetheless, the study of Nguyen The Anh (1970: 257) has pointed out that those families were of peasant origin (they became industrial workers as a result of harsh recruitment measures brought in by the French), and that they kept in close touch with their relatives in the native villages. A great many workers did not bring their families with them; they often left them behind, and supported them by sending part of their wages home. They usually went back to their villages during the strikes that were caused by brutal working conditions and low pay, and also at harvest time (when labour was much in demand) or for festivals. Since working conditions in the towns were uniformly grim, there was a tendency to gravitate back to one's home village whenever possible (Marr, 1981: 29). We have little evidence to establish the accuracy of these accounts. They also tell us that only a small number of mineworkers and industrial workers became permanent members of the working class.

LIMITS OF THE FRENCH INFLUENCE ON FAMILY PATTERNS

There are conflicting evaluations of the French influence in general. On the one hand, Paul Mus, a French researcher well known for his book *Vietnam: la sociologie d'une guerre* (quoted in Nguyen The Anh, 1970: 228) holds the view that the traditional Vietnamese society was not affected strongly by colonialism; the latter just added some new elements. On the other hand, Buttinger (1967) supposes that the economic changes under the French rule destroyed the traditional Vietnamese society 'as effectively as the conquest of Indochina had destroyed the political structure of mandarin Vietnam' in the sense that 'these changes resulted in the rise of

social classes unknown in precolonial Vietnam' (ibid.: 160). By new social classes he means an upper class of capitalists that was, however, largely foreign and outside of Vietnamese society, a small middle class, a relatively large intelligentsia, and a working class.

Nevertheless, it would be safe to suppose that the French influence varied from domain to domain, and was seen mainly in the above social strata of urban areas. Different studies (Dao Duy Anh, 1938/1992: 376; Nguyen The Anh, 1970: 254) showed that the middle class was still weak; the working class bore many characteristics reminiscent of peasant origin. Buttinger (1967: 193) quotes the official count of workers in the whole country by the 1930s as 220,000; 'if this figure were correct, it would mean that only one person out of one hundred Vietnamese was a salaried worker.' Nonetheless, he points out that 'all its members were former peasants; what is more important is that the majority would sooner or later become peasants again' (ibid.: 194-195). As for the middle class, not only was it 'numerically small, but it also was of little social importance' (ibid.: 196).

Altogether, the new classes were insignificant in comparison to the absolute majority of rural population. As late as 1936 it was not too difficult to find a large village, not too far from the town, where young children had never seen a single European face and where no French administrators had ever set foot since the beginning of the colonial period (Woodside, 1976: 118). New institutions coexisted with old ones. Confucian conventions still existed although they had lost much of their vitality.

As for the family relationships, one may say that during the period many old patterns changed very little among the overwhelming majority of population, even among the above-mentioned two family types. Marr tells us that although members of the middle class thought of themselves as urbanites, and tried to model themselves on their Parisian counterparts, complete with champagne, fashionable furniture and clothing, dinner parties, government medals, and advisory council positions, most of them still depended on rural income, many had concubines, and many arranged socially advantageous marriages for their children. The same source also tells us that in the countryside, despite the commercial character of relationship with tenants and wage labourers, most village landlords thought of themselves as inheritors of the traditions of the local literati and the village notables. They tended to be staunch upholders of status hierarchy, traditional festivals, rites for village tutelary deities, and patriarchal discipline (Marr, 1981: 26-27). We have so

far no evidence to refute this; in fact what evidence we do have (including literary works), strongly supports this argument.

During this period, there was a gradual increase in the number of girls attending school, most of them came from a minority of upper- or middle-class families. By 1930, according to French administrators' recordings, there were 40,752 girls undergoing public or private instruction out of a total of 435,782 primary pupils (Marr, 1981: 206). Although these educational statistics demonstrate an unprecedented phenomenon, the significance is somewhat diminished when we remember that this was a country of about twenty million people. According to the above researcher, a new market had developed in textbooks written for female students in the new script. Nevertheless, the predominant topic of textbooks for female students were the traditional feminine norms 'three submissions' and 'four virtues', which were the dogmas taken from orthodox Confucian texts. The first textbook of this kind (with a print-run of 1,000 copies) was printed in Hanoi in 1918, entitled *Nu hoc huan ly tap doc* [Reading lessons in feminine moral conduct] by Phan Dinh Giap. In the next decade, about twenty-five other such texts, written especially for young women, appeared for sale; quantities ranged from 1,000 copies per edition to 10,000 (Marr, 1981: 207). In other words, the new educational developments and the new script were just the means to communicate the traditional norms to young, French-educated female students.

So in cities, many women received something that had eluded them in the past: an education. However, this did not always lead to free and self-determined marriages. By contrast, the custom of the bride-price¹ was maintained, even strengthened, in accordance with the education. A study by Woodside provides the following evidence.

 Thuy An, a female novelist and poetess, noted sardonically in a 1933 Hanoi journal article that the higher educational qualifications of these girls 'were simply absorbed into the mercantile ferment of old-style family marriage politics'. For those girls who have some learning, and a capacity of making their own living, the bride-price becomes increasingly expensive. In addition to computing the value of their own efforts at raising the daughters and giving moral instruction, their mothers count in addition the extra efforts at giving them some education ... If one adds together all these efforts, the bride-price amounts to a formidable sum of money, and

terrifies the grooms when they hear it. In a middle-class family that has a daughter about to be given in marriage, 'the go-between bargains, the mother persists, and the daughter is no different from an article of merchandise displayed in a market, with sellers and buyers agreeing on a price'.

(Woodside, 1976: 99–100)

If this is accurate, in the lively description of the haggling there are some points indicating that the old family system had not yet been destroyed. First, married daughters – even without any level of education – were a net gain for the family they married into, because they no longer contributed to their family of origin. If they had some education, then that would be an extra merit. Second, although there was some modernisation in the rituals of the wedding (e.g. cars would be rented for the wedding procession), its purpose was to keep face and maintain the social standing of the bride's family with other people in the community, not to serve the interests of the young people concerned. Third, the go-between still played the same role in a marriage as before.

We can see the vestiges of the traditional family from other sources. It is no accident that this period witnessed the appearance of many novels and short stories based on family issues. A number of them were award-winning; in general they provoked an explosive reaction from readers for their realism. The typical plot often involved a young man and a girl falling in love, but then being forced to part due to social restrictions, and being driven into loveless marriages. Young people at this time were absorbing French ideas about romantic love, but they encountered the strong disapproval of older people. In the transitional period between the old and the new, the new ideas were not yet strong enough to vanquish the old. As a result, young people had to give up their romantic love or choose another option, like committing suicide or running away from home. Such events were not merely works of fiction. In big cities, there were often media accounts about parent-child conflicts; abandonment of the wife by the husband; young boys and girls running together away from home; and suicides committed by young people. That was why the historian Dao Duy Anh (1938/1992: 133) reached the conclusion that the Vietnamese family had to transform in step with the new era.

There were a number of reasons for the slow rate of change. The first one was the vitality and the persistence of traditional norms. Since the 1930s the traditional family as an institution had been

encouraged by a number of French rulers. Its autocratic, hierarchical nature was useful for the colonial government because it provided them with a cheap source of social control and political stability (Woodside, 1976: 96–97). If we can lend any credence to literary works, it is worth pausing to consider the famous novel *Doan tuyet* [Breaking the Ties] by Nhat Linh (1935). In it the French-educated Vietnamese heroine has to struggle against an old-fashioned family. Finally she is taken to court, and made to face a conservative French prosecutor. The writer makes the prosecutor admit the growing identification of interests between the colonial government and the supporters of the hierarchical Confucian family (Jamieson, 1993: 143).

That may be open to question, but it cannot be ruled out that from the 1930s onwards, the French rulers deliberately kept the traditional family to serve their interests. Especially during the period 1940–45, according to one source, the Vichy slogan 'Work-Family-Fatherland' was hoisted on banners and splashed on walls because to the mind of the Governor-General Decoux, it corresponded marvellously with the deep-seated and traditional aspirations of the Vietnamese masses, and tallied with Confucian morality (Marr, 1995: 72–73).

FRENCH ECONOMIC POLICY AND THE PEASANT FAMILY

Probably the clearest impact of the French rule on the overwhelming majority of families was the colonial economic policy that aimed at the capitalist exploitation of land, labour, and natural resources. That exacerbated the problems the peasants faced in maintaining their precarious livelihoods. It should be pointed out that the colonial policy was not static, but changed in response to both the altering needs of the colonial economy and Vietnamese reactions. In the summary of Luong Van Hy (1992: 43), this policy included the following measures: direct and indirect taxation were introduced; the payment of taxes was converted from kind to cash; indigenous land was conceded to colonial settlers for the development of major cash crops; labour was appropriated through a *corvée* system, and repressive labour laws were introduced to keep down labour costs for capitalist agromineral ventures.

Meanwhile studies have emphasised the subsistence orientation of peasants in the Delta. In the precise words of Gourou, agriculture here is 'an agriculture of subsistence which is limited exclusively to feeding those who practise it' (quoted in Scott, 1976: 22). Scott has characterised it (*ibid.*: 25) as having little land, large

families, highly variable yields (because of the vagaries of the weather), and few outside opportunities in overpopulated regions. To borrow the imagery of R. H. Tawney, the position of the rural population 'is that of a man standing permanently up to the neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him' (Tawney quoted in Scott, 1976: 1).

Therefore, the peasant family as a unit of production as well as a unit of consumption had to adopt the so-called 'subsistence ethic', as Scott has observed. In his view, unlike a capitalist enterprise, the peasants' 'hand-to-mouth' existence forced them to follow the 'safety first' principle. This meant that emphasis was placed on minimising the risk of disaster, not on maximising the average return (Scott, 1976: 17–18). Scott goes on to tell us that peasant families also had to look for ways to survive, including tightening their belts; making use of small trades, e.g. handicrafts; moving around as casual wage labourers; and relying on institutions outside the nuclear family. The last might include kinsmen, particularly bilateral kindred, neighbours, and villagers (*ibid.*: 26–27).

To avoid being left on their own, families often engaged in social arrangements, like patterns of reciprocity. First, labour was exchanged in a reciprocal pattern, not in co-operative production on a large scale. Second, families often participated in a complicated ritual system that was quite costly in terms of economically rational choice theory that French-educated people supported and promoted. Rites of passage that were often carried out by families became occasions for reciprocal exchanges between villagers according to the principle of give and take. Consequently, a lot of families got into heavy debt. That explained why there was a strong tendency among revolutionaries and reformists to transform radically the ritual system. Luong Van Hy (1992: 59, 85) has described how costly the rituals were and how the attempts at ritual reforms made by French-educated people failed. The reason was that those intellectuals saw the rituals only in terms of a waste of money; they neglected the social meanings that lay behind them. By the same token, rituals later came under heavy fire from the new government of 1945, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Nonetheless, the French rule made things much worse for peasant families. Most of the available sources tell us that taxes were a heavy burden; moreover the shift from taxes in kind to cash exacerbated the situation. Different researchers agree that in addition to the uncertainties of the weather (drought, flood, etc.), the peasant families were now forced to face the uncertainties of the local

market and international demand for rice. At tax collection times, when almost all the desperate peasants sought to sell paddy and rice (even land if necessary) to raise the necessary money, the prices fell dramatically. As a result, a great number of land-owning peasants were turned into tenants overnight, while the emergence of huge individual landholdings became a common occurrence.

The social differentiation became more acute. In the words of Dumont (quoted in Popkin, 1979: 154–155), 'colonial rule and development did not simply bring wealth to a few ... they brought wealth at the expense of the majority of the peasants – the rich got richer, *and* the poor got poorer.' Available data (Buttinger, 1967: 168; Ngo Vinh Long, 1973: 19; Popkin, 1979: 155–156) may differ significantly but they have one thing in common: a great amount of the land in the Delta was owned by landlords; therefore most peasant families became landless; they had to work as agricultural labourers and as tenant-farmers and sharecroppers. Their working conditions were terrible; their wages were extremely low; and they had to live in constant hunger, culminating finally in the tragic famine of 1945. After the Japanese troops invaded Vietnam (1940), things went from bad to worse. As a result, two million people died of starvation in the whole country in 1945.

Paul Mus (quoted in Luong Van Hy, 1992: 48) reveals that peasants' livelihoods were sustained within a subsistence-oriented framework, but their taxes were calculated on the terms of the capitalist world economy. More importantly, as the different researchers (Scott, Popkin) have pointed out, the precolonial tax exemption and reduction in cases of natural calamity were no longer granted. The class relationship between landlords and peasants eventually deteriorated; instead of its traditional patronage aspects, it became quite arbitrary.

The studies of Ngo Vinh Long (1973), Le Thi Nham Tuyet (1975) and Eisen (1984) have demonstrated how brutal this class relationship was. Many peasants were forced to take desperate measures: the sale of children; the giving away of daughters as concubines and sons as slaves was often the only alternative to the complete break-up of the whole family, as Gourou and Dumont (quoted in Popkin, 1979: 152) observed. The following account of an old woman highlights the situation of just such a family in 1918. In her youth her father did not have the wherewithal to pay his poll tax. Consequently her parents had to mortgage her labour for five piasters to a wealthy relative for whom she worked for twelve long years (Luong Van Hy, 1992: 45). This was just one of the countless cases.

Thus social differentiation and class relationship penetrated the kinship network as well. It was common enough for relatives to exploit one another as landlords and tenants, masters and servants. That in part explained why some people, including communists, overreacted to kinship: in their view, class relation was the guiding thread of history. That would lead to extremes later. In fact, the evidence provided by Luong Van Hy (1992: 65) shows that although class differentiation reached its peak during this period, kinship was still an irreplaceable source of assistance in the form of mutual loans of money or rice whenever necessary. It was also an organising force even among the anti-colonial movement (ibid.: 95). It could be suggested that if the role of organising force was not common, the role of assistance source was quite widespread.

The historian Dao Duy Anh (1938/1992: 360) demonstrated that the tradition of mutual assistance and solidarity among members of the same lineage still persisted: *Co du thi bo vao ho, tung thieu thi nho vao ho* [Give the surplus to your lineage and rely on your lineage when in need]. In fact, apart from territorial and voluntary associations that were established in almost every village and offered some limited mutual help, the family and kinship were the main institutions of support during all the ups and downs of the human life-cycle. That was the main reason why people were concerned above all with family issues, not those of their country and society, as Dao Duy Anh (1938/1992: 363–364) complained. This irreplaceable role of the family and kinship in part explains many of the family characteristics that will be discussed later: the hierarchy which favoured the older generations, and the great emphasis on filial piety, etc. Robertson (1991: 68) has explained 'gerontocratic' tendencies – the concentration of political and economic control in the hands of the elderly – in the light of the need to assure adequate pensioning services.

Moreover, kinsmen still had to be responsible for one another when it came to the payment of taxes. If a poor peasant could not pay his taxes, another member of his family had to be responsible for his 'share'. If no member of the family could pay, the delinquent taxpayer's possessions were auctioned off, then his family's possessions. In case all these measures failed, the peasant or one of his children would become enslaved to anyone willing to pay his tax (Popkin, 1979: 146). Another source has confirmed this: if a man failed to pay in time, his brother or adult family member would be arrested and tortured in the communal house courtyard (Luong Van Hy, 1992: 64). That meant that even under French

rule, the traditional principle of mutual responsibility of the whole family community continued to exist; the system of personal responsibility before the law was not recognised. In other words, with the principle of mutual responsibility, the authorities continued the long-standing traditional communitarian character of the family, whereby if one of the members broke the law, all the others had to be punished. This feature of the traditional society was not undermined even when the French law (which incorporated the principle of individual responsibility) was introduced in some areas.

In this context, it is understandable that the failure of numerous peasant revolts and isolated violent acts against the French resulted in the emergence of modern anticolonial movements. The collapse of these movements in 1930 reinforced the prominence of the Communist Party, whose founders were able to work and study in France, then bring back to Vietnam the Marxist-Leninist theory with its strong emphasis on the class dynamic. Their targets were dual: first, the French colonialists and second, the landlords together with everything that could be defined as 'feudal' (*phan de, phan phong*). Their aims were national independence and improved socio-economic welfare.

In sum, the French influence on family patterns could be seen mainly in the two social strata in urban areas; moreover, within these strata, some of the old features continued to exist alongside the new ones. As for the overwhelming majority of population, they lived in the countryside and remained attached to their traditional family patterns (Le Thi Que, 1986: 6). The French influence was seen in the appearance of some new family types, but not in the change of the family patterns among the population as a whole.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TRADITIONAL FAMILY

We shall turn our attention at this point to some general characteristics of the traditional family that could be seen in the majority of population, especially in rural areas. However, we need to keep in mind that within the overall patterns described here, there may be differences resulted from the diversity of social groups.

COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY

The most marked feature of the traditional family was the collective community. The hazardous natural environment and the often uncertain social one demanded the subordination of the individual to the collective discipline of the family and, to some extent, the

village. The collective community was highlighted by the absolutely dominant influence of the family as a whole *vis-à-vis* every one of its component members. The individual was not an independent entity; there was no individual in the Western sense, and certainly no free individual. Every facet of life was bound up with the family to which a person owed complete allegiance. While the *raison d'être* of the Western family may be to produce and support the individual, whose maturity will signal the attainment of its objective, in the Vietnamese family the *raison d'être* of each individual member was to continue, maintain, and serve the family, and first of all people of the older generations.

Ideally members of a family were expected to subordinate their personal interests to those of the family as a whole. Personal interests could not run counter to the family interests but should comply with the latter. Each person had to discipline him- or herself, and subdue his or her personal desires and aspirations if those ran counter to the communal standards. Communalism was upheld and individualism was negated: therefore conformity was emphasised. Senior members of every family repeated again and again the following proverbs to the younger members: *Khon loi sao bang gioi dan* [Individual excellence is not as good as group success]; *Xau deu hon tot loi* [Equal mediocrity is better than exceptional goodness]; *Tha chet mot dong con hon song mot nguoi* [Better for the whole group to die than for one person to survive]. From childhood everyone was trained in the sense of communalism, considering communal assessment the highest standard, and modifying their behaviour and attitude accordingly, not by reasoning out for themselves what was right or wrong. Otherwise a person would be subject to 'social disgrace' and 'losing face'. The opinion of people around was very important. Disciplines were based on what the surrounding people, particularly the 'significant others', approved or considered appropriate (Mai Huy Bich, 1993: 43–45; Dao Duy Anh, 1938/1992: 363).

Within the family a sense of solidarity was strong. The family members would help one another in times of need and adopt a united front *vis-à-vis* the outside world, whatever their internal differences might be. Woodside (1976: 95) has penetratingly observed that the traditional family was a little like a modern business corporation: it survived the deaths of its individual members or 'shareholders' at any point in time. It was designed to be a permanent corporate group. Each individual member had to serve it first and foremost.

It must be pointed out that the communitarian character of the family found expression not only in the relationships between living members, but also in those between dead, living and unborn ones; between generations along the temporal axis. The family was understood as a human community stemming from ancestors often going back four or five generations, or as long as Vietnamese families could remember and worship (Do Thai Dong, 1991; Nguyen Tu Chi, 1991). This community extends through the present into future. In this sense, the family was more than a group of people; it was a continuing entity carrying on from generation to generation. This human community was of a special kind that could be called a diachronic and generational community. Each member was not an independent person, but a link in the generational chain. (S)he had numerous obligations and limited rights in this diachronic community, which may be summarised in a few words: to serve this community was the first and foremost virtue. By dividing these obligations (and rights) into the ones directed towards the older generations on the one hand, and the ones directed at the younger generation on the other, we may say that the primary duties were towards the older generations (Mai Huy Bich, 1993: 48–50). The main obligations and rights are presented below.

Everybody should be permeated with the concept of origin. Everything that an individual enjoyed in his life was not the result of his individual efforts, but an inheritance from, and blessing of his ancestors. That was why a young student who obtained an academic degree of French education after trying three times supposed that it was thanks to his close relatives, including his father's progressive attitude, his senior mother's kindness, and his intelligence inherited from his mother's father, who was a mandarin and a doctorate degree holder (*pho bang*) (Luong Van Hy, 1992: 68). That meant that the French education did not liberate him from the traditional view.

Traditions stipulated that everybody should take care of and obey the older generations while they were alive, then worship and revere them with appropriate rituals after their death (in addition to supplying them with some symbolic necessities to enable them to survive in the other world). Each family member should take care of the tombs of his or her ancestors and ensure that they were covered with 'green grass and incense smoke' (*xanh ngon co, do nen huong*). It was a sin of filial omission to leave a tomb in a state of neglect or without a carer. Filial piety then was a paramount responsibility but in response, the older generations – even after

their death – would continue to protect and bless the younger ones in different ways. For instance, based on geomancy, people held the view that a certain locational co-ordinate of a tomb would render either blessing or disaster to future descendants of the deceased person.

Those standards of behaviour towards the older generations served as the social adhesive connecting people not only with their forbears, but also with their native land, where the tombs of their ancestors were located. This sometimes resulted in a person feeling unable to leave his or her native village, no matter what the reason. Although natural disasters, economic crises, and so on, continued to happen, and the population pressure increased, not only did the unemployed refuse to move and uproot themselves in the search for a job, but young people, too, looked for work in their overpopulated home areas. Having lost ancestor tombs in their native villages meant that there could be no memories and no sense of roots, even imaginary ones, anywhere else. That would make them miserable. By staying in their own areas, they could take care of their parents, their ancestors' tombs, and remain in their native cultural milieus.

To fulfil his duty towards the older generations and his ancestors, a man not only had to meet all his present obligations, but also had to produce male offspring to continue in the future all the tasks he was currently performing. Otherwise the older generations would be anxious until their last breath. As for the obligations towards the younger generations, there was a cause-and-effect relation between generations in the sense that what one member did would affect the whole generational community. Because of this, the social behaviour of one person was deemed not to be his own responsibility; the consequences were not only rendered to himself, but also to future generations in the diachronic community. A Vietnamese saying went: *Doi cha an man, doi con khat nuoc* [When the father eats too salty food, his children will be thirsty].

So everybody should, in their lifetime, accumulate virtues, store up merit (*tu nhan, tích đức*), be benevolent, show piety to others, and strive to do good deeds, in order to hand down blessings to posterity. Moreover, a person should avoid bad or irresponsible acts, which would bring disaster to the future generations. That was why rich parents tried to leave lands and properties to their children, and scholars tried to leave a good reputation as their legacy. Those who had little to leave also did their best to help their children to build up a home. If they were too poor to do so, they tried to

improve themselves, accumulate virtues, and avoid committing sins in order to pass something on to the younger generations. They did so because they not only hoped to be supported by their children later, in their old age, but also thought that this was their responsibility to their children.

This belief could be seen in people with little formal education, particularly old Buddhist women. The following narrative is about the belief of an old woman.

☞ Her son had received two death sentences from the French authorities for having participated in an anticolonial uprising. After learning the news of his two death sentences, his senior mother consoled him by telling him not to be afraid because she believed that their family had accumulated a lot of merit through their compassionate Buddhist acts. That, in her view, would save her son from being beheaded. Upon hearing this, a French investigator laughed in disbelief.

(Luong Van Hy, 1992: 114)

The Frenchman, from the other side of a cultural abyss, failed to understand her way of reasoning. This story, with its idea of storing up merit for one's descendants, tells us how the transgenerational community was understood in Vietnam.

The next story shows how strongly embedded was the communitarian character at the family level.

☞ In 1929, there was a fight between a landlord and the labourers whom he had hired. It had been agreed that the wage was to consist solely of a day's food. The labourers claimed the right to share the evening meal with their families, but the landlord argued that if they did not eat the meal themselves, they would be less able to work the next day. In other words, the men thought not only of themselves, but also of their families; they even denied themselves for the sake of their families. At last, the landlord had to give way because the men acted according to the customs.

(Popkin, 1979: 157–158)

It could be said that the family ties were still quite close-knit despite the economic hardship and crisis endured under French rule.

In response to the individual member's submission to the strict, sometimes arbitrary, control by the family, and the sacrifice of individual interests to the supreme interests of the whole family, the latter tried to satisfy all the fundamental needs of its members, and

serve as a reliable support base for their whole life, from infancy to old age and death. In other words, the family performed all the basic functions for its members. That was why people were so attached to their families.

HIERARCHY

But despite the communal solidarity among the family members, the family structure was also characterised by a sharp hierarchy. Everyone occupied a certain position in the order of precedence based on generation, age, and gender. Furthermore, the hierarchy was very clear-cut, and strictly defined. Father, mother, older brother, and older sister were at the top of the hierarchy; children and younger siblings occupied a lower ranking. This could be seen in the relation between discursive practices and power structure within the family: unlike the English language, in Vietnamese a sharp distinction based on the order of birth is made between siblings. There are separate terms of kinship and terms of address for older brother (*anh*) and older sister (*chị*), while there is only one term for younger siblings (*em*) to express the lesser importance of those people, although the term needs a double clarification by adding a gender word in each case: *em trai* for younger brother, *em gái* for younger sister. Those who were older must be addressed and treated with respect, and they really exerted some power over the younger ones. Otherwise, it would be quite confusing, disordered and therefore unacceptable. However, when translated into English, these subtle distinctions of rank are often lost entirely by their rendition as simply 'brother' and 'sister'.

The order of precedence thus imposed heavily on two kinds of people: first, those who belonged to younger generations and ages (children, younger siblings) and, second, those who belonged to the female sex (wife, daughters, and sisters). This was not confined to the nuclear family, but extended to the lineage. Everyone was connected not only with his parents and siblings in his family of origin, then with his spouse and children in his family of procreation, but also with other people in his lineage through the older generations. All those relationships were woven together, creating a complex network of relatives. Everyone must know who his parents, grandparents, and forebears were; their places in the order of precedence; where his own place was, and how to behave appropriately to each family member. For instance, from early childhood everyone was taught to know who this male or that female relative was; whether they were of superior, inferior or equal rank; whether

a close or distant relative; how to address them and refer to oneself in relation to them; etc. (Nguyen Hong Phong, 1978).

The terms of address denoted exactly the other person's order of generation and family rank, and whether that person belonged to one's maternal or paternal side. The kin terminology also included various self-referential terms, which differed according to the person whom one was addressing, and the relationship with that person in terms of hierarchy. Vietnamese people considered that the proper usage of terms of reference to family members involved not only order and social etiquette, but also real behaviour and sentiments. As Le Thi Que (1986: 16) has explained, correct terms of address were an expression of family solidarity, and a proper observance of order. If a family member used a wrong kinship term when addressing other relatives, that would be considered an indication of lack of family order, and therefore a lack of filial piety.

It is interesting to point out here that the term of the first person, I (*toi*), was rarely used in reference to oneself within the family, particularly by the inferior to the superior. To refer to oneself as *toi* was to tell the other person that one was not pleased with him, or that one did not consider him to be a family member. The term *toi* destroyed the bilateral relations between the interlocutors. Just as the pronoun 'I', as used by English-speaking people, served to individualise the user, the pronoun *toi* as used by Vietnamese had the reverse effect (Le Thi Que, 1986: 17). Thus, a child never referred to himself as anything but *con* [your child] when speaking to his parents, and *cháu* [your grandchild] when speaking to his grandparents. By doing so, the person continually reminded himself that he was in a specific order to others, symbolising thereby that he existed only in relation to others (Le Thi Que, 1986: 17). Even in late adulthood a person had to continue to use *con* [your child] for self-reference in speech interaction with his parents. Luong Van Hy (1992: 228) is correct in his remark that such a linguistic usage highlights the hierarchical nature of the interaction.

In brief, the hierarchical character of the Vietnamese family could be presented in a few words: age-respecting and mainly male-oriented. As a proverb puts it, you had to know exactly who was above you and who was below in the family order so that you could yield to those below, and respect those above (*tren kinh, duoi nhuong*). A popular saying went: 'Above has to be above, and beneath has to be beneath' (*Tren phai ra tren, duoi phai ra duoi*).

We can see through the following story what kind of behaviour the hierarchy of the traditional family caused.

 A man joined a secret movement to fight against the French rule in 1929–30. His comrades wanted to use his house to make bombs but they had to persuade his senior mother to agree, because they knew that she was the most senior family member in the house at the time. Once she had agreed, nobody in the family could object. Other members of the family, including not only the females, but also junior male ones, did not dare to object, although they knew it was dangerous if the colonial authorities discovered what was going on. As for the wives, they had to follow the Confucian maxim of the three obediences: 'When at home, obey your father; after marriage, obey your husband; after the death of your husband, obey your sons'.

(Luong Van Hy, 1992: 92)

Typical examples of family community and hierarchy could be found in family rituals. The Vietnamese culture is characterised by a large number of rituals, often performed at the family level. For instance, on the anniversary of a parent's death, all the sons and their families had to get together at the eldest son's home to celebrate. It was the duty of every family member to keep in mind the dates of the death anniversaries to gather together with other relatives and worship their common ancestors. Forgetting those dates or being a wilful absentee on such occasions showed a lack of piety to dead ancestors and an arrogance to living relatives. Those death anniversaries were very meaningful to living relatives. For the adult members they provided an opportunity to get together, perhaps to patch up quarrels, to recall the old days, or to relate to the younger generations the past glories and deeds of their common ancestors. This was the chance for the young to be involved in family rituals, to get acquainted with one another, and to learn of the numerous ties that bound them together.

In other words, they served to renew and strengthen family ties, promote intrafamily relationships ... One has to attend one of these family gatherings to understand the intense emotional attachment that Vietnamese feel for their families.

(Le Thi Que, 1986: 22).

That means that the sense of community was quite strong here. At the same time the hierarchy was also strict. Le Thi Que continues:

A member, whatever his social status, finds his place in front of the ancestor altar and at the feasting table determined on the one hand by the place he occupies in the order of generation, and on the other by the order number he holds in his own family. (ibid.)

Nevertheless, it must be said that while there is some truth in this picture, it cannot be the whole truth. The author has forgotten the other side of the coin: in some cases there was a contradiction between siblings, things did not go in the way described here. However, community and hierarchy in those rituals were undeniable.

The ritual meals were another example. At the usual family meal, everyone would wait for the absent members to return so that the whole family could eat together. Even in poor families where there was less emphasis on rituals, children usually did not start to eat until they had said a few words respectfully to request (*moi*) all their superiors around to start the meal. They made this request according to the established order of precedence; they must not reverse or break this order, for instance they must not mention the parents first. Instead, they must mention the grandparents first, then the parents, etc. When leaving the eating place, they must say a few words to excuse themselves. According to Phan Thi Dac (quoted in Mai Huy Bich, 1993: 51), those rituals were carefully observed in all families. In well-to-do families or those of high social status, children were not allowed to start to eat before the adults. In this way they were trained to control their hunger, a natural instinct, and to learn the proper way of taking a meal, in an atmosphere imbued with *communitas* and a sense of generational hierarchy.

Very often the whole family sat around a tray of food with a big pot of rice. Each person possessed only a pair of chopsticks and a bowl as their individual things. All the rest, including various dishes and sauce, were for common use (not divided into personal rations). The senior members approved of the junior members' respectful requests, gave small children the best dishes, and received their thanks. This picture served as a concrete and familiar symbol of the harmonious, ordered family community, and represented the strong attraction of the home to every Vietnamese. On the other hand, it should be pointed out the obligations of this family hierarchy weighed most heavily on the younger generations and women.

Patrilineal family

Following the system of tracing descents that has prevailed until now, kinship is attributed through the father. It is through this system

that ancestor worship is performed (see Chapter Four). Consequently, in the traditional family, polygyny was practised to continue the male line, and having son(s) was emphasised. Resources were located in favour of sons and other patrilineal relatives. The strong emphasis on the clear-cut distinction between patrilineal and matrilineal relatives was obvious in the kinship terminology used in reference to 'uncle' and 'aunt'. In some areas there was a strong terminological distinction between the father's and the mother's siblings. Luong Van Hy (1989: 745) has noticed that one used the term *bac* for father's elder brothers; *chu* for father's younger brothers; and *co* for father's sisters. Meanwhile, one used the term *cau* for mother's brothers and *di* for mother's sisters. That is correct, but there might be variations depending on the region.

However, each Vietnamese still kept his relationships with the people of his mother's lineage. He belonged to two *ho* [lineages]: *ho noi* ['interior lineage' or the father's] and *ho ngoai* ['exterior lineage' or the mother's]. Of course, the lineage on one's paternal side was accorded priority in its claims upon one's affections and service, etc. Nevertheless, that did not mean the Vietnamese family neglected the kinship network of the mother's side. Morals and customs required everybody to respect the members of the mother's side and give them certain considerations in terms of observance of mourning rites, visiting, moral support, and financial help.

In return, one could call on members of both lineages for moral and material support. The popular saying *say cha con chu, say me bu di* [When your father passes away, there is still the paternal uncle for you to rely on; when your mother passes away, the maternal aunt will nurse you] has been quoted by Le Thi Que (1986: 15) to demonstrate one's affinity with both lineages. By the same token, another saying goes: *chau ba noi, toi ba ngoai* [The child is the descendant of the paternal grandmother, but it is the maternal grandmother who bears the greatest burden of care]. The woman maintained not only contact with her natal relatives, but also the surname of her father upon marriage, and kept ritual obligations towards the members of her natal relatives. For example, she was expected to bring her children to her parents' home to attend important death anniversaries in her natal family (Le Thi Que, 1986: 20). In this sense, the male-oriented model in the Vietnamese kinship was not absolute; there was also the non-male-oriented model (Luong Van Hy, 1989: 744-749).

Patrilocal residence pattern and its variant

Marriage required a bride to go and live with the groom's family. In general, once she married, she severed the ties that attached her to her parents. From the moment she entered her husband's home and was presented to his ancestors at the altar as the climax of the wedding ceremony, her status changed. From being an outsider, still belonging to her natal family, she started to become a member of her husband's family. She and her husband often lived in the same house as the husband's parents and unmarried siblings for a certain period of time. The married sons were allowed to remain in the parental home until they reached agreement with their parents to set up households of their own. If there was only one son in a family, he often stayed in the same house as his parents, when there were several sons, one of them (often the eldest one, but in some areas, the youngest) stayed with the parents, the rest moved away some time after their marriages. However, their households were often in the vicinity of their parents' ones. Thus they established the patrilocal residence pattern, or its variant.

The primary reason for this was that sons preferred to live in the same village as their parents and siblings. It meant that they could keep in touch with their relatives more easily, and retain the intense attachment to their natal place that they called *que cha, dat to* [father's natal village, ancestors' land]. This traditional attachment was still so strong in the period under consideration that Desrousseau, a French Inspector of Mines, wrote a report addressed to a Governor General that the peasants would leave their villages to work only when they were dying from starvation. Therefore the way to overcome the difficulty (in getting enough people to work the mines) was to impoverish the countryside (Ngo Vinh Long, 1973: 116).

The second reason for the patrilocal residence pattern lay in the disincentives to move away. If a person left his native place, he would find nowhere to put down roots. Anywhere else he would be treated as *dan ngu cu* [a refugee] who lived on *dat khach, que nguoi* [other people's land, other people's natal village] (Le Thi Que, 1986: 18). In almost every village there was a written code that made a sharp distinction between *dan noi tich* [insider] and *dan ngoai tich* [outsider]. The discrimination against the outsiders – people coming from outside a given village – was undeniable. The village insider status was granted only after a family had settled in the village for several generations. That was why sons and their families often resided near their parents' home: there were social constraints which prevented their moving away to establish their own households after marriage.

In some areas, daughters of wealthy families might be able to stay on with their natal families to help their parents for a short time after marriage (Luong Van Hy, 1992: 74). As a vestige of the old custom, after the wedding, a bride sometimes went back to her natal family for some years (Le Thi Nham Tuyet, 1975: 121). However, this rarely happened. In this period patrilocal residence was taken for granted; there were only certain situations whereby a bridegroom might live at the future wife's house.

One such instance was if a rich family accepted a poor young man as a suitable marriage partner for their daughter. He then had to live and work in the fiancée's house for three years before they could marry. This was called *lam re* [living and working as a fiancé]. However, he lost his freedom, and in spite of his hard work, the bride's family sometimes drove him out of the house and married her to someone else. Moreover, people around the young man often sneered at him. There was a popular saying: *O re nhu cho chui gam chan* [To live and work as a fiancé is to lead the life of a dog that has to make do with the limited space under the low cupboard].

A rich family might also accept a promising but poor young man who could not afford to pursue an education. They created favourable conditions for his studies. By being studious, becoming successful, and earning both a good reputation and the praise of the society, he brought honour to himself, his parents, and to his parents-in-law. Nevertheless, this was not common practice.

When living in the parental house, sons were supposed to take care of parents in every way possible, to comply with their wishes and instructions, and receive in return mutual help from them. Even if sons established households of their own, they were supposed to continue this tradition. The main thing here was not the residence pattern itself, but the way sons treated their parents. Probably not being aware of that, when trying to get an operationalisation of Confucian concepts in their empirical survey, Hirschman and Vu Manh Loi (1994) identified the Confucian family with the patrilocal residence pattern. Nonetheless, I would disagree with them on this point; otherwise a subtle theoretical concept has been reduced to a crude indicator. Perhaps we should recall here the words of Confucius on how to understand and interpret the basic Confucian concepts? Somebody asked Confucius what filial piety was; whether to feed one's parents was filial piety or not. Confucius is reported to have answered:

Filial piety nowadays means to support one's parents. But dogs and horses are nourished too. If care for parents is not

accompanied by respect, what is the difference between them and the animals?

(Quoted in Lang, 1946: 24)

Confucius, then, particularly emphasised the devotion of children to parents, i.e. filial piety. He demanded from a son not merely the cold formal fulfilment of obligations but an attitude of warmth and reverence. In other words, the Confucian family stressed the respect due to parents by their offspring, not just patrilocal residence pattern. This tells us how complicated it is to relate the subtle Confucian concepts to data.

The patrilocal residence pattern exerted a profound influence on the position of daughters and daughters-in-law. First, daughters were regarded as 'flying ducks' in the sense that one raised them, but when they grew up, they moved away from one's home. Feeding a daughter was an unprofitable investment. There was a popular saying that went: 'To raise your daughter is to raise her for others' (*nuoi ho*). A folk song noted: 'Your daughter is someone else's child. Only a daughter-in-law is your true child for whom you have paid.'

Second, daughters-in-law were often placed in difficult situations. For a young woman, being married meant *ganh vac giang son nha chong* [shouldering the burden of taking care of everything in your husband's family]. If the bride was the eldest son's wife, her obligations were much heavier than those of the other daughters-in-law. She was expected to set a moral example in serving the whole household's interests. To be able to play such a new and arduous role meant changing all her habits and way of life. Although she would have received training since childhood on how to live and work as a bride, that was just the anticipatory and primary socialisation into her new role.

On stepping into her husband's house, she was a 'stranger'. To integrate herself into a new family, she had to undergo a secondary socialisation, a crucible trial. She had to submit to the judging eyes, the severe training, and often the ruthlessness of her mother-in-law. 'It was considered routine for mothers-in-law to haze a new arrival mercilessly' (Marr, 1981: 193). The daughter-in-law had somewhat similar obligations to her mother-in-law as a son had to his father, but she could not expect from the mother-in-law what a son could expect from his father.

The relationships were totally unbalanced and tense. They were often so tense that in many areas there was a custom whereby on the wedding day, when the new bride first arrived at the groom's house,

the groom's mother would avoid meeting her for a while. It was believed that the mother-in-law had already anticipated and prepared for the tense conflict that would inevitably ensue between the two women. By postponing meeting the new daughter-in-law, the mother-in-law hoped to delay the conflict that would accompany their coexistence under the same roof (Le Thi Nham Tuyet, 1975: 151-152). Of course, this custom may have been disregarded by some, but those who did disregard it were often blamed for the conflict if it developed.

The incompatibility between mothers and daughters-in-law often surfaced during the first days of the marriage and started with the custom of setting the daughter-in-law different tests. For instance, the mother-in-law would pretend to drop some money, then ask the daughter-in-law to sweep the floor in order to discover whether she would keep the money or not. Or the mother-in-law might measure out some paddy (of course in secret), then ask the daughter-in-law to grind the paddy into rice. Then the mother-in-law would measure the rice to see if the daughter-in-law had stolen any. If the mother-in-law was not satisfied with her daughter-in-law, she would begin to scold and ill-treat her (Le Thi Nham Tuyet, 1975: 152). That was not always true but gave us some ideas about the tests.

Folk songs frequently dealt angrily with these relationships. One of them went: 'Once you are the buffalo trader, you certainly are dishonest; once you are the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, you definitely do not love each other' (there was a strong prejudice against traders because it was believed that they were dishonest). Another song concluded that mother-in-law and daughter-in-law 'can never have anything good to say about each other'.

Why did mothers-in-law often mistreat their daughters-in-law? One of the reasons was that with the patrilocal pattern and its variant, a woman was incorporated into an alien patrilineal family who bought the rights to her fertility, sexual services, and domestic labour by the payment of a bride-price. As a part of the wedding ceremony, the bride's family often asked the groom's family to deliver pork, chickens, glutinous rice, wine, and sometimes cash. The quantities demanded were often large; consequently the groom's family representatives generally negotiated to reduce the amount. As a result, the mother-in-law often thought that after having paid the price of buying her daughter-in-law, she had the right to regard and treat her however she liked. The treatment meted out often equated to the amount of money she had paid for her 'possession'.

The second reason for maltreatment was that the relationship between the two women was not based on a blood tie, unlike that between mother and son. The two women competed with each other to win the son's affections. In a society that emphasised blood ties, of course the mother-son relationship had to come first. In the words of O'Harrow (1995: 170-171), a woman often regarded her daughter-in-law as 'archival' because in the context of Vietnamese culture, her son was the only male she could possibly dominate, the only male who could look upon no other woman in the same way as he looked upon her. When her son married, he left her private space, betrayed this most intimate connection for another woman, his wife.

To keep the balance between the blood ties and the marital ones was a very difficult task for the groom. If a conflict occurred between them, because of the norm of filial piety, the husband could not act against his mother and in favour of his wife. On the contrary, he had to obey his mother; moreover, he also had to teach his wife to respect her mother-in-law, otherwise, a mother could ruin her son's marriage.

Indeed probably nowhere in the world's folk literature is there a richer mine of sayings than the one found in Vietnam about mothers-in-law, and especially regarding the hatred that arises between the husband's mother and the young wife.

(O'Harrow (1995: 167-168)

Conflicts of this kind often formed the basis of the plot for novels and short stories. Literature thus held up the mirror to life. Such conflicts were commonplace and especially tense in this period because an increasing number of young women began to discover the Western concept of romantic love and individual freedom, and they started to oppose the old order.

Nonetheless, such conflicts stemming from patrilocal pattern did not last indefinitely. Except for sons who were supposed by local custom to stay with their parents for good, or who lived in rich, upper-class families, a great many left the parents' home a certain time after the marriage. In fact, if we take a snapshot of family patterns, existing literature has suggested that in the period under consideration, families were diversified: some were in the extended form; for the rest, the most common pattern was not the extended patrilocal family, but its variant: the nuclear family. However, it was not far, let alone isolated from patrilineal kinship network.

According to Phan Ke Binh (1915/1992: 26-27) those parents who were well-off and healthy often lived separately from their children;

only the infirm and the poor co-habited with their adult offspring. Nevertheless, children were mindful of their parents and often presented them with delicious food; even those who lived far away offered them monthly allowances or gifts. One must remember that Phan Ke Binh was only offering his opinion, no hard evidence.

Nguyen Tu Chi (1980) made the assertion that the Vietnamese family has long been, in the main, a nuclear one. The reason for this may have been connected to the techniques of wet-rice cultivation, which were most suited to the nuclear type of family. Similarly, the researcher also failed to provide precise data to confirm this view. Do Thai Dong (1991) claimed – but presented no substantiating evidence – that the most common family pattern was what he has called the 'semi-nuclear family'. By that he means what in the sociological jargon is termed the 'stem family': parents lived with the eldest son's family, and other sons established their own households after marriage. He has offered no explanation for this development, but there are good reasons to apply Robertson's arguments (1991: 15) and suppose that the existence of the stem family pattern was associated with scarcity of development opportunity. Living space and economic resources were so limited that the only way one household could replace another was by taking over the residential space and economic assets of its predecessor.

Though they present different pictures about the family patterns, these authors are of one mind in their claim that the extended family was not common. There is no objective method to validate their claims, but if they are accurate the following conclusion may be drawn: although until the 1920s and 1930s the three-generational family (under one roof) remained the social ideal for most rural Vietnamese (Marr, 1981: 25), the extended family was not common in Vietnam this period. It existed mainly among the upper classes, as the evidence by Luong Van Hy (1989) has shown. For the majority of the population the family was almost nuclear. Owing to the harsh living conditions prevailing among the lower classes, death and widowhood were common occurrences. Consequently, the one-parent family was not rare.

In sum, then, families at this time could take the extended, stem, nuclear, or one-parent form. Furthermore, if one does not lose sight of the repetitive cycle of domestic development, one can say that at certain stages in its development process a nuclear family may derive from an extended one, or come to take the extended form.

Gender separation and women's status

This period witnessed the decreasing influence of Confucianism, one main characteristic of which was patriarchy (i.e. male domination), but its vestiges were still obvious. On the other hand, so-called matriarchy, with its emphasis on the high status of women, that was said to have existed in the remote past of Vietnam (Le Thi Nham Tuyet, 1975: 27–40; Wiegersma, 1988: 28) also left some impressive traces. As a result, we can see both sources of influence in family life. Let us look at men's domination first.

This can be seen in the gender separation that has been created by men and served their interests. It found clear expression first of all in the division of activities and labour.

Division of activities and labour. In the family, there was a division of activities and labour. For the upper class, the husband–father was the head and had the absolute power over his wife and children if his family existed in the nuclear form. In the extended family, the eldest man was the head. With Confucianism's 'three obediences', the wife's role was insignificant in comparison to the husband's. In accordance with the Confucian tradition, a sharp distinction between mental and manual work was made. Men in this family type were often the privileged and educated ones, the gentlemen. They were supposed to play a vital role in social leadership. To fulfil this mission, they did not get involved in manual labour; that left the domestic economy largely in women's hands. Consequently, women had to do everything, including rice production, housework, and trading. They worked from early morning until late at night, while men were exempted from all that. Men even were accustomed to rise very late in the morning, as related by a man from an upper-class family (Luong Van Hy, 1992: 68–69).

The narrative revealed the significant contribution of women in the upper-class family: their labour was effective and essential not only in wet-rice cultivation, but also in housework chores and trade. Thus the old tradition that held commerce to be unworthy of men's respect, and therefore the purview of women, was still very much alive under French rule. So it was the women who spent much of their time and energy in the marketplace and who brought their families a significant amount of cash income. In fact, women predominated in the market: they not only formed the overwhelming majority of all active merchants, but also made up the mass of customers.

The narrative reminds us of the similarity between the position of the daughter-in-law in Vietnam and her counterpart in China:

they both had to get up earlier than anybody else in the family and serve not only the men, but also their mothers-in-law (Lang, 1946: 233). The gender-based division of labour is also revealed by a folk song that voices the women's dissatisfaction:

You dress in your best gowns and loaf around
While I have to soak in sweat working in the paddy.

(Vietnam Resource Centre, 1974: 34)

Moreover, in this family type, even the sons were prohibited from getting involved in manual work (Luong Van Hy, 1992: 68).

It was also this family type that was most likely to practise polygyny, which was designed to exploit women's labour. Rich landlords might get concubines by purchasing daughters of poor peasants who could not afford to pay their debts. In the eyes of those men, buying a concubine was cheaper than paying the wages of a servant for life. Among those families there was a saying: *Thu the, mai thiep* [A wife is married, but a concubine is bought]. Except for concubines who were their husbands' favourites, many husbands and concubines had little contact with each other.

The situation in the lower-class family was different. Wet-rice cultivation was extremely hard work; it required co-operation. It was this type of family that functioned as the production unit. Couples had to share the rice cultivation and housework at different levels; nobody had reason to feel superior or inferior, and women were the irreplaceable helpers of their fathers and husbands. This was especially the case if the family had no buffalo and could not afford to rent one. Then women and their children sometimes had to act as draft animals, pulling the ploughs on the front while their husbands pushed on the ploughs behind, as an agronomist described vividly (quoted in Ngo Vinh Long, 1973: 46). That was why a common ambition and dream of all peasants was to acquire a buffalo.

As soon as children could make a contribution, they started to work under the supervision of their parents. The parents exerted guidance and control over their children's work to some extent. In the beginning, the labour of children was just supplementary to that of the parents, but the important thing was to utilise the labour force of the whole family to the full, be it the labour of the young or old. If grown up, but not married yet, children still worked according to their parents' plans.

However, the gender-based division of labour could also be seen clearly in this family type. Wet-rice cultivation comprised the following stages: ploughing, harrowing, transplanting, weeding and reaping.

Ploughing and harrowing were jobs for men; but the transplantation of the rice seedlings to other fields was the exclusive task of women (Nguyen Tu Chi, 1991). This interesting fact was of a symbolic significance. Women were – because of their biological reproductive affinities – believed to be best suited to perform transplanting. Although women participated in the cultivation process as indispensable and irreplaceable labourers, the gender division was undeniable. As in the upper-class family, in this family type the housework was not done by men. Women were responsible for the most of housework chores.

Apart from the division of labour, the division of other activities was also clear-cut: it was the man who took part in outside-family activities; women were absent in village organisations. It was the man who received guests, especially the important ones.

Spatial separation. In the house, each sex had separate locations. There was a room named 'the room for the honours' in every house. It was here that the altar for the ancestors stood and important visitors were received; therefore the place was a male domain. At celebration times it was women who prepared special foods, but they could not enter the male domain; it was men who made the offering to the ancestors.

The extent of spatial separation between the sexes varied between the classes. According to Luong Van Hy, women in an upper-class family were not allowed to enter the main room of the house in the presence of guests. They also had to cover their faces with conical hats if passing through the courtyard in front of the ancestral room, if male guests were present (Luong Van Hy, 1989: 745). There were often rooms or places for women which most female members shared, but those places were semi-dark (Gourou, 1936/1955: 326). In general, the place of women was at home, in the darkest, wettest locations (Le Thi Nham Tuyet, 1975: 89–90) and in the kitchen.

By tradition, the kitchen was regarded as the women's place and had a low status. This was expressed both in the vernacular and in the very construction of the area, which was a separate outhouse. The traditional house was always built higher than the ground (this was as much a precaution against flooding by the Red River as a symbol of status), however the kitchen was built directly on the ground. The house was often built with care and sometimes with art, but the kitchen was a pitiful hut of lower height, made of poor quality material, as Gourou described. However, the kitchen was more than a place for cooking: most of the housewife's guests (relatives,

neighbours who came to talk to the housewife, therefore unimportant from the household head's point of view) were received here.

In the common parlance, people created a hierarchy of spatial locations between the house and the kitchen. In Vietnamese a sharp distinction was drawn between the two places; therefore the phrase 'go to the house' was phrased *di len nha* [go up to the house], and *di xuống bếp* [go down to the kitchen] (Tran Hoai Anh, 1993: 2-3). That may reflect to some extent the status of women.

In upper-class families, the gender separation was rigidly applied – to the extent that men and women ate separately. According to one of Luong Van Hy's case studies (1989: 744-745), the most privileged members of one particular household were the household head, his three sons, and the three senior women of the family: they were served meals together in the family's main room. The household head's niece and three daughters-in-law ate separately with the children. This again reminds us of a story related by Lang (1946: 161). She recounts how Western guests organised a communal dinner for a rich Chinese family: this marked the first occasion that the women ate together with the men. However, there was an important difference: in Vietnam, the senior women of this upper-class family could eat meals with the men; it was only the junior women who had to eat separately. In other words, although Vietnamese women were secondary to men, they started to gain status and influence with increasing age. A woman who had progressed in status, from a new bride in the patrilineal family to a mother-in-law experienced a turning point of power.

There was even a separate place for women to wash, hang and dry their clothes because, as Gourou (1936/1955: 298) mentioned, women's skirts (not solely after childbirth and during menstruation) were generally considered as particularly unclean. Men were advised to avoid touching women's clothing; some husbands would not even help their wives bring in female attire from the drying place when it rained.

As for the lower-class family, the house was often overcrowded; therefore the spatial separation between the sexes was less obvious. The problem here was that women often enjoyed very little privacy and were supposed to cover themselves well at all times.

Double standards of conduct. The gender-based segregation could be seen most clearly in the double standards of conduct. Women had long been considered as the property of men. To keep their property secure, men imposed and continuously enforced rules guarding women's chastity. Women were supposed to value their

chastity above all things. If, on the wedding night, the groom found that the bride had already been deflowered, it would be perfectly justified to return her to her family immediately. Another example: an unmarried woman caught in sexual relationship was punished with 100 lashes according to the Gia Long Code that was still in effect during this period. At the village level, an unmarried mother brought so much shame to her parents' family that she and her parents had to pay a fine to the village (Eisen, 1984: 16).

O'Harrow (1995: 175) may be right when he claims that in Vietnam extramarital affairs outnumber premarital ones, yet men took stringent measures to discourage adultery by their wives. A man was encouraged to have many wives, while a woman could only have one husband. The unfaithful wife suffered brutal punishment, but official law never mentioned adultery as a crime for men and they were never punished for it either. Two measures dealing with an unfaithful wife were often reported: first, her head was forcibly shaved and plastered with lime; then she was led around her village while villagers did whatever they liked to humiliate her in front of everybody. The second and more extreme punishment was to tie the wife to a raft of banana trunks, then let the raft float on the river until she died.

An author (Toan Anh) gives accounts verifying the use of both measures. Both accounts seem to be generally reliable. He has an example of the first measure (humiliation) being used in 1930 in Hanoi's First District. Le Thi Nham Tuyet (1975: 133, 162) also tells of this measure being applied in Dinh Bang village, Ha Bac province. Descriptions of the second, more severe, punishment have been received from eye witnesses now living in Ha Bac province, also by Demoutier, a French researcher whose book was published in 1907. Toan Anh's account is from a district now belonging to Ha Nam Ninh province. An unfaithful wife was caught in the act. She was charged with adultery and punished severely. Villagers made a raft of banana trunks and tied her to it, then put a board beside her, where they wrote down her name, age, native village, and her sin. The villagers left the raft floating on the river until she died; nobody rescued her (Toan Anh, n.d.: 197-198). The date of this second story is uncertain but seems to have been in 1917-18.

It should also be pointed out that it was mainly men who had right to initiate divorce; women had no parallel right to do so. Women could appeal to a court only if their husbands had abandoned them for more than six months.

In brief, women suffered from numerous male prejudices and conventions. The gender relationship deteriorated particularly during

the period under consideration as a result of the impoverishment of the overwhelming majority of peasants on the one hand and the enrichment of a minority of landlords as well as the French on the other. It became a fertile soil for the growth of the idea regarding men as exploiters, and women as the exploited.

The evidence from the studies of Le Thi Nham Tuyet (1975) and Eisen (1984) strongly suggests that it was women, particularly those from the lower class, who suffered most under French rule. Although some upper- and middle-class women in the 1930s talked about women's rights, peasant women interviewed by a female reporter stressed that the real problem they faced was extreme poverty, not sexual inequality or polygamy. Later, the upper- and middle-class women also came to realise that to improve the lot of women they had to eliminate all the contradictions in the current society because 'the women's issue is only one aspect of the social question' (Vietnam Resource Centre, 1974: 17, 39). In other words, the contradictions of the colonial society obscured the gender oppression. Therefore the aims of the women's liberation movement would be defined later in a special way, as we shall see in the next chapter.

However, it would be wrong to say that women were regarded as absolutely inferior to men. Women had their own separate sphere of influence, in which they wielded quite a lot of power. Different researchers (Yu Insun, for example) have demonstrated the wife's prominent position in the family prior to the twentieth century. Many Western observers and tourists (René Crayssac, Diguët) had already pointed out that in the traditional Vietnamese society, women enjoyed more economic and social independence than their counterparts in China; they never suffered from footbinding, for example, as did the Chinese women (Vietnam Resource Centre, 1974: 9). Actually, the position of women in lower-class families was much higher than that of women of the upper class. Generally speaking, if a family was poor, because of difficult living conditions, the husband and wife were more likely to rely on each other, to co-operate, and to pay no or little attention to the superior-inferior structure. A wealthy family often had more opportunity to retain the extended family form, and therefore needed a clear-cut role differentiation and vertical organisation.

We can see the relatively high position of women in the following spheres of lower-class families. Whereas farming provided a family with rice, the cash income of the family depended totally on small trade, which was almost entirely in women's hands. The wife made the decisions regarding not only most money issues, but

also the use of the harvested rice, in the production of which she had played such a large part. According to Nguyen Tu Chi, before the arrival of the French, the currency unit was a round coin with a square hole in the middle for threading on to string. During the French rule, metal coins were still used together with paper notes issued by the French. In the family, strings of coins were kept in a strong wooden trunk locked with a key. It was the wife who had the key; nobody else could open and lock the trunk. The husband – the head of the family – seldom knew the sum of coins kept by his wife. He could ask her for money for various expenses, but the final decision rested with his wife. A popular saying went: 'The wife holds the key to the cash trunk' (Nguyen Tu Chi, 1991: 66). However, the researcher had no definitive facts and figures.

As for rice, apart from daily domestic needs, the family head had to obtain his wife's consent before taking any rice from the container. If after a long discussion, the wife did not agree, the husband had to give up (*ibid.*). Again, the researcher seems to be relying on hearsay evidence. By the same token he described how women could still exercise their influence on organisations outside the family which had a traditional patriarchal basis and interests, and from which women were often excluded. That was because, he contends, the husband's behaviour in village social life was influenced by the wife's opinion even though she stayed at home.

The wife also played an important, even decisive – in the words of Tran Dinh Huou (1991: 45) – role in the socialisation of children. Ideally, the father had to be severe; otherwise he might lose his authority. The mother taught her children differently, through playing on the sympathy of the children, through tenderness and gentleness. As the above researcher put it, 'by his strictness, the father inspired fear in the children; by her gentleness the mother instilled love in them; and they did not dare to, or have the heart to misbehave' (*ibid.*). We need to add that by his discipline the father was often the chief judge of the family: all misbehaviour was reported to him; therefore the threat of telling a child's faults to the father was one of the most effective methods of preventing the child from getting into mischief. So the husband and wife complemented each other. She often tried to intervene if her husband beat the children; by doing so she reduced the tension in the home.

As a result, the children's attitude towards their parents was often bifurcated. According to Le Thi Nham Tuyet (1975: 91), in upper-class families, there was some psychological distance between the father and the children; the children usually displayed a negative

attitude towards him (fear and a desire to avoid him). Nevertheless, there was no such distance between the mother and the children, particularly between the mother and daughter. Sons might go to school, but the education of daughters remained in the mother's hands. The mother often offered companionship to her daughter. She also acted as an intermediary between the father and the children, especially when arranging a marriage for her daughter. On the other hand, the mother's views also had most weight in the choice of her daughter-in-law. Tran Dinh Huou noticed that the mother did not pay as much attention to selecting a husband for her daughter as selecting a wife for her son. If this is correct, it must be because it was primarily her responsibility to deal with the new daughter-in-law. If we understand how important the selection of a daughter-in-law was in continuing the family, we will understand too the prominence of the mother-in-law's role in this process.

If we turn to the vernacular as well as folk culture in an attempt to discover more about the position and status of women in family relationships, we see that wives were often referred to as *noi tuong* [general of the interior]. This was a hidden, but real position, as Nguyen Tu Chi (1980) put it. In describing the relationship between a married couple, one always mentioned the wife (*vo*) first, the husband (*chong*) second (*vo chong*). Any attempt to reverse this order would not only make the speaker a laughing-stock, but also show that he or she could not speak the Vietnamese language correctly (Vietnam Resource Centre, 1974: 30–31). Of course, local parlance does not really reflect the power structure; however, it can lend some insights. Peasant men showed their high esteem for their wives in the following adages: *Nhat vo, nhi troi* [The wife comes first and the king of heaven second], *Lenh ong khong bang cong ba* [His kettledrum cannot sound as loud as her gong].

In brief, we may say that in spite of the persistence of the Confucian doctrine of 'three obediences', the Vietnamese women played a significant role in the family, especially among the lower classes and families where the husbands were incompetent or irresponsible. It is generally agreed that it was because of the original Vietnamese folk culture that the rigid Confucianist concepts about women were softened. If we make a distinction between the East Asian cultural world, which is characterised by the male-dominated character, and the Southeast Asian one, which is characterised by the relatively high status of women (Taylor, 1983), we can recognise both elements within Vietnamese society. However, the Vietnamese form is less stringent in its characteristics than the East Asian and

Southeast Asian models. The Confucian vestiges found expression not necessarily in the patrilocal residence pattern, as some researchers have interpreted crudely, but in the communal character of family relationships; the hierarchy of sexes, generations, and ages; and the way in which children had to behave to their parents (filial piety).

Although the clear system of oppression for women nurtured and refined by men varied from class to class, and although women of a certain class enjoyed a degree of status, up until this century there was ample reason for women and young people to challenge the status quo. This protest grew in tandem with the spread of new ideas about individual freedom, social justice, and so on. The dissemination of Western ideas of freedom and self-expression led young people, particularly French-educated urbanites, to recognise the oppression and to take a stand against it. As Jamieson (1993: 107) noted, those youths believed that 'the old Vietnamese family system had to be overturned'. In fact, the above-mentioned important conclusion was voiced by Dao Duy Anh: the traditional family had to transform.

However, to adopt this view, one first had to decide the direction in which the family should be transformed. That depended in great part on how the existing family was evaluated, and what socio-economic transformation programme was chosen. From everything that has been presented so far, it is clear that the family during this period was still quite traditional. Being heavily hierarchical and male-dominated, the existing family was a fertile soil for the growth of imported ideas about liberation, freedom, equality and modernisation. Nevertheless, when accusing the traditional family of oppression of the young and women, the reformists seemed to lose sight of its deep cause: the concerns about protecting old people against the ups and downs of the human life course in a society where family and kinship were the main support mechanisms. Moreover, in the context of the urgent need for national liberation, in the eyes of revolutionaries and reformists, the traditional family nurtured only one kind of person who was too narrow-minded in his or her preoccupation with the family (that was understandable because the family was the only thing people could rely on for their needs). This prevented them from widening their horizons to participate in the struggle for national independence.

At last the Communist Party with its Marxist theory came to power and carried out its radical socio-economic transformation programme, a crucial part of which was aimed at the family. The communists evaluated everything at the time as old-fashioned and

backward, and saw the key solution to the problem in radical transformation. They viewed everything that they wanted to achieve (the elimination of private property; the restructuring of the traditional family; collectivisation and large-scale production; industrialisation; rationalisation; and so on) as modern – as not only antithetical to but also superior to traditionalism. As we shall see in the next chapter, apart from some major achievements, they also made many extremist mistakes. A major reason for this was their erroneous evaluation of traditions, which led to a misconception of their programme.

Of course, if the native soil had not been fertile for the growth of the Marxist ideology, for instance if the class relationships had not worsened seriously during the period in question, then the Marxist theories would not have taken root so deeply in Vietnam. Nonetheless the communists have lost their sight of the fact that class relationships did not totally prevail over kinship. Not so long ago, a researcher wrote:

Class contradictions entered the hearts of the patrilineage organisations and created complications for the kinship system, making it difficult for insiders to realise where their family feelings rested and whence class contradiction arose.

(Nguyen Tu Chi, 1980: 41)

That may be true of distant relatives, but not so of close ones, at least within the immediate family, or what some social scientists call household. The reason is twofold: first, social classes divide whole societies but do not divide households (Robertson, 1991: 102). Second, because of the precarious circumstances of the majority in Vietnam, people were well aware of the phases of poverty in the life course. In other words, however rich a person might be, he knew he would grow old and be incapable of supporting himself. Therefore to secure his old age, he had to support – not to exploit – his children. Contrary to the communists' misconception, the family and kinship still played an essential role in almost all aspects of life. The communists' misconception led to dramatic transformations of the family later. Meanwhile the class issues seemed to have obscured the gender ones for them.

NOTES

1 The concept 'bride-wealth' has been used to avoid the implications of 'bride-purchase', but I use here the concept 'bride-price' instead of 'bride-wealth' because the latter 'goes to the bride's male kin (typically brothers)

in order that they can themselves take a wife' (Goody *et al.*, 1973: 5). In the Red River Delta, that is not the case. By contrast, people who have more than one wedding during a short period of time for their children of opposite sexes often try to avoid that. They usually make arrangements so that the marriage of the son is held first, then that of the daughter. Otherwise they would be open to public criticism that they were selling their daughter to get money for their son's marriage. Furthermore, the bride-price is often used to covering the wedding expenses of the bride's family, not for anything else.

Moreover, in the Vietnamese language, the concept *ga* (to marry off one's daughter) is sometimes accompanied by the word *ban* [to sell out] in the saying *ga ban* [to marry off and sell out one's daughter].