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The Confucian Four Feminine Virtues (*tu duc*): The Old Versus the New — *Ke thua* Versus *phat huy**

NGO THI NGAN BINH

Introduction

After completing her B.A. in English in 1994, Mai started her first job at a foreign company and at the same time considered pursuing another degree in economics through evening courses. Like many women her age, Mai was aware that a good command of English alone was not sufficient to secure a well-paying job if one was not equipped with training in a specialized field. Mai's desire to become a well-educated professional was fully supported by her family. When she started attending part-time classes for her second degree in 1996 while working full-time, her mother continued to shoulder most of the chores to give her all the time she needed for her career and education. Everyday, on her motorbike, Mai shuttled to and from work, school and home. When she came home, her mother had already prepared meals for the whole family. Because of Mai's heavy load of work and study, her mother even helped out with her laundry and ironing. During examination periods, Mai's mother specially tended to her every need and ensured that she had proper nutrition to produce maximum energy for her intensive learning.

Outside office and school, Mai also enjoyed an active social life with friends with whom she could always go out for some snacks (*an hang vat*); chat about romance, music, and fashion; see foreign movies; or spend occasional weekends on long-distance trips. Mai's normal day was mainly filled with work, study and the company of her friends, both male and female. Her parents rarely objected to her social activities because they knew her circle of friends relatively well. Mai's lifestyle was generally accepted by her society and was seldom restricted by the Confucian four virtues (*tu duc*) which consist of *cong*, *dung*, *ngon*, *hanh* (labour,

appearance, speech, and behaviour) traditionally prescribed for women. Mai's lifestyle, unrestricted by these four traditional prescriptions, represents the lifestyle typical of many young unmarried urban women in present-day Vietnam.

In 1998, Mai married at the age of 27 when she was holding a promising position at a prestigious bank in the city and was still a second-year economics student. The marriage, which placed a new role upon her as a daughter-in-law in her husband's family, has changed her lifestyle tremendously. Every day before going to work, Mai has to get up early to sweep the house, go shopping at the nearby market, and then clean the food to put it in the fridge so that in the evening it will take less time to cook. After she gets home from work, she fixes dinner for her husband, her mother-in-law and herself. Dinner is followed by doing the dishes and tidying up the kitchen. Rest comes only after her chores are all done. On weekends, she has to make sure that the family's laundry is taken care of and the house is mopped before she can feel free to go out with her husband without being thought of as "lazy" (*luoi bieng*) by her mother-in-law. However, three times a week when Mai goes to her evening economics classes, she lets her husband cook dinner for his mother and himself. Mai's regular negligence of housework incurs her mother-in-law's disapproval, and Mai's persistent attitude towards her educational pursuit after marriage is faced with strong objections from her mother-in-law, consequently causing enormous tension in their relationship.

Not only has her life routine changed after marriage, but her ambitions and responsibilities are now also expected to conform to a standard far different than she could ever have been prepared for. Mai's mother-in-law opposes her excessive devotion to her career and study and is not pleased to see her only son in the kitchen preparing dinner. She also takes offence at Mai's postponement of having children in order to achieve her professional and educational goals. In the eyes of her husband's mother, Mai has failed to meet the traditional standard of *me hien, dau thao, vo dam* (self-sacrificing mother, devoted daughter-in-law, dedicated wife).

In other words, Mai does not adequately display the traditionally defined female attributes prescribed in the four virtues. Although her heavy household responsibilities¹ would not seem to be much of a novelty for most Vietnamese married women,² what is hard for Mai to fulfil her new duties of a daughter-in-law is the gap in her transition from her natal to patrilocal homes. Before marriage she was exposed to a new version of *tu duc*, yet after marriage she is expected by her in-laws to

live according to the traditional version, thus creating a conflict between her acceptance of the new and her responsibility to carry on the old. This situation indicates that she has not been sufficiently trained in *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* to cope with the demands borne by a live-in daughter-in-law (*lam dau*).³ Mai's case represents the predicament of many young daughters-in-law in Vietnam nowadays in terms of how they experience *tu duc* before and after marriage, and how the traditional four female virtues bring them into conflict with their mothers-in-law.

This paper presents and analyses the dilemma of the contemporary Vietnamese woman in the urban context of Ho Chi Minh City in terms of her adherence to *tu duc* practice. It highlights and discusses three major conflicts between the two versions of *tu duc* in the Vietnamese family, between the parents' perceptions of daughters and daughters-in-law, and between role expectations and performance in the patrilocal extended household.⁴ While touching on some literature directly related to Vietnamese women's values and traditions, much of the paper is based on my ethnographic research between 1998 and 2000 in Ho Chi Minh City through survey questionnaires on 60 single women and in-depth interviews with 25 daughters-in-law who had experiences living with their husbands' families in the 1960s and 1990s.

Traditional Attitudes to *tu duc*

Traditionally, "most of the dogma on what a proper Vietnamese woman should be and do was taken from orthodox Confucian texts" (Marr 1981:192). One of the most famous texts was *Gia Huan Ca* [Family Training Ode],⁵ a highly elaborate dissemination of ethical principles and appropriate behaviour, particularly aimed at training girls to become virtuous women and desirable matches for marriage. To fit that Confucian mould of a well-bred woman, most of one's life was circumscribed by hundreds of prohibitions and taboos:

- Don't talk to a man who is not a relative;
- Do not say hello to him, so as not arouse suspicion;
- Do not frequent women who are not virtuous;
- Do not alter your clothes without reason;
- When sewing do not let your needle be idle;
- When alone, do not sing or declaim poetry;
- Do not look out of the window with a pensive air;
- Do not shrug, do not sigh;

- Do not laugh before you have even said a word;
- When laughing, do not show all your teeth;
- Do not gossip or talk crudely.

These injunctions guided women in terms of housework (*cong*), appearance (*dung*), speech (*ngon*), and conduct (*hanh*). In the public eye, a woman behind “high walls and closed gates” (*kin cong cao tuong*) was viewed as a virtuous one (Hue Tam Ho Tai 1992). Such traditional female norms stipulated that venturing out into society with men, either for schooling⁷ or for socializing was deemed undesirable in a decent woman. A woman’s place was by the hearth; her worth was largely measured by her skills at maintaining the warmth of that hearth, namely the well-being of her family. These feminine guidelines indicated that women in days past were expected to confine themselves strictly within the familial circle.

Apart from the orthodox Confucian texts designed to regulate women’s demeanour, numerous maxims, popular proverbs and sayings also acted as practical tools to assist parents in teaching daughters appropriate feminine behaviour (Marr 1981: pp.192–99). Here are several typical sayings among hundreds of them:

An coi noi, ngoi coi huong

(Keep an eye on the rice pot while eating; mind your surrounding while sitting)⁸

Uon luoi bay lan truoc khi noi

(Bend your tongue seven times before you speak)

Loi noi chang mat tien mua lua loi ma noi cho vua long nhau

(Kind words do not cost money, suit your words to others’ liking for the sake of harmony)⁹

The four female virtues were meant to be of equal importance. Each acted as a ring in a connected chain. Should one of these rings be cut off, the chain would be broken, too. First, *cong* taught a woman to be not only industrious but also appreciative of others’ labour. Through her work such qualities as thrift, endurance, and attentiveness would be gradually instilled. Thrift advised her not to use the family’s finances excessively for her own needs so that selflessness was cultivated. Second, *dung* educated her to maintain a neat and humble physical appearance in all situations. Under no circumstance would she expose her real financial condition through her attire — neither in rags nor in extravagant outfits. Third, *ngon* instructed her to refrain from verbally showing such intense emotions as anger,

frustration or jealousy. This act of self-control was a demonstration of her care and respect for people around her. Finally, *hanh* focused on her inner beauty, making her an upright, filial, devoted, trustworthy, and kind-hearted person. *Hanh* was the ultimate outcome of the long process of self-control, self-sacrifice, and self-cultivation. Reaching this final stage of “virtue training”, one would receive considerable recognition and admiration from one’s lineage and community as a woman of unstained virtues and perfect morality (*duc hanh ven toan*).¹⁰ Such achievement had to stand the test of time, and exemplary virtues were believed to ripen as one aged. A young woman, therefore, was seldom recognized as having arrived at that final stage and was thus always subject to the surveillance of her elders.

A woman’s *duc hanh* was believed to be of utmost importance and to always rank above her education and talent. Should a husband sink into a life of vice — drinking, gambling or philandering, his wife would be still able to steer the children through the storm and bring them up to become good citizens by being a model of *duc hanh*. In contrast, it was thought that a wife and mother who demonstrated a lack of *duc hanh* would sooner or later drive her family to disintegration and her children to degradation. Today, *duc hanh* is still highly valued in a woman by most Vietnamese.¹¹

Mai Huy Bich (1993) commented that *tu duc* were meant not to serve the personal happiness of the woman, but rather the interests of the family and community. Indeed, for a woman the demand to master the four feminine virtues could restrict her personal freedom and advancement tremendously and require a great deal of self-sacrifice on her part. A good mastery of these qualities, however, would definitely bring great honour to her own family and later to that of her husband when she married. It was assumed that her in-laws would be blessed with merit-virtue (*phuc duc*) to have such a well-mannered daughter-in-law, since her positive womanly attributes were assumed to be able to bring peace and harmony to them. In this case, she would be praised not only for representing her civilized and cultured home (*con nha co giao duc*), but also, thanks to such good reputation, for showing a deep sense of filial gratitude to her own parents. Conversely, if her conduct proved undesirable, she would be considered as evidence of an uncultured and ill-bred background (*con nha vo giao duc*), and thus would be made to feel guilty for causing disgrace to her family.

Femininity in Public Discourse

By and large, under the old family system, and even today, femininity was defined and a woman’s virtues were judged largely by the framework of *tu*

duc qualities. In those days, the strict confinement of daughters to the domestic space provided an ideal setting to impose the *tu duc* principles on them. Such imposition, however, began to be deeply shaken during the war years when the Party, in its vigorous efforts to mobilize women from all walks of life, reformulated the values of Vietnamese femininity, appealing to women to break away from the rigid Confucian family ideology and serve the cause of national liberation.

To support this mass mobilization, numerous movements with such straightforward names as "Five Goods" (*nam tot*),¹² "Three Responsibilities" (*ba dam dang*),¹³ "Three Ensures" (*ba chac chan*), "Three Readies" (*ba san sang*), "Three Constructions and Three Struggles" (*ba xay, ba chong*), the "Moral Education of the New Woman" (*giao duc dao duc nguoi phu nu moi*) policy, and many others were intensively implemented between 1960s and 1970s. In April 1965, the "whole nation's struggle against the US aggression" (*nhân dân cả nước đấu tranh chống giặc Mỹ xâm lược*) campaign was launched, which received enthusiastic response from millions of women from North to South Vietnam. These ceaseless waves of strategic agendas aimed at opening women's eyes to the oppression of the "feudal" family and at educating them with new cultural standards to become the "new socialist woman". The ultimate purpose of these movements was to make the most use of women's labour and potential for the revolution.

Given the Party's appeal for women's active participation in both production and revolution, the issue of preserving or emphasizing *tu duc* ideals in its traditional orthodoxy became inconsistent with the promotion of the "new socialist woman" image in these war years. One relevant example is Nguyen Thi Dinh.¹⁴ She was among the outstanding female figures who received Ho Chi Minh's praise: "Nowhere else in the world lives a female commander like her. She glorifies the South and our race."¹⁵ An interesting detail about Nguyen Thi Dinh is that to gain respect from her fellow male comrades and obedience from her subordinates she had to talk, walk, and act like a man. It seems clear that in this context of war, a woman with masculine behaviour — loud-spoken, straightforward, self-assertive, competent in fighting, and fearless of risk — was acceptable and even praiseworthy.¹⁶

Another detail that lends evidence to this acceptable masculine projection of a woman is Ho Chi Minh's compliment of Vietnamese women's revolutionary ability. He rewarded Southern women with the eight "golden" words: *anh hung, bat khuat, trung hau, dam dang* (heroic, indomitable, loyal, and resourceful) for their contribution to the national

struggle. Arguably, the image of the new Vietnamese woman being promoted in this revolutionary context was that of one who should be both courageous at the frontline, and active and productive in the logistic rear. It seems clear that the 1960s' and 1970s' modified version of femininity represents a combination of both masculine and feminine characteristics, of which the first two new attributes — traditionally associated with men — now began to be promoted as appropriate for women as well.

This revolutionary version of femininity continued to be emphasized in the post-war period through the "new woman in the national protection and construction" movement implemented after 1975. However, the involvement of women in the initial stages of peace was encouraged in the direction of economic rather than military contribution (see Le Thi 1989). Such a shift of emphasis from female military participation made the eight-golden-word slogan no longer relevant in the period of peacetime and the market-oriented economy, particularly since after the 1986 open-door policy (*doi moi*). As a result, the slogan was gradually less mentioned in public discourse,¹⁷ having been replaced with a softer concoction of traditional feminine qualities — "loyal, gentle, elegant, tactful and resourceful" (*trung hau, diu dang, thanh lich, te nhi, and dam dang*) — which have been employed more frequently to project what a proper contemporary Vietnamese woman should be (see Phan Thanh Hao 1992; Pham Con Son 1996; Le Minh 1997; Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2000).

One might question whether such replacement of the revolutionary femininity by a more traditional feminine formula has signalled the return of *tu duc* orthodoxy. A direct answer does not exist since social discourse has not yet acknowledged such a return. However, much can be inferred from the use of terminology in scholarly writings as well as from current gender discourse by Vietnamese academics.

A look into frequent occurrence of terminology in academic writings shows how the key expression "*cong, dung, ngon, hanh*" is increasingly preferred over the term "*tu duc*" in public discussions of present-day femininity (see, for example, Thanh Truc 1988; Pham Con Son, 1996; Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2000), and if the latter is used it always indicates an association with Confucian or "feudal" ideology (see Tran Dinh Huu, 1991; Phan Thanh Hao 1992; Mai Huy Bich 1993). One reason for such terminological preference, in my view, is that the term "*tu duc*" easily suggests the old label "*tam tong, tu duc*", of which *tam tong*¹⁸ is being seen as obsolete and is condemned by the society as oppressive to women.

Also in current discourse on the contemporary Vietnamese woman by many Vietnamese academics, the question of *tu duc* values has been frequently raised: should *tu duc* be considered a "feudal" vestige and be discarded completely? Or should they still be considered relevant and continue to be kept? The consensus of their opinions is that although *tu duc* originated from "feudal" times, these traditional feminine ideals are still very relevant in present-day Vietnam. The *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* qualities, therefore, should be "preserved" or "inherited" (*ke thua*). However, they should also be "developed" (*phat huy*) to adapt to the new social context of *doi moi* (see Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2000: 13–16). Apparently, there is still a strong social emphasis on the Confucian *tu duc* values but these feminine virtues are now reconsidered with a viewpoint less dogmatic from the old prescription defined in the orthodox texts. Nevertheless, despite this significant on-going revaluation of *tu duc*, such equally important issues are absent from the academic discussions as to what extent the Confucian *tu duc* principles are to be "preserved",¹⁹ how realistic they are to be "developed" without hindering the process of "preservation", whether Vietnamese society are ready to accept this new "preserve and develop" concept of *tu duc*, and whether this call for a *doi moi* version of *tu duc* — preserving the Vietnamese traditional femininity and at the same time adopting a "modern and industrial" attitude and mannerism (*tac phong cong nghiep va hien dai*) is creating additional pressure on women.

In short, the State modification of Vietnamese femininity during the war years, the social reference to *tu duc* as "feudal" ideology, the contemporary terminological preference for the key expression "*cong, dung, ngon, hanh*" over "*tu duc*", and the public consensus to "preserve" and "develop" *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* in the new social context all indicate that the four feminine virtues have undergone a dramatic transformation. The questions to be asked are: To what extent has the teaching of *tu duc* changed in today's Vietnamese family? What are the current attitudes of older and younger Vietnamese toward these traditional virtues? Where are such differences in people's perceptions, if any, manifested?

Contemporary Attitudes: The Natal Home

In the late 1990s, popular media began to talk about a "speed culture" (*van hoa toc do*) among Vietnamese youth. Young people sped up with enjoying their youthful years, fulfilling their dreams, climbing fast in their chosen professional paths and getting rich quickly. The common attitudes among

them towards career and education are to obtain multiple degrees in the preferred fields of study,²⁰ and seek immediate financial rewards upon graduation even though it sometimes means working in areas unrelated to their training. In terms of romance, going from one relationship to another is neither a novelty nor a taboo any more.²¹ Young Vietnamese of both genders, especially those in urban parts of the country, are increasingly exposed to numerous foreign stimuli and various sets of values and opportunities.²²

This "speed culture" is clearly a big challenge to any attempt to preserve the traditional *tu duc* ideals which denounced free interaction between the two sexes and emphasized female domesticity. Strict restriction and absolute supervision of daughters' movements like what many of their mothers and grandmothers were subject to in their younger days, therefore, seem to be almost impossible in the current social context. Given increasing exposure to various sets of values, better access to education, and higher mobility among today's youth, many Vietnamese parents know that rigidly monitoring their daughters' behaviour and engagements outside the home might yield only adverse effects: making them hide their social activities from their family, or even worse, driving them away from home. Parents have therefore been willing to reconsider the *tu duc* virtues and adjust their ways of educating daughters to the new situation, giving them greater personal freedom and space for their own advancement. As a result, the importance of *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* virtues has received less emphasis, and they are being taught with more flexibility, although the learning of those feminine qualities is still encouraged in most families.

The motivation for this change comes first from the Vietnamese parents' increasing realization of the need to provide as much formal education as possible for their daughters. In fact, while a traditional upbringing is still required of a good daughter, formal education is now also viewed as being equally important because it opens future opportunities for her. This perspective, from my interview data, is clearly shown in how today's mothers exempt their daughters from the burden of housework, happily sacrificing much motherly effort to ensure that their daughters can now devote more time to their studies.

Ideally, academic competence and a mastery of basic domestic skills are the most desirable combination of qualities in a daughter. However, in practice, if a choice has to be made between the two values, most mothers would not let the training of womanly skills (*cong*) stand in the way of their daughters' educational pursuits. Bac Tam is a case in point. Although

her three daughters and one son have all grown up, aged between 17 and 23 years, she continues to shoulder most of the household chores. Meals are often ready on the table when her children return from school. She explains:

As I stay home full-time, I don't think I need much help from my daughters with the housework. I can do things at my own pace and rest when I feel tired. When they [her children] return from school they need to have their meal right away so that they can have time for homework and tuition lessons. If I ask them to take turns cooking for the family, I am sure that they would do it happily. But it would mean less time for their study. I would be more satisfied to see my children do well in school.

As a matter of fact, this informant's response does not represent only one single case where the daughter is exempted from practising *cong*. A survey I conducted with 60 single women aged between 20 and 25 years indicates that in many Vietnamese families, the daughter's academic performance takes priority over her household duty. This tendency will be on the rise in the near future when admissions into popular schools become increasingly competitive and the dual-or-multi degree phenomenon among young Vietnamese becomes more widespread. This trend demonstrates that the demand for time devoted to academic pursuits will be more pressing on the generation currently aged below 20 years. To meet such a demand, the household responsibilities of the daughter would be borne mostly by the mother, a female relative or a domestic helper.

Another sign of adjustment in the way of educating daughters is that many parents, especially mothers, are fully supportive of their daughters' active social life. Such an adjustment, however, still remains subtle and does not mean that daughters can create their own world of freedom as they wish. For instance, although unmarried daughters are allowed to stay out late, an implicit "curfew" is still expected of them. Interacting with male friends is also more acceptable and an intimate relationship is not opposed if parents know their daughter's boyfriend. In other words, today's upbringing is a compromise whereby daughters can enjoy some level of independence while at the same time parents continue to have a say in their daughters' personal affairs.

As for the daughter, should she be put under strict parental supervision, she will adopt subtle tactics to satisfy her social needs while still ensuring her parents' trust in her. Knowing that she cannot get out

without sensible proof of her engagements outside the home, she quickly learns to utilize many activities of which her parents are likely to approve to maximize her personal freedom. Activities most likely to receive parents' approval are perhaps those associated with study. By filling the day with learning and relevant engagements, girls assume that they can justifiably go out more often. Therefore, apart from the main school schedule, many young unmarried women see signing up for evening language courses, especially English, or enrolling in more than one university simultaneously not only as a good strategy to secure future jobs but also as an appealing chance to seek relationships and expand the time outside parental supervision. This new trend was demonstrated to me by Huong, a university student, who told me about her study routines and occasional truancy:

I major in English at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities. School usually starts at 7:30 in the morning and finishes at around noon. But three times a week, I have to stay back for a few more afternoon sessions. On these days, I have lunch at school. I am also studying part-time for another degree in economics, three evenings every week. Most of my day is spent at the two universities. Sometimes, my friends and I skip minor subject classes to go out for a snack or a karaoke session. I normally did not tell my mother about it but sooner or later she found it out from my chatting with friends at home. However, she never scolds or disciplines me seriously for having played truant because she knows that I am also serious about my studies.

Again, Huong's story reveals the fact that a large part of the urban young female population in their late teens and early twenties are spending more of their waking time outside the home and beyond their parents' supervision than did the previous generation. Such newly-found freedom leads to more opportunities for today's daughters to easily express their individualism in behaviour, manners and speech once outside the domestic space, being unconfined by the restraints of the traditional norms of *cong*, *dung*, *ngon*, *hanh*.

It is also worth noticing that the flexible instruction and practice of *cong*, *dung*, *ngon*, *hanh* in the family and the diverse activities beyond the home available to the present daughter have also influenced her perception of those traditional female virtues. My survey reveals that most of the focused young women ideally wish to preserve these cultural virtues. In their view, these feminine ideals characterize the distinctive

nature of the Vietnamese woman, training her to become gentle, graceful, skilful and, most importantly, filial to her parents and devoted to her husband and children. However, this is only an expressed attitude rather than a reality. When asked which virtue is to rank as the most important, the 60 female informants' responses differ greatly:

<i>Hanh</i> (behaviour or conduct)	98 per cent
<i>Ngon</i> (speech)	58 per cent
<i>Cong</i> (labour or industry)	40 per cent
<i>Dung</i> (appearance)	21 per cent

Dung is considered the least important virtue. The traditional *dung* required a woman to be humble, decent, and modest in her looks, but most of the women in the survey mistook the meaning of *dung* as physical beauty and explained that people would emphasize the inner, not the outward beauty of a prospective wife or daughter-in-law. As for the virtue *cong*, in their argument, a woman could not be judged solely by her housekeeping skills and should opt for a combination of work inside and outside the home as a new version of *cong*. This new attitude was expressed to me by Huong: "Nowadays, women are no longer confined to the family circles. More and more women work for a living so the *cong* virtue is not very necessary. We can't devote ourselves completely both to the home and work at the same time." While these young women criticized society's emphasis on the female's primary household duties, they also attacked social expectations of them, restraining their speech as an appropriate norm: "I think that nowadays housework no longer belongs only to women and it doesn't affect a woman's personality. Moreover, women today should have the right to express their opinions because men are not always right." *Hanh* (moral conduct) is still most highly valued, but there exists a new belief among young Vietnamese women that they can still achieve *hanh* without the assistance of *cong*, *dung* and *ngon* attributes. This attitude among young single women towards the four virtues is different from the traditional perspective, which placed all four feminine traits in the same ranking, since they were seen to be interdependent. From the perspective of the young women in the survey, the order of importance is now *hanh*, *ngon*, *cong* and finally *dung*; training one's inner and spiritual beauty (*hanh*) takes priority while the other three values (*cong*, *dung*, *ngon*) do not play an essential role in shaping a virtuous woman.

Contemporary Attitudes: The Patrilocal Home

Nevertheless, this changing attitude among the single women towards the traditional *cong*, *dung*, *ngon*, *hanh* values will become unacceptable in the context of patrilocality. Once the daughter is transferred to the house of her husband's family, she comes to realize that the other three virtues (*cong*, *dung*, *ngon*) which she used to take lightly and practise somewhat loosely back at her natal home now turn out to rank the same as *hanh*. In other words, all the four virtues are required of a good daughter-in-law. Such a contradiction between how a woman perceives and practises these feminine qualities before and after marriage reveals an emergence of two contrasting attitudes among Vietnamese parents toward the proper virtues of their own daughters and daughters-in-law. The following account illustrates a contradiction in the way the mother views what behaviour is appropriate in her own daughter and daughter-in-law.

On one occasion, after a long interview session I treated Bac Thanh and her friend to *bun bo* (a Hue beef noodle dish) as a gesture of appreciation for taking so much of her time. The *bun bo* stall was owned by a young lady in her early twenties. She was nice-looking but turned out to be rather curt in responding to customers. My informant felt offended and tried to talk the unpleasant feeling away by commenting that the girl's mother must have failed to educate her on one of the virtues: the *ngon* (speech) of a well-behaved woman. This particular incident reminded Bac Thanh of several occasions where she had corrected her daughter-in-law's *ngon*. As she recalled, at a reunion dinner with her family and relatives, being exhausted by the heavy cooking duties, she could not eat much. At this, her daughter-in-law jokingly commented: "Mom, you eat like a cat licking its food" (*Me an nhu meo liem day!*). This Vietnamese saying is used to lovingly refer to a younger person who is a small and picky eater and is inappropriate to address a person of a senior status. The daughter-in-law seemed oblivious to this notion of age hierarchy in the usage, and ended up offending her husband's mother.

It was an embarrassing experience, especially when all of Bac Thanh's relatives were looking at her to see her reaction to her daughter-in-law's words. She then felt compelled to handle this delicate situation so as to preserve her dignity and yet correct her daughter-in-law in such a manner that the younger woman would not lose face. After a moment's hesitation she commented to her guests that young people nowadays did not understand all Vietnamese proverbs as thoroughly as the older generation. At this comment, her daughter-in-law got the implication and kept quiet

during the rest of the meal. Bac Thanh then concluded her story by stressing that it was always important for her two daughters to be taught the female appropriate virtues: *cong, dung, ngon, hanh*.

After having eaten *bun bo*, Bac Thanh invited her friend and me to her home for tea. Upon arrival, seeing that the gate was locked, she called loudly so that her youngest daughter would hear from upstairs. Contrary to my previous mental picture of Bac Thanh's soft-spoken and mild-mannered daughters who would display a good grasp of female behavioural teaching, I was startled by an abrupt and crude shout from the balcony: "Can't you hang on for one second? What on earth is the hurry?" I then stole a secret glance at Bac Thanh to see her reaction. However, her facial expression showed no sign of embarrassment in the presence of a first-time guest. As we went in, the young woman went on to complain that her mother had failed to leave tuition money at home for her before she finally greeted me with a sullen face. Bac Thanh sweetly told her daughter that she had left the money on top of the fridge. To this, the girl smiled and withdrew into the back of the house. Perhaps Bac Thanh was not conscious of how differently she treated her daughter and daughter-in-law when they seemed to "misbehave" by her standard of traditional female virtues.

Traditionally, the four virtues were designed to guide women's behaviour with no differentiation between daughters and daughters-in-law, but Bac Thanh's story reveals the fact that the four qualities of *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* are viewed and practised differently in the family of origin and the patrilocal home. In the former, greater emphasis is placed on teaching the daughter these traditional feminine principles, but less pressure is put on her to practise them, and the criticism of displeasing manners is also less severe. In her husband's home, on the other hand, priority is given to her capability as a daughter-in-law to put into use what she has learned about *cong, dung, ngon, hanh*. In short, parents tend to be more permissive and lenient towards misdemeanour from a daughter while a daughter-in-law's non-conformist behaviour and attitudes are not easily tolerated at the house of the husband's family. Failure in meeting her in-laws' expectations in this aspect not only invites critical comments from them, especially from the mother-in-law, but also greatly affects her relationship with them.

Such a difference in how Vietnamese women experience *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* before and after marriage also suggests that many of them do not actually realize the full impact of the four traditional virtues on their lives until they live with their husband's family. They tend to think that

hanh is the most essential quality in a woman while the rest only play a secondary role in shaping her moral character and can be compensated for by other means. In their opinion, women's earning power enables them to make up for their lack of *cong* by hiring domestic help or buying services and home conveniences. From their perspective, as long as one can be an ethical (*hanh*) person, with a reasonable sense of responsibility and determination, it is not very difficult to observe the other three virtues *cong, dung, and ngon*. For example, they assume that *cong* means only knowing how to do housework, that *dung* suggests physical beauty (which, in their opinion, many mothers-in-law would not emphasize much), and that *ngon* means only showing respect for parents-in-law by not talking back to them.

Convinced by such an oversimplified understanding of *cong, dung, and ngon*, Vietnamese unmarried women are thus unaware of the fact that of the four female virtues, these are actually the three that affect them most significantly on the day-to-day basis at the house of their in-laws. One explanation is that in the patrilocal home, one's understanding of *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* values does not matter much, as it is the application of that knowledge to her daily performance of her *lam dau* responsibility that counts the most. Therefore, without sufficient demonstration of such concrete qualities as industry, appropriate appearance and speech, a daughter-in-law would hardly survive the role of a good live-in daughter-in-law.

With regards to the virtue of *ngon*, there is a stronger emphasis on the daughter-in-law's observation of appropriate speech than on the daughter. Although today's young women may have more leeway to voice their own opinions and feelings at their natal home, it does not mean that they can do so when they live with their husband's family. Respect for senior in-laws is one of the essential criteria for a good daughter-in-law. It should be reflected in the way she carries herself both verbally and non-verbally at her patrilocal home. She is expected to show deference while a daughter does not necessarily have to abide by this rule. One anecdote frequently heard from the daughter-in-law group is that they have to "report" themselves to their parents-in-law or acknowledge their presence every time they come or leave the house (*di thua ve trinh*) while their husband's sisters are not expected to do the same.

Of the four virtues, *dung* perhaps affects the *lam dau* experience of a woman the least, and sometimes its meaning overlaps with that of *cong*. For instance, a daughter-in-law's excessive attention to her outward

appearance would be interpreted by members of her husband's family, especially her mother-in-law, as a sign of laziness (*luoi lao dong*). It is usually assumed that such a sharp dresser does not want to work hard for fear of spoiling her carefully-manicured nails or beautiful outfits. Nevertheless, compared to the *lam dau* situation of the 1960s, today's mothers-in-law are more receptive to the dressing styles of their sons' young wives. The reason for such acceptance is the older people's acknowledgement of the younger generation's greater need to dress for success in their career, as well as the wider variety of fashions available to young people in present-day Vietnam.

As far as the traditional female value of *cong* is concerned, this virtue affects women's role as a daughter-in-law most significantly and on a daily basis. Even though today's younger women have gained a greater degree of economic independence than their mothers did at their age, their earning power cannot compensate for the lack of *cong* (labour) in the context of patrilocal home. Tuyen is a typical case where conflict between her and her mother-in-law is related to the traditional standard of *cong*. When she was going to give birth to her first baby, she wanted to hire a domestic helper. However, her husband's mother was not warm to the idea and assured Tuyen that she would be completely free from housework and be taken good care of during her first postnatal month.⁴³ Tuyen knew that, without a maid, many daughters-in-law in her situation have ended up doing most of the chores, since they feel uncomfortable letting their husband's mothers serve them. Failing to convince her mother-in-law, Tuyen asked for permission to go back to her family for a month. Thinking that her daughter-in-law was not appreciative of her genuine offer for help, the mother-in-law created a stand-off by temporarily leaving the house and staying with a relative.

At this point, Tuyen had to give up her idea of employing a maid. The mother-in-law here must have honestly been showing her concern towards her daughter-in-law and would not have trusted a stranger in her home. However, out of the 15 younger daughters-in-law, 6 wanted to have a domestic helper but failed to gain their mother-in-law's approval. If the discomfort caused by the presence of an outsider (the maid) is put aside, there are two other subtle reasons behind the mother-in-law's objections. First, there is a danger of overstepping power boundaries when a domestic helper is hired by the younger woman. In the extended family, the mother-in-law is often known as the boss. If the daughter-in-law hires a housemaid, it will put her in the status of a boss, at least to the maid. It is unacceptable

for the younger woman to have the same status with her mother-in-law while they are still living under the same roof. Second and more importantly, a domestic helper means exemption from housework for the younger woman, which is contradictory to the traditional value of industry (*cong*) expected of a good daughter-in-law.

Generally speaking, social attitudes since the 1960s have changed a great deal in the perception of the daughter's household duty but this is not the case for the daughter-in-law. In the public sphere, today's school system no longer includes home economics for girls in its curriculum as it did in the past, while in the private sphere, less familial pressure is put on the daughter to share the burden of housework. Consequently, a growing number of young women are under-equipped with domestic skills to face the *lam dau* demands after marriage. Five married informants in their mid-twenties told me that before marriage they had never taken full charge of cooking for their families nor had their mothers pushed them to learn to cook. This tendency towards unpreparedness in domestic skills among younger women seem to adversely affect their *lam dau* experience once they marry and have to take on heavy household duties at the home of their husband's family.

Externally, many younger daughters-in-law seem to adjust readily to their role by getting up earlier and managing to do chores satisfactorily. On the inside, however, they grow increasingly bitter and find it hard to accept the heavy responsibility that their culture and society put on the shoulders of a daughter-in-law. Mai (at the beginning of this paper) is a case in point. Before marriage, she had never taken a main role in cooking meals for her own family; lending an occasional hand in the kitchen was all that her mother had asked of her. Once married, she had to take primary responsibilities in arranging and performing domestic routines at her husband's family home. This new duty took up all of her spare time after work, and she quietly felt disappointed and even regretted having gotten married:

Sunday is the only day when I don't have to go to work.⁴⁴ I really want to spend that time going out with my husband or visiting my family but I have to do heaps of laundry accumulated during the week and all the cleaning and tidying around the house. My mother-in-law never asks me to finish all of those chores before I can go out. However, she did not seem very pleased with me the other day when I left things undone and went to a movie with my husband. She thought I was lazy. Normally it's only after three o'clock in the afternoon that I find myself free and able

to do what I want. By that time I am exhausted and my good mood is gone too. As a result, my Sunday is spoilt. I feel very unhappy living at the house of my in-laws. Before marriage I was never bound by those duties and could always put housework aside if I needed to go out. To me marriage means: "You leave your own house and join another to do housework for them."

As a matter of fact, what Mai really resents here is not the actual performance of housework, but the fact that she is unable to put it aside to attend to her recreational needs first. For fear of giving an impression of laziness in the eyes of her mother-in-law, she has to give priority to her household responsibilities over her personal desires. Even though she managed to do the laundry and cleaning after returning home from the movie on that occasion, it did not seem to help erase the impression of "laziness" in her mother-in-law's mind.

In this respect, what is significant about the traditional perception of the female ideal of *cong* is that *cong* means not only performing housework, but doing it in the proper manner and at the proper time. Failure to observe these subtle variables suggests that one would hardly be viewed as a diligent daughter-in-law. Many strikingly similar accounts learned from daughters-in-law of both generations lend weight to this evidence. One senior informant, married in 1967, told me that she had not dared to leave the dishes undone right after a meal no matter how tired she was. This detail is also heard repeatedly among the younger daughter-in-law group.

Although *hanh* (ethical character) is often seen as the most important female virtue, it does not affect a live-in daughter-in-law's life on a day-to-day basis as significantly as does the virtue of *cong*. As a matter of fact, being industrious also plays a crucial role in helping a woman reach the standard of *hanh* in the eyes of her in-laws. The difference in the impact of *hanh* and *cong* on the daughter-in-law is probably that the former is an abstract and long-term cultural ideal for her in-laws' judgement of her worth, while the latter is a concrete and short-term principle for the same purpose. For example, such characteristics of *hanh* as uprightness, filial piety, devotion, trustworthiness and kind-heartedness are not to be cultivated and achieved overnight; rather, it is through daily actions and behaviour that one tries to work towards this ideal. During this long process of self-cultivation, should a daughter-in-law occasionally fail to conform to the prescribed female ethical standards she would seldom be accused of lacking virtue. However, the daughter-in-law's quality of *cong* can be more easily

assessed through her performance of routine chores. Should she demonstrate a lack of industriousness, her husband's family would quickly interpret it as a lack of devotion to her new home and would not accept her as a full family member.

A woman who is insufficient in *cong*, either consciously or subconsciously, cannot survive the role of a good daughter-in-law. Her domestic insufficiency could in turn affect her relationship with her husband's family, especially her mother-in-law who is now the primary "overseer" of her *cong*. If the older woman thinks that the younger woman cannot meet her standards in this area, tension is likely to result. In such a situation, the daughter-in-law is commonly held responsible for the cold atmosphere between her and her mother-in-law. Consequently, ineffective performance of *cong* can have far-reaching complications in her relationship with her in-laws. In short, *cong*, which many young Vietnamese women rank third in their order of significance, turns out to be the most important virtue to be observed at the patrilocal home. And the gap between the mother-in-law's expectations of her daughter-in-law's *cong* and the latter's ability to meet those expectations is one of the main sources of conflict in the Vietnamese co-residential household.

Today, while in the public sphere many Vietnamese social scientists investigate and address the problem of gender inequality in the division of labour (see for example Tran Thi Van Anh and Le Ngoc Hung 1996: 219-319; Le Thi 1996; Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2000), in the private sphere gender-based roles are still strongly maintained. In this regard, the patrilocal home is representative of the tendency to maintain the traditional gender-defined values and stereotypes. As my field research progressed, one thing that attracted my attention particularly during my numerous conversations with both the older and younger focus groups was their strikingly similar complaints about the unbalanced division of labour between husband and wife in the context of the extended family. In fact, "division of labour" is perhaps not an accurate term to use for the live-in daughter-in-law, since there is a virtual lack of contribution to routine chores from the husband, a tendency consciously supported and encouraged by his mother. In other words, many mothers-in-law object strongly to their married sons' sharing household tasks with their wives on the grounds that housework is entirely women's responsibility.

Furthermore, many accounts given to me by the daughter-in-law informants indicate that in the context of the extended family, many young Vietnamese wives have problems asking their husbands to share the burden

housework. The obstacle is usually cited as the mother-in-law. Although today's husbands show more sympathy and concern than their predecessors for the heavy household tasks borne by their wives, when they make a conscious effort to help their spouses out, this has to be always done in the absence of their mothers. Tam is a case in point. Every time her husband was "caught" sharing chores with her, her mother-in-law found some excuse to demand her husband's immediate attention. In many such situations, it is understood that Tam had to finish the chore on her own:

The other day I was doing the laundry, when I asked my husband to hang the clothes out on the lines for me. The lines are in the front yard open to our neighbours' view. Hearing this, my mother-in-law immediately requested him to run upstairs to get something for her and she herself did the hanging. As she passed by me she whispered to me: "Next time, dear, don't ask your husband to do these women's jobs in the public. People will laugh at our family and think that all the women in our home are lazy." From then on I never dared to let my husband help me with any housework in the presence of my mother-in-law.

Conclusion

Today's parents are beginning to show willingness, more than ever before, to adjust their styles of educating daughters to the new sociocultural context by re-evaluating the four traditional female virtues. This awareness leads to not only a more flexible and less restrictive upbringing of the daughter, but also a dramatic increase in time and opportunities for her academic and professional pursuits as well as social interactions. As this process of adaptability rolls on, it gradually reduces family emphasis on the daughter's practice of *cong, dung, ngon, hanh*. Such attitudes, however, is not equally adopted by many mothers-in-law. In fact, mothers-in-law still expect their sons' wives to perform the traditional feminine duties, particularly *cong, ngon*, and *dung*, to a great extent. This situation represents a bitter dilemma. While real parents show concern for the moral *hanh*, an *intangible* principle, as the predominant quality they would like to see develop in their daughter, she eventually serves as a daughter-in-law and, ironically, becomes subject to judgment based mostly on her performance of *tangible* qualities: *cong, dung*, and *ngon*. Vietnamese society thus witnesses a glaring contrast between how the denotation of *tu duc* is re-contextualized or *phat huy* in the natal home and how it is reinforced or *ke thua* in the patrilocal home.

This scenario suggests that two distinct versions, old and new, of *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* co-exist in today's Vietnamese family, since the same home can be both natal and patrilocal if it has at least one daughter and one daughter-in-law in co-residence. In other words, these variations of *tu duc* values reveal two contrasting treatments of the daughter and daughter-in-law, the former enjoying more flexibility and leniency while the latter is subject to stricter household demands and conforming behaviour. As such disparity becomes visible through daily routines, it places additional strain on the daughter-in-law's responsibilities and explains to a great extent her often-heard complaint about domestic discrimination and the lack of familial affection at the house of her in-laws.

Also noteworthy about the denotation of *cong* is that it is mostly defined within the confines of *housework*. The daughter-in-law's work outside the home is usually not counted towards her virtue of industry, or *cong*, if her employment does not serve to increase the extended family's budget. Furthermore, such virtue is attributed only to the domestic duties performed by her alone. The husband's share of housework by no means helps his wife earn merit of *cong* since such sharing happens to signify his care and love which should go to his mother first. Technically every mother-in-law being asked what would make her son a good husband will claim that he ought to share his wife's heavy chores. However, when it comes to such practice, the mother would not feel comfortable as his sharing act in her eyes also implies sign of more affection given to his wife than to her.

While every mother-in-law is happy to voice her ideology about sharing, deep inside is a delicate emotion that she would rather hide. Such overlapped domain between divided duties and divided affection not only complicates many husbands' desire to help their wives but also jeopardizes the equal division of labour in marriage in the patrilocal home, as one of my daughter-in-law informants reveals: "Every time I seek help from my husband with household chores in my mother-in-law's presence, she would intervene by asking him to go and do something else for her."

In a word, there exist in parallel two sets of standards for a Vietnamese woman's virtues, one for her own daughter and one for a daughter-in-law. Such double-standard perception testifies that the nature of *tu duc* in the Vietnamese family can be fluid and situational, as the old and new versions of *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* challenge each other under one roof. This complication, however, is yet to be addressed in public discourse simply because bringing it up would mean questioning the four traditional virtues which to date are still glorified as being unique and desirable traits of

Vietnamese femininity. Although the Confucian label of *tam tong, tu duc* is often said to be associated with feudal ideology, by stressing the traditional aspects of *tu duc*, society has somehow upheld its conservative view, giving the mother-in-law the legitimacy to reinforce these ideals in her own domestic sphere.

In this discussion, I hope to have highlighted the lack of shared conditions in today's Vietnamese society for a combination of the old and new versions of *tu duc*. It seems difficult to reach a compromise between the act of "inheriting" (*ke thua*) *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* and that of "developing" (*phat huy*) them. The case of Mai is evidence of many Vietnamese mothers' tendency to adopt a more progressive attitude towards their daughter's practice of *tu duc*, which *phat huy* the four traditional feminine ideals to suit the new social context. Yet, by staying with a more conservative view of *tu duc* towards their daughter-in-law they continue to *ke thua* the feminine standard as traditionally prescribed. The often-heard appeal by many Vietnamese social scientists has been for society to both inherit and develop the four virtues. This view, however, comes as an expressed ideal rather than drawing on a grounded reality. There is mounting evidence that although the *ke thua* and *phat huy* of these four traditional virtues are happening today in many Vietnamese families, each tendency is set in a separate circumstance from others. Hardly is there a common platform where the two versions of *tu duc* can be compromised and negotiated.

Notes

- * I would like to thank Dr Bruce Lockhart for his valuable comments on the earlier version of this paper. My thanks also go to Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydström for their thoughtful suggestions and their endless effort to make the publication of this volume possible.
- 1. According to the 1997 survey on the division of labour conducted by Trung Tam Nghien Cuu Gioi, Gia Dinh, Moi Truong trong Phat Trien (Center for Gender, Family, and Environment in Development), the wife takes charge of 68.1 per cent of house cleaning, 83.7 per cent of clothes washing, 75.4 per cent of cooking and 88.2 per cent of food shopping; and the rest are shared by the husband, grown-up children and others (cited in Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2000:158).
- 2. While Vietnamese married women generally take on heavy domestic responsibilities, their counterparts in the patrilocal residence situation experience a heavier burden of housework. It is not uncommon that the new bride, due

- to the pressure of family harmony, has to perform in silent resentment the extra chores which used to be shared and now are neglected by the husband's sisters (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2000:119-23).
- 3. Two predominant terms referring to post-marital co-residence in Vietnam are *lam dau* and *o re*. *Lam dau* indicates the act of the bride's moving in with her in-laws and *o re* to the same situation for the groom. Literally, *lam* means "to do" or "to work" and *dau* has the double meaning of "bride" and "daughter-in-law", while *o* means "to stay", and *re* is "groom" and "son-in-law". Such terminological differences imply that when a woman shares housing with her husband's family, her primary obligation is *to work*. On the contrary, if a man moves in with his wife's family his duty is just *to stay* (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2000:20).
- 4. The empirical material for this paper was largely drawn from the data collected in Ho Chi Minh City for my M.A. study. Over three fieldwork periods were carried out intermittently between late 1998 and early 2000. Many one-on-one interviews were conducted with 10 former *lam dau* women in their fifties and sixties and 15 current *lam dau* ones in their twenties and thirties. In addition, a survey was carried out with 60 single women aged between 20 and 25 on their opinions of these four female values. For the married group, the phrase "*cong, dung, ngon, hanh*" was avoided and only questions related to their performance of these four virtues at their in-laws' homes were asked. By deliberately not mentioning the maxim "*cong, dung, ngon, hanh*" in the context of their *lam dau* duty, my intention was to allow the informants as much freedom as possible in expressing their views and sharing their experiences of *cong, dung, ngon, hanh* in their own terms. In other words, I hoped to keep the focus group's attitudes from being influenced or distorted by the standard that may be highlighted in the four-virtues label.
- 5. *Gia Huan Ca* is traditionally attributed to Nguyen Trai, a renowned strategist, statesman and scholar in the early fifteenth century (Marr 1981).
- 6. The translation of this family training manual is taken from Hue Tam Ho Tai's *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (1992). The author states that Pham Quynh listed in one of the family education manuals 100 "don'ts" for women.
- 7. Prior to 1918, Vietnamese women were not allowed to sit for the imperial civil examination, whose main educational objective was to train competent men into mandarins. Women gained the right to go to school only under French rule, when the imperial examination system was gradually abolished.
- 8. "Watch the rice pot" provides a woman with proper table manner, advising her not to eat excessively any particular dishes while sharing a meal with others, which would suggest gluttony. And "Mind the surrounding" advises her to watch if her activities are causing inconveniences to other people otherwise it would reveal her lack of attentiveness.

9. Further similar proverbs can be found in Nguyen Dang Khanh (1995). See also Cong Huyen Ton Nu Thi Nha Trang (1973) for a more complete discussion of relevant proverbs.
10. *Hanh* refers to one of the womanly qualities in the four virtues, while *duc hanh ven toan* indicates the "enlightenment" stage in the acquisition of those four attributes.
11. An often-quoted saying to criticize someone who lacks in virtues and morality is *co hoc ma khong co hanh la do vo dung cho xa hoi* (a person with knowledge but without ethics is useless for society). A person without *duc hanh* is often considered as being selfish, arrogant and indifferent to the pains of others. In other words, he or she is not a trustworthy character.
12. The three responsibilities were: (1) responsibility for production and civil service so that their men folk could feel assured to fight at the front; (2) responsibility for running the family and encouraging their men to take part in the revolution; (3) responsibility for taking up arms when there was a need. This movement was for women in the North in competition with the "Five Goods" movement for women in the South. The five goods were good production, good solidarity, good implementation of policies, good study and good education of children (see *Phong Trao Ba Dam Nhiem Trong Phong Trao Chong My Cuu Nuoc*, Nha Xuat Ban Phu Nu, Hanoi, 1965; and *Chu Tich Ho Chi Minh va Con Duong Dua Phu Nu Viet Nam Di Toi Binh Dang, Tu Do va Phat Trien* [President Ho Chi Minh and the Path toward Equality, Freedom and Development for Women], Le Thi, Trung Tam Nghien Cuu Khoa Hoc ve Phu Nu, Hanoi, 1990).
13. Nguyen Khoa Dieu Hong, then President of Hanoi Committee of Vietnam Women's Union, in her speech at its 4th Congress said that to maximize the effect of the "Three Responsibilities" movement, hundreds of *ba dam dang* classes were opened to improve cultural standards of women-cadres at grassroot levels and of army men's wives. This movement was implemented in the North and was carried out until 1974 to compete with the "Five Goods" movement in the South (*Glorious Daughters of Vietnam — Reports of Delegates at the 4th Congress of Vietnamese Women*, Vol. II, published by Vietnam Women's Union, Hanoi 1975:17).
14. Nguyen Thi Dinh was President of the South Vietnam Liberation and Deputy Commander of the People's Liberation Armed Force.
15. Ho Chi Minh, in his speech at the 20th anniversary of Vietnam Women's Union, praised the "long-hair" army led by Nguyen Thi Dinh and urged Northern women to follow her example (*Ho Chu Tich voi Van De Giai Phong Phu Nu*, Nha Xuat Ban Phu Nu, Hanoi 1970:65).
16. Pham Con Son (1996) has a very radical view of what a woman at the turn of the new millennium should be in terms of her life goals and personal advancement. He urges Vietnamese mothers not to encourage their daughters

- to get married early in order to have more time for their professional development. He also urges young women to be clearly oriented toward their career and be self-sufficient and not to take their husband's success as the ultimate goal of their life since it may create a sense of dependence. However, in terms of appropriate feminine behaviour, Pham Con Son glorifies the traditional traits of the Vietnamese woman: charming, modest, gentle, skilful in words and work. In short, he highly values the four female virtues and stresses that today a woman should be more sociable, career-minded and at the same time try to cultivate her femininity. He argues that a woman who holds a high position in society but lacks those desirable feminine virtues will hardly win admiration from people around her. If his view is to be shared by the majority of the population, then it is doubtful that Nguyen Thi Dinh would be considered a role model for the contemporary Vietnamese woman to follow now that the war is over.
17. Today this eight-golden-word slogan is occasionally heard but it is often associated with the revolutionary background. For example, General Secretary Do Muoi on the 65th anniversary of Vietnam Women's Union in 1995 awarded Vietnamese women a picture embroidered with these eight words to praise their devotion to the national liberation. In this same year, the government granted 34,312 elderly women who lost their children to the revolution the title "Vietnamese Heroic Mother" (*Ba Me Viet Nam Anh Hung*) in acknowledgement of their contribution during the war (Le Minh 1997).
 18. *Tam tong* (three submissions) demanded a woman to submit to her father when young, to her husband when married, and to her eldest son when widowed. Phan Thanh Hao (1992), Pham Con Son (1996), and Le Thi Nham Tuyet (2000) share the same view that *tam tong* are no longer suitable in today's social context.
 19. Thanh Truc (1988) in her article "Femininity in present-day Society" commented that the Vietnamese woman in the fast-changing society now should add an "industrial" attitude to her traditional traits, rather than adopt a complete "masculinization" mannerism by doing exactly what men do. However, the author did not elaborate on what traditional traits should be kept and what should be modified.
 20. Marr in his study of Vietnamese youth in the 1990s observes that Saigon students summarized preferences for study fields in the following slogan: "First English, second Informatics, third Economics, and fourth Law" ("Vietnamese Youth in the 1990s", Australian-Vietnam Research Project, Working Paper no. 3, November 1996).
 21. A survey conducted among 500 unmarried men and women by sociologist Nguyen Minh Hoa shows that 60.2 per cent accept the idea of pre-marital sex (*Hon Nhan va Gia Dinh o Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh: Nhan Dien va Du Bao*, Nha Xuat Ban Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1998).

22. This paragraph is a summary of David Marr's observation of Vietnamese youth in the 1990s.
23. It is a custom in Vietnam to confine a new mother to her sleeping quarters during the first postnatal month. It is believed that after delivery a woman is as weak as a soft-shelled crab and needs to get as much rest as possible to rejuvenate her health. Working or moving around the house more than necessary is assumed to seriously affect her health in the long term. For the daughter-in-law, this custom carries practical meaning: having a good excuse to ask for her mother-in-law's permission to go back to her own family for a month. But in practice many new mothers try to stay as long as they can at their natal home.
24. At the time I was doing my second round of fieldwork in June 1999, Saturday was still considered a full working day. But in the mid-2000, the Vietnamese government announced that Saturday was an official off-work day for the civil service and state-owned sectors. In many private-owned and foreign companies, though, employees continue to work on Saturday.

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