

TOO LATE TO MARRY: FAILURE, FATE OR FORTUNE? FEMALE SINGLEHOOD IN RURAL NORTH VIỆT NAM

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This chapter discusses rural Vietnamese women who are daughters, sisters, and aunts, rarely mothers and certainly not wives: women considered too old to marry. In Việt Nam, as in many other Asian countries, marriage and motherhood are strong social norms, and legitimate alternatives to married life are almost non-existent. The question that arises regarding single women past a certain age is not "why are these women single?" but rather, "Why are these women not married yet?" In rural North Việt Nam, the socially defined period for a woman's entry and exit from the marriage market is relatively short: five to seven years, which span the ages between eighteen and twenty-five years. Past the "fatal" age, most women make the transition from temporary to permanent non-marriage; they become *ế chồng* or *quá lứa*.

Unmarried women in Việt Nam and other Southeast and East Asian countries have attracted little attention in the past simply because there were so few of them; female marriage was "nearly universal."² Recently, however, demographic data indicate that female marriage is losing ground in many Asian societies. More and more women remain single in their thirties, an unexpected demographic change that challenges our notion of Asian families.³ While the phenomenon is more acute in large urban areas, rural women too are marrying less than in the past.

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² Peter Smith, "Asian Marriage Patterns in Transition," *Journal of Family History* 5,1 (1980): 58-96.

³ Gavin Jones, "The Demise of Universal Marriage in East and South-East Asia," in *The Continuing Demographic Transition*, ed. Gavin Jones, R. M. Douglas, J. C. Caldwell, and R. M. D'Souza (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 51-79; and Richard Leete, "The Continuing Flight from Marriage and Parenthood Among the Overseas Chinese in East and Southeast Asia: Dimensions and Implications," *Population and Development Review* 20,4 (1994): 811-830.

Data for Việt Nam also indicate that relatively high proportions of women are remaining single in their thirties and forties. In 1989, among women aged thirty to thirty-four years, 10 percent in rural areas were never-married and 15 percent in urban areas were never-married.⁴ To explain the phenomenon in Việt Nam, the literature has stressed the very low sex ratio—the ratio of available men to women—due to excessive male mortality during the American War.⁵ For younger cohorts, sex ratios are more favorable, but proportions of never-married women in their middle to late twenties suggest that singlehood will probably remain stable or even increase. In Việt Nam and other countries where marriage appears to have become less desirable, we know little about the underlying processes responsible for the “demise of marriage.”⁶ Equally unknown are the lives, roles, and statuses of never-married women. This chapter addresses these issues for women in Việt Nam.

Our study is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with twenty-two never-married women and family members of fifteen such women, living in two villages located in the Hà Nội environs. Based on these data, we first study the circumstances that led these women to remain unmarried, in an attempt to identify “paths” to singlehood. Our analysis situates women’s lives in their families and households. In order to contextualize female singlehood, however, we also take into account the broader social and historical contexts. Secondly, we document women’s current lives and roles in their households. Throughout the analysis, we compare women who went through their “marriageable ages” at different periods of Việt Nam’s recent history. The oldest women we interviewed were young during the American War, while the youngest ones reached their prime ages for marriage under the first decade of *đổi mới*.

Our study of these women’s lives indicates that the collective absolute desirability of marriage has been replaced by some women’s ability to envision lifelong singlehood. We argue that this change resulted from a combination of contextual constraints and women’s agency. A greater acceptability of non-marriage was brought about by the war, by socialist attempts to reform marriage and family, as well as by increasing family wealth since *đổi mới*. At the micro-level, women’s agency manifests itself in family conflict that arises when it comes time for women to choose a mate, especially if they refuse potential partners, which may ultimately lead to the state of being permanently unmarried. We suggest that the experience of the women whom we call “war spinsters” acted as a catalyst to make singlehood more acceptable for younger generations. Overall, our evidence points to the changing position of daughters in families as a central element that helps explain the reduced desirability of marriage in rural areas. An analysis of women’s current lives, however, shows that single women are far from being fully accepted by, and integrated in, their families and communities. In this second part of the chapter, we document important discrepancies between birth cohorts as to the degree of independence women currently hold. While younger women can aspire to autonomy and access to inheritance, older women are dependent and anomalous

⁴ General Statistical Office, “Detailed Analysis of Sample Results: Việt Nam Population Census 1989” (Hà Nội: General Statistical Office, 1991).

⁵ Daniel Goodkind, “The Vietnamese Double Marriage Squeeze,” *International Migration Review* 31,1 (1997): 108-127; and Jones, “The Demise of Universal Marriage,” pp. 51-79.

⁶ Jones, “The Demise of Universal Marriage,” pp. 51-79.

family members who must pay a high price for their refusal and/or inability to marry.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SINGLEHOOD

Proportions of those never-married vary across time and societies: spinsters and bachelors may be extremely rare or relatively common. In turn, permanent singlehood may be a social anomaly or a legitimate life option in different societies, and at different times. In the socio-demographic literature, Asia and Europe are often contrasted as examples of these two possible cases. John Hajnal identified a pattern of late marriage and the high prevalence of permanent celibacy in Western Europe, but one of early and nearly universal marriage in Asia.⁷ Based on these observations, early marriage is believed to be conducive to universal marriage, while later marriage is said to result in a higher proportion of people never marrying. Yet, empirical evidence has challenged this theoretical relationship between the timing and the prevalence of marriage. Ruth Dixon highlighted what she called a few "deviant cases," such as Japan and Ireland.⁸ Dixon noted that between 1920 and 1950 in Japan, marriage was postponed, while practically everyone married by age forty-five. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland, the timing of male marriage did not vary much, yet the incidence of marriage in different parts of the country did.

In trying to elucidate mechanisms leading to these exceptions, Dixon developed a theoretical framework in which she singled out three factors explaining variations in the timing and prevalence of marriage: the desirability of marriage, the feasibility of marriage, and the availability of potential partners. The desirability of marriage refers to cultural and social norms making singlehood acceptable or unacceptable. When the desirability of marriage is very high, very few men and women never marry. The feasibility of marriage defines the economic conditions required to enter a union. When these conditions are difficult to reach in a given time and space, marriage is less feasible and, therefore, less prevalent. Very adverse economic conditions or requirements for an expensive dowry may, for instance, create situations where marriage is more difficult. The availability of potential partners depends on the number of men relative to the number of women. When there is a deficit of males due to a war or migration, as in the case of Việt Nam, the sex ratio is low and the marriage market less favorable for women.

In her analysis of the relative importance of these three factors, Dixon concludes that the desirability of marriage is the most important factor accounting for differences in proportions of people married across societies. A deficit of males or females in certain age groups may easily be overcome by adaptation of the matching criteria concerning rules that define homogamy, endogamy, the preferable age difference between spouses, and other criteria defining an

⁷ John Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective," in *Population in History*, ed. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (London: Edwards Arnold, 1965), pp. 101-143.

⁸ Ruth B. Dixon, "Explaining Cross-cultural Variations in Age at Marriage and Proportions Never Marrying," *Population Studies* 25,2 (1971): 215-233; and Ruth B. Dixon, "Late Marriage and Non-Marriage as Demographic Responses: Are They Similar?," *Population Studies* 32,3 (1978): 449-466.

acceptable match.⁹ While the availability of mates does matter, a scarcity of prospective partners does not prove to be a rigid obstacle to marriage.¹⁰

The desirability of marriage varies depending on the absence or the presence of life options for women that offer opportunities beyond marriage and childbearing. Scholars have hypothesized that in Asia, as in most developing regions, rates of singlehood have been particularly low, since the only acceptable social roles for women were those of wife and mother.¹¹ In contrast, Western Europe offered women other life options besides marriage: they could be nurses, teachers, or *religieuses*. These careers permitted unmarried women to gain or maintain a degree of economic independence without the support of a husband.¹² But women in Europe might also remain unmarried as a result of difficult circumstances. Adverse economic conditions during mortality crises or periods of extreme poverty sometimes made it necessary for a daughter to stay in the household. This daughter would act as a substitute for another family member and provide indispensable labor. In these cases, non-marriage was not the outcome of a quest for autonomy; rather, it was part of a family strategy to ensure survival of other family members.

Variations in timing and prevalence of marriage between Europe and Asia have elsewhere been linked to family system (nuclear versus stem or extended) and marriage type (arranged by the parents or not).¹³ In pre-industrial England, young couples were required to set up an independent household after marriage. This characteristic of the nuclear family system was conducive to later marriage and encouraged individuals to enter the labor force before entering a union. In contrast, the stem and extended families of Asia did not put economic pressure on the newly married couples, as newlyweds were expected to live with the parents of the groom, either temporarily or permanently. In sum, the patrilocal, patriarchal, and patrilineal kinship system prevalent in East and South Asia, together with the system of arranged marriages, created favorable conditions for early and universal marriage.

In sociological scholarship, few theoretical works address singlehood. In this context, Peter J. Stein is often noted, for he has put forward a typology of singles for Western cultures.¹⁴ He distinguishes "voluntary" from "involuntary" singles. Among people voluntarily single, he identifies those who are "ambivalent" (not

⁹ Dixon, "Late Marriage and Non-Marriage as Demographic Responses," pp. 449-466; and Louis Henry, "Perturbations de la nuptialité résultant de la guerre 1914-18," *Population* 21,2 (1966): 273-332.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Jelin, "Celibacy, Solitude, and Personal Autonomy: Individual Choice and Social Constraints," in *Family Systems and Cultural Change*, ed. Elza Berquo and Peter Xenos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 109-124.

¹¹ Susan Cotts Watkins, "Spinsters," *Journal of Family History* (Winter 1984): 310-339; and Laurel L. Cornell, "Why Are There No Spinsters in Japan?," *Journal of Family History* (Winter 1984): 326-339.

¹² Tamara Hareven and L. A. Tilly, "Solitary Women and Family Mediation in America and French Textile Cities," *Annales de Démographie Historique* (1981): 253-271.

¹³ Kingsley Davis and Judith Blake, "Social Structure and Fertility: An Analytic Framework," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 4 (1955): 211-235; Dixon, "Explaining Cross-cultural Variations in Age at Marriage"; and Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective."

¹⁴ Peter J. Stein, "Understanding Single Adulthood," in *Single Life: Unmarried Adults in Social Context*, ed. Peter Stein (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

seeking but open to the idea of marriage) and those who are "resolved" (consciously prefer singlehood). Singles who have not deliberately chosen non-marriage are either "wishful" or "regretful." Davies's more dynamic perspective of unmarried life suggests that singlehood is a status involving multiple transitions.¹⁵ For example, while one may anticipate marriage earlier in life, if that marriage fails to take place, a person's marital expectations are often gradually replaced by a more stable single identity.

ASIAN AND VIETNAMESE CONTEXTS

In Confucian Asia, marriage was expected and singlehood feared. Marriage was a natural step of the life-course, not a matter for reflection. The few who did not enter married life were usually the handicapped or the extremely disadvantaged. Given this cultural context, nearly all men and women were married by age thirty-five to forty.¹⁶ Things have changed, however. Rates of women remaining single in their thirties among overseas Chinese of Asia and in several countries of East and Southeast Asia clearly indicate that near-universal marriage is no longer the norm throughout the region. Richard Leete suggests that, for female cohorts of overseas Chinese born in the 1950s, we may observe rates of permanent celibacy and childlessness close to those observed in some European countries at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ In a cultural setting where female non-marriage was an aberration until recently, proportions of singlehood among women aged thirty to thirty-four years, which range as high as 15 percent, are puzzling. What is particularly striking is the magnitude of the increase among women in their early thirties (age group thirty to thirty-four) between 1960 and 1990. For example, the proportion of never-married women in this age group rose from 2 to 11 percent in Taiwan, from 7 to 14 percent in Thailand, and from 2 to 15 percent in Peninsular Malaysia over this thirty-year period.¹⁸ Jones also showed that the trend is particularly acute in large urban centers, such as Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Manila, where between 20 and 30 percent of women aged thirty to thirty-four were single in 1990.

While no series data are yet available for Việt Nam to document whether rates of singlehood are increasing there, reflecting the increase in other Asian countries, there is no reason to think that Việt Nam might be immune from this change. As shown by Table 1, non-marriage is more prevalent among women than men in Vietnam.¹⁹ Interestingly, high proportions of never-married women are not accompanied by an increase in age at the time of marriage among cohorts (data not shown). All recent demographic surveys indicate that age at the time of marriage remains stable across cohorts of Vietnamese women: the average age for marriage is

¹⁵ Lorraine Davies, "Transitions and Singlehood: The Forgotten Life Course," paper presented at Canadian Gerontological Association meetings, Halifax, October 1998.

¹⁶ Smith, "Asian Marriage Patterns in Transition," pp. 58-96; and United Nations Department of International Economics and Social Affairs, *Patterns of First Marriage: Timing and Prevalence* (New York: United Nations, 1990).

¹⁷ Leete, "The Continuing Flight from Marriage and Parenthood."

¹⁸ Jones, "The Demise of Universal Marriage," p. 55.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 51-79.

about twenty-one years.²⁰ It is therefore reasonable to think that proportions of never-married women between age thirty and thirty-nine do not simply reflect a delay of marriage. Analyses of Việt Nam's nuptiality data unanimously point to the very low sex ratios—male to female—that followed the American War in order to explain high rates of unmarried women. Preliminary results of the 1999 census suggest that the squeeze is now over and that young cohorts do not suffer from a scarcity of partners as did the previous generations (Table 2). But given historical examples that show populations have adapted to distorted sex ratios even in post-war periods (for instance, the post-World War II period in France), a strictly demographic explanation is of little value.²¹

Table 1. Proportion (in percent) of Never Married by Sex, Age, and Rural and Urban Residence. 1989. Sample results of census.

Age Group	Rural		Urban	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
25-29	15	16.6	25	39
30-34	10	4.6	15	13
35-39	7.4	2.2	13	6
40-44	5	1.3	8	3.6

Source: General Statistical Office, 1991

Table 2. Sex Ratios (Males/Females) at Peak Marrying Ages, Việt Nam, 1979, 1989, 1999

	20-24	25-29	30-34	M25-29/ F20-24
1979	0.88	0.88	0.90	0.67
1989	0.92	0.91	0.91	0.86
1999	0.94	0.99	0.98	1.07

Source: Data for 1979 and 1989: General Statistical Office, 1979, 1991. Data for 2000: 1999 *Population and Housing Census: Sample Results* (Hà Nội: Thế Giới Publishers, 2000).

²⁰ National Committee for Population and Family Planning, *Demographic and Health Survey 1997* (Hà Nội: Author, 1999).

²¹ Henry, "Perturbations de la nuptialité résultant de la guerre 1914-18," pp. 273-332.

In sum, the changing desirability of marriage is no longer disputable, but the reasons for this change remain largely unexplored. One hypothesis focuses on the changing status of women.²² With increasing education, urbanization, and women's entry into the workforce in massive numbers, women have more opportunities and may find marriage *per se* less indispensable. Rather than marrying at any cost, they wish to marry "well." Their economic independence also makes the delay of marriage, and even lifelong singlehood, possible. Leete suggests that female singlehood is increasing among overseas Chinese because educated women refuse to marry "down," meaning they refuse to marry men who are less educated than they are and probably earn a lower income than they do.²³ Not enough "superior" males would be available to these educated women, whose proportion has dramatically increased.²⁴ Persistent matching criteria in a changing society would thus make marriage more difficult. Such studies begin to clarify the situation of single women in urban areas, but no research has specifically addressed the issue of increasing singlehood in rural areas.

METHOD AND DATA

The present analysis is based on verbatim transcription of twenty-two qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with single women in two villages located near Hà Nội. Interviews were also conducted with a family member of fifteen of the women. Numbers of women and other family members interviewed in each village are shown in Table 3 (below). In the first village, located fifteen kilometers north of Hà Nội in the district of Gia Lâm, women are

Table 3. Number of Interviews per Village

<i>Village</i>	Estimated number of single women <i>ế chồng</i> in the village*	Number of women interviewed	Number of family members interviewed
Village 1	26	14	9
Village 2	50	8	6
Total	76	22	15

* These estimates come from the village leaders and have been confirmed during the focus group discussions conducted in each village. The women considered *ế chồng* (too old to marry) are twenty-five and over in both villages. A few other women may be included in these estimates, such as women suspected of no longer being virgins. In Village 1, nine of these twenty-six women have a child outside of wedlock. An additional four women that married as second wives were mentioned in the group *ế chồng* but are not included in the total of twenty-six. This number represents six percent of the women in their reproductive ages as recorded in the village records for 1997. We did not obtain such detailed information for the second village.

²² Jones, "The Demise of Universal Marriage," pp. 51-79.

²³ Leete, "The Continuing Flight from Marriage and Parenthood."

²⁴ Jones, "The Demise of Universal Marriage."

heavily involved in the trade of textiles. Women are economically powerful and, in many cases, earn most, if not all, of the family income. The second village, located about fifteen kilometers from Hà Nội in the district of Thanh Trì, is far less prosperous. Most families rely on agriculture and earn supplementary income by making and selling tofu and/or by raising pigs. Some families are extremely poor. We expected to find differences in the lives, roles, and statuses of the women interviewed between the two villages, but instead we found that the cases were remarkably similar, and it proved more relevant to analyze the group of women as a whole rather than studying women in the two villages separately.

In both areas we worked with the leaders of the village. We asked our informants to identify women considered *ế chồng rồi* (no longer marriageable) by the villagers. We did not set an age group *a priori* but, rather, we let the community establish who these women were based on their local rules as to when one exits the marriage market. Members of the two villages easily identified and agreed upon which women were considered no longer marriageable. A few of the relevant characteristics of these women appear in Table 4 (below). The women interviewed were between ages twenty-six and fifty-one. The table shows that fourteen of the twenty-two women are the first- or second-born of their sibling sets, that sixteen are from families with five or more children, and that fourteen had lost one or both of their parents. All women received offers of marriage; we distinguish between offers received before age twenty-five and those received after. Among the twenty-two women interviewed, four had one or two biological children; single women with no children lived with family members.

We designed our interview guidelines based on previous research experience on marriage and the family and after the completion of one focus group discussion in each village with influential members of the community. The guideline was composed of six sections: socio-demographic; health history and status; personal and family life history; self-perception of marital status; and plans for the future. The current study is not about sexual orientation or preference. We did not ask questions about this issue, but rather let the interviewees choose what they could comfortably reveal. None of them presented herself as being lesbian. In fact, a striking feature of these women's lives was their lack of close female friends (married or unmarried). We asked women about their experiences with heterosexual intimacy and sexuality. All the childless women we interviewed, but one, said they had no sexual experience.

The interviews with a co-residing family member of fifteen of the women included questions on family background and history, family's perceptions as to why the woman did not marry, as well as the family's expectations and plans for the future for their unmarried daughter or sister. Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. Women and family members interviewed participated with enthusiasm, although the issue awakened grief and sadness for some.²⁵

²⁵ The protocol of this study was submitted and approved by the Ethics Review Board of the home institution of the first author of this chapter.

Table 4. Characteristics of Women Interviewed

First Name	Year of birth	Birth order and family size	Sex composition of sibling set	Number of parties before age 25	Number of parties after age 25 and marital status of the men	Survival of parents	Current living arrangement and family responsibility
1. Hoi	1947	1 st of 8	4 brothers and 3 sisters	1	3 ever-married	Both parents died	Lives with younger brother, helps him in doing business.
2. Can	1947	2 nd of 6	3 brothers and 2 sisters	4	3-4 single	Mother died	Lives with father and family of second brother. Takes care of father and helps brother.
3. Con	1947	4 th of 4	2 sisters and 1 brother	1	4 ever-married	Both parents died	Lives with nephew, a brother's son.
4. Them	1953	1 st of 7	4 brothers and 2 sisters	3-4	2 ever-married	Mother died	Lives with father, takes care of him.
5. Minh	1955	1 st of 5	3 brothers and 1 sister	3	1 single and 2 ever-married	Both parents alive	Lives with her 2-year-old son.
6. Vui	1955	1 st of 2	1 brother	1	1 single	Both parents died	Lives with her 6-year-old daughter and her younger brother. Main laborer.
7. Lan	1956	2 nd of 8	1 brother and 6 sisters	2	2 ever-married	Father died	Father died. Lives with mother and four single siblings.
8. Cai	1956	2 nd of 8	4 brothers and 3 sisters	2	2 ever-married	Father died	Lives with mother, takes care of her.
9. Trang	1957	1 st of 7	3 brothers and 3 sisters	0	1 widowed	Both parents alive	Lives with parents and two single siblings.
10. Loan	1957	3 rd of 5		1	3 ever-married	Father died	Lives with two children.
11. Hao	1958	1 st of 4		1	3 ever-married	Father died	Lives with her daughter.
12. Nguyệt	1964	3 rd of 4	2 brothers and 1 sister	0	1 single and 2 ever-married	Both parents died	Lives in the same house with eldest brother's family but eats alone.
13. Binh	1965	1 st of 4	2 sisters and 1 brother	0	3 single	Both parents alive	Lives with parents and 2 single sisters and brother's family. Main laborer.
14. Mui	1968	4 th of 7	3 brothers and 3 sisters	1	1 ever-married	Both parents alive	Lives with parents and a single brother. Main laborer.
15. Van	1968	2 nd of 5	3 brothers and 1 sister	0	0	Both parents died	Lives alone.
16. Hanh	1970	1 st of 5	1 brother and 3 sisters	3	0	Both parents alive	Lives with parents and single siblings.
17. Qui	1970	2 nd of 8	3 brothers and 4 sisters	2	1 single	Both parents alive	Lives with parents and single siblings.
18. Phuong	1971	5 th of 5	2 brothers and 2 sisters	4	1 single	Father died	Lives with mother.
19. Hong	1971	2 nd of 2	1 brother	1	0	Both parents alive	Lives with parents. Main laborer, takes care of parents.
20. Thinh	1972	4 th of 8	1 brother and 6 sisters	2	1 single	Father died	Lives with mother and two single sisters and brother's family.
21. Mai	1972	4 th of 5	2 brothers and 2 sisters	2	1 single	Both parents alive	Lives with parents.
22. Hang	1973	6th of 6	4 brothers + 1 sister	3	0	Father died	Lives with parents.

PATHS TO SINGLEHOOD

A dominant theme emerging from our interviews is that most women made a definitive transition from temporary to permanent non-marriage. This transition occurred when they reached their mid-twenties, an age at which they were socially considered too old to enter a good marriage. All women interviewed received offers of marriage and did not express regrets for having refused them. Instead, they felt that their refusals had been in their best interest.

We could categorize the unmarried state of these women as “involuntary,” to use one of Stein’s categories of singlehood.²⁶ As we shall see below, the state in which they found themselves—not having formed a family (*không có gia đình*)—was not the outcome of a deliberate choice in favor of singlehood, but of constraints and doubts about what marriage had to offer. Stein’s typology further divides the involuntary singles into the “wishful” and the “regretful.” The women we interviewed do not quite fit either of these groups. Few entertain any hope or wish to marry, and those who lament their single status are rare. They do not attribute their being unmarried to their failure to marry, but rather to their fate, a recurrent theme we will explore below.

If marriage is so highly desirable and spinsterhood such a curse, why and how did these women reach the fatal age still single? What are the mechanisms that made them exit the marriage market? To explore the paths to unmarried life, we rely on women’s accounts of their prime ages for marriage. Women recalled all the offers they received and why they did not result in a union. A two-level process emerged from these women’s experiences. First of all, during their youth (from ages eighteen to twenty-five), women aspired to find a good match. A good match was defined as a man who was older than the woman, had access to housing and land, did not have too many dependents (parents and unmarried siblings), was gentle, serious, hard working, and resided in the same village. Also, the two families had to come from the same socioeconomic group (*môn đẳng hộ đối*). Once women approached their mid-twenties, these candidates were practically out of their reach, as eligible men and their families would consider younger women first.

However, these women in their mid-twenties still might have married. Strategies that enable a woman to enter marriage at a later age include marrying a divorced or widowed man (potentially with young children); becoming the second wife (concubine) of a married man (probably to have a son); or marrying a very poor and landless or disabled man. Since having children is the fundamental objective of marriage, the last stretch of the reproductive years (defined as the mid-thirties) roughly defines the final exit out of the marriage market. All the women of our sample were over twenty-five and clearly perceived themselves as being too old for a good match. All of them, however, had received offers from these less desirable candidates.

With this pattern outlined, we next explore the different paths to singlehood in the context of a first- and second-class marriage market as socially delimited by the age of the woman. Two questions emerged from this life-course perspective: “why did these women not marry while they were part of the highly desirable first-class marriage market between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five?” and “why did they not enter, or intend to enter, the second-class marriage market in

²⁶ Stein, “Understanding Single Adulthood.”

their late twenties and thirties?" The analysis of the data uncovers significant distinctions in the transition from temporary to permanent non-marriage between birth cohorts.

CONSTRAINTS: WAR AND FATE

Women born in the late 1940s and 1950s reached their twentieth birthdays between 1965 and 1979. Many saw their most favorable ages for marriage slip away during years of war and adverse economic circumstances. These women interpreted their situations as being the result of fate (*cái duyên cái số*). For them, fate refers to very harsh family situations that obliged them to take on family responsibilities as older sisters and faithful daughters. Marriage was practically out of the question because these women had to stay home and take care of others.

Their position in the sibling set played an important role in their lives: most of the women born in the late 1940s and 1950s were either the first or second born of their families (see Table 4). Besides sharing a similar sibling position, most women came from large families where care of siblings and agricultural labor could not be completely managed by parents and other family members. The survival of the family sometimes depended heavily on an older daughter.

Trang was born in 1957. She is the oldest in a family of seven children. Her father had been away in the army since her early childhood and her mother was actively involved in politics. At the end of the war in 1975, she was eighteen, and her father came home ill and weak. She did not even consider marriage, although many men asked her. She had to be home to take care of her siblings.

She says, "I never thought about marriage. My family was poor, my parents had to work hard to make ends meet. I have many brothers and sisters so I never thought of getting married and having my own children."

Family dependence on elder daughters was particularly acute in families with several daughters and one or few sons. In these families, parents were losing more labor by marrying their daughters out than they were gaining from the few daughters-in-law who were brought into the family.

Lan, who was born in 1956, is the oldest in a family of seven daughters and one son. Her father died in 1991, and she currently lives with her mother and three of her siblings who are still unmarried, one of whom is disabled. She did not marry for two reasons, because she was needed in the household and also because marrying seven daughters out is very difficult for parents.

She says, "Several people wanted to ask me [to marry] when I was young, but my family situation was difficult. My sisters were all small; I did not want to get married. I could not leave my family in this situation."

Family members' perspectives on these women's lives confirm that family circumstances, and not failure to find suitable mates, mainly explain why the women did not marry during their prime in their youth. When younger, these

daughters were desperately needed in the household. For these women, singlehood had not been a choice, but the outcome of unfortunate circumstances. Parents sadly perceived their daughters' lives as having been sacrificed. As had been true in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, keeping a daughter home rather than marrying her out was a family survival strategy, a strategy that overrode opportunities for marriage, even though marriage was highly desirable.

Trang's mother, who is now sixty-three, acknowledges that her daughter did not marry as a result of difficult family circumstances that created a need for her in the household.

She says, "I had a hard life. Frankly speaking, she has many younger siblings; she is the eldest among my children. She hesitated about marriage from year to year. Now it is too late; she is over forty already."

Women who did not serve in the military, but are nonetheless war spinsters, have received little attention in the literature about Vietnamese women's participation in the American War.²⁷ According to our data, some young women stayed home to replace a father or an older brother who had gone to war or was deceased, but some also stayed to replace their mothers, who were directly involved in war or revolutionary activities. Unlike female veterans, who enjoyed access to education, paid employment, and the right to live in the city, older single women who did not serve in the military did not gain any social or financial recognition for their indirect participation in the war and revolutionary activities.²⁸

Clearly, the desirability of marriage changed during and after the war, as did the position of daughters in families. Following these difficult years, all women in our study could still have married. Indeed, they all received offers for marriage in their late twenties and thirties. But most of them believed that, if they could not marry young, it was their fate to remain single. They perceived themselves as having been sacrificed, and a late marriage would have entailed a second sacrifice they were not willing to make. Why bother entering a marriage that will potentially bring one more suffering? After raising siblings, why raise the children of a widowed or divorced man? Women interviewed strongly asserted their right to refuse marriage at an older age. The role that they had played in their households gave them the right to make decisions for themselves. Even if parents and siblings strongly opposed their daughters' choice never to marry despite pending offers, they respected them as adults, and no longer defined them strictly as either daughters or sisters.

²⁷ See Susan C. Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War, Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1999); and Karen Gottschang Turner with Phan Thanh Hào, *Even the Women Must Fight* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998). As part of our broader interest in single women, we also interviewed seventeen women living in urban areas. Veterans from rural areas who had moved to Hà Nội following the war were numerous in this sub-group of women. Since this analysis is strictly concerned with single women currently living in rural areas, we do not analyze these cases in this paper.

²⁸ Danièle Bélanger, "Past the Marriageable Age and Still Single: Choice or Constraint? Paths to Unmarried Life in Viet Nam," paper presented at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Los Angeles, March 2000.

Cần, born in 1947, is second in a family of six children. She was taking care of her siblings at an early age, as her father was involved in politics. She replaced him at home. Her mother died when she was about thirty. Cần became the main caregiver of her siblings. When she was between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two several men wanted to marry her, but she refused. When she was older, she had a few other offers from men who had been married before, but she refused because none of them would have brought her a brighter future.

She says, "I would never marry [to be a second wife]. Since I sacrificed [my youth], I might as well sacrifice all my life. I could never marry like that. When I was young, many young and handsome men asked me, but I refused. Now I am old and aging. It is much better to stay single than to marry a stupid man."

AGENCY: SHAPING ONE'S FATE

While the women whom we call "war spinsters" did not enter the first and most desirable marriage market in their youth, other women we interviewed did. These women were born in different periods, but we find most of them among the younger cohorts who were in their early twenties during the 1980s and 1990s. Most of these women remained single as a result of the increasing power of daughters, manifested here in their power to decide for themselves whom and when to marry.

In the villages studied, women typically do not choose their husbands, but wait to receive offers from men and their families. In the past, research suggests that if a woman received an offer of marriage and her parents agreed to it, she would generally not protest and would agree to marry. Marriage was "arranged" by parents. Since the socialist state made arranged marriages illegal, the situation changed in part: rural women rarely chose their future husbands, but they were comparatively more likely to refuse marriage offers. Nowadays, parents and daughters must reach a consensus when they are selecting a husband for the daughter.²⁹ If the parents or the woman refuse a particular candidate, the offer is aborted. This dynamic between the parents and their daughter increases the risk that a young woman will not be married in a timely fashion. A few patterns illustrated below show how marriage patterns and expectations may lead to singlehood.

A woman's faithfulness to a first love who, for one reason or another, does not marry her commonly leads her to refuse subsequent candidates and, ultimately, to live out her life as a single woman.

Côn was born in 1947 and is the youngest in a family of four. When she was eighteen, she fell in love with a young man in the neighboring village, but her parents did not agree to their marriage because he had no job [in fact he

²⁹ Danièle Bélanger and Khuất Thu Hồng, "Marriage and the Family in Urban North Vietnam, 1965-1993," *Journal of Population* 2.1 (1996): 83-112; and Danièle Bélanger, "Changements familiaux au Vietnam depuis 1960: trente années de formation des couples à Hanoi," *Autrepart* 2 (1997): 33-51.

was looking for a job in a state factory]. In the following years, several men proposed, but she refused all of them because they were not good matches. One man was widowed; another was an alcoholic and a gambler; the third wanted to marry her as a second wife.

She says, "... these people were not compatible with me [*không hợp*]. All I wanted was someone similar to me, but that [the first love] failed."

If there is evidence or a general suspicion that a young woman engaged in premarital sex with a man whom she did not eventually marry, this may exclude her from the marriage market. Women's relative freedom during courtship, which sometimes leads to having sex, may have severe consequences for them.

Hằng is twenty-six years old, smart, and, according to local criteria, very good looking. She works as a tailor. Her family is rather poor in comparison with other families in the village because others run businesses while her family does not. Hằng is the youngest child in the family. Her father died three years ago, and she now takes care of her sixty-eight-year-old mother. She had two offers for marriage. The first man was her brother's friend. At the time she was eighteen, but, since she did not like him, she refused. The second man came when she was twenty. She wanted to accept the offer, but her parents did not agree because he was not from the same village. She then fell in love with a man from her village when she was twenty-three. Their relationship developed to the degree that she engaged in sexual relations with him. She sincerely thought they would marry. But due to opposition from his family, they had to part. Because villagers know about her intimate relationship with that man, no other man will ever want to marry her.

She cries and says, "Because I am in this situation [no longer a virgin], no one will ever pay attention to me. The whole village knows that I loved him. This is why I will never marry."

Other women attribute their refusal of numerous marriage candidates to the poor prospects that marriage offers compared with remaining single. Most of these cases are found among women from the poorest families. As a result of the rather strict rule of endogamy (both in the strict sense of the word and in the sense of social endogamy, *môn đẳng hộ đối*), women from poor families received offers from poor men or men from other villages. These men generally had no education, were landless, or had many dependents. Some had a reputation for alcoholism or gambling. Often, marriage to such a man would have destined a woman to a harder life than the one she already had.

Phượng is the youngest child in a family of five. She was born in 1971. In total, she and her family were approached by five men who offered to marry her. When she was nineteen, she had a first offer from a man from the same village who was three years older than her. She did not like him and refused the offer; she felt they were not made for one another (*không hợp duyên, hợp số*). Two years later a man from a nearby village expressed

his interest in marrying her. She refused because his family earned a living by collecting and selling firewood, which she considered to be too difficult. When she was twenty-three, a man a year older than she was, and from another village, came to ask for her hand. She did not accept because he was extremely poor; he had many young siblings, and the family owned very little land. The fourth man proposed to her when she was twenty-five; he was one year younger than she. He was from a village where families live from the culture and trade of flowers. She did not want to marry a younger man (afraid to look older than him) and worried that she would not be a good daughter-in-law in the culture of flowers, since she did not have any relevant knowledge. The most recent offer came from a man one year older than she was. He was from a family better off than hers, but, at this point, she did not feel healthy, was afraid of being looked down upon, and didn't want to be a burden for him and his family.

She says, "I think that it is difficult to marry because my family and I really do not have any money, absolutely no economic resources. Daily life is so difficult. I think I will not marry, just stay home."

Binh was born in 1965 and was the first child in a family of four children. Her family is very poor. Her first offer for marriage came when she was thirty, but she refused because she was afraid of not being able to fulfill the expectations her husband's family would have had. The second offer came from a man with a bad reputation who was an orphan. The most recent one was from a man who is disabled and has Parkinson's Disease.

Family members often perceive these women as having failed to marry due to their stubbornness. Resentment on the part of family members is particularly salient for women born in the 1940s and 1950s. Family members we interviewed perceived the women as responsible for the "unhappy turn of events." Women themselves have a different perspective, however: they do not perceive themselves as having failed to marry, but as having succeeded in avoiding undesirable marriages. Again, they spontaneously mention "fate" when referring to their lives. Here, fate takes on a different meaning; it refers to destiny in marriage. The right man simply did not come on time. By referring to fate, women use language suggesting determinism and external constraints on their lives. Yet in truth they exerted agency in refusing potential partners, in refusing an unhappy and uncertain future, or in wishing to remain faithful to a first love.

Contrary to the situations of these comparatively older women, younger women did not experience resentment from and were not stigmatized by their families. Among women in their twenties, we noted a strong bond between parents and daughters. Some parents absolutely wanted their daughters to remain close to them (that is, to avoid marrying a man from another village, *thiên hạ*). They also wanted the best for their daughters and would refuse any offer that did not guarantee happiness and some degree of material security and comfort. To be sure, these women and their families did not choose singlehood, but rather avoided unions that they considered unworthy of their daughter.

Hằng was born in 1973. When she was twenty years old, a man from another village asked her to marry him. She liked him and wanted to accept, but her parents did not agree because they did not want her to move to another village.

She says, "My parents thought they have only two daughters, so if they marry their daughters far away, they will not be able to take care of them [us] when they [we] are sick or give birth."

These cases may also illustrate inflexible matching criteria that Krowolski's contribution in this collection documents by showing a very high rate of village endogamy.

Some young women did not refer to their fate in a pejorative way at all. While the term "fortunate" somewhat overstates their assessments of their own lives, it does capture the tone of some of their sentiments about the freedom and feelings of satisfaction they have known as single women.

Binh, born in 1965, had a few offers in her early thirties, but refused all of them. She is scared of marriage and prefers to stay home with her parents. As she was getting older, she did not really want to marry because she believed married life could bring her unhappiness.

She says, "I have never been married, but I have seen many unhappy couples. I was scared when I saw them quarrel or hit each other."

Cải was born in 1956 and is the second in a family of eight children. She refused a first offer for marriage at age twenty because that man was incompatible (*không hợp*) with her. During the following years, she received offers at ages twenty-four, thirty, thirty-two, and forty, but none of them was a good match. At age forty-two, she accepted her "fate" and does not regret not having married.

She says, "I never feel sorry for myself and I do not pay attention to my brothers' and sisters' complaints about me [because I refused to marry]. As a married woman, I may suffer. I may not be as happy as I am now. There is nothing more precious than freedom. I don't need to take care of anyone."

By comparing the experiences of different cohorts, we have identified external constraints and women's agency in paths to singlehood. The cohort approach also indicates a continuum between these two processes, a continuum characterized by a gradual intensification of women's agency in refusing some marriages. In referring to the first- and second-class marriage markets, we see that most of the oldest women we interviewed never really entered the first-class one. Instead of marrying, they raised siblings and replaced their absentee parents and brothers in agriculture. As a result, their position and role in the family changed. They were no longer viewed as relatively useless daughters best suited to be married out, but instead they became central members of their families, people upon whom others depended.

We hypothesize that parents' acceptance of their daughter's ongoing refusal to marry is partly the outcome of daughters' roles during the war and post-war

periods. Although we have not studied the importance of political and legal attempts to reform marriage practices and to reconfigure gender roles and intergenerational relations, we cannot neglect this other structural element. Finally, inflexible matching criteria with respect to homogamy and endogamy, as well as unchanging expectations of virginity while premarital sexuality is on the rise, also create situations that may make marriage difficult for some women.

UNMARRIED LIVES

Most women we interviewed play crucial roles in their families as agricultural workers, breadwinners, and caregivers. But when it comes to family relations, some women experience conflict, while others live in relative harmony. Three elements that became apparent during our interviews stand out as affecting women's status in their households and families: the family life-course, the family's attitude towards non-marriage, and the family's economic status. In conjunction, these factors explain some of the reasons why most single women we interviewed see themselves as having difficult lives. These dimensions of family life also affect the unmarried woman's ability to gain and maintain a small degree of autonomy within the web of family obligations and expectations surrounding her.

In rural Việt Nam, only through marriage or childbearing is a woman completely emancipated from her family of origin. Not surprisingly, therefore, all single and childless women we interviewed lived with members of their immediate family. They remained with their parents as long as possible; then, upon their parents' death, they moved to live with one of their married brothers. These women's living arrangements were characterized by two defining features: the people with whom they shared a housing unit (the household), and the people with whom they shared economic resources (the economic family or unit). To identify the economic families that constitute a particular household, interviewees identified which people ate together (*ăn chung*) and which ate separately (*ăn riêng*). A household composed of two elderly parents, an unmarried daughter, a married son, and his family is generally divided into two economic units. In this particular example, the unmarried woman shares her meals with her parents. Usually, economic units have a small amount of land for rice cultivation, and individuals in that unit work together in income-generating activities, such as raising pigs or producing tofu.

In the Confucian family system, the oldest son inherits the parental house and holds responsibility for taking care of his elderly parents.³⁰ But in the families of the women we studied, when the parents are alive beyond the single woman's adolescence, she becomes primarily responsible for them. The unmarried daughter supports her parents to the extent that they become either significantly or entirely dependent on her for their survival (the parents' dependence will vary depending on their age and health). Women who provide for their parents and live with them generally enjoy good family relations, particularly if all the married siblings form other independent households. These women hold an unambiguous and

³⁰ Empirical evidence has shown that in the Red River Delta today, sons most often take care of parents, although it is not always the oldest son who accepts the responsibility. See Trương Sĩ Anh et al., "Living Arrangements, Patrilineality and Sources of Support Among Elderly Vietnamese," *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 12,4 (1997): 69-88.

important role as their parents' caregiver and thus relieve their siblings from the economic burden of supporting two elderly parents. While a daughter works to feed and take care of her parents, her brothers are able to invest more in their own families. Women rarely experience conflict at this stage of the family life-course, since they belong to a unit and are well integrated into the rest of the family.

Upon the death of their parents, women usually move into the household of one of their brothers, often the oldest. Their role and status then begins to be problematic. No longer part of their parental unit, unmarried women become extensions of their brothers' families. These women become anomalous and peculiar. Up to this point in their lives, single women were legitimate family members in charge of feeding their younger siblings or their elderly parents. In the past, it was reasonable to think that these women would eventually enter marriage at a later stage of their life, as the idea of depending on a married brother was not acceptable and, most likely, economically impossible. Single women living with a brother have an unclear role and, therefore, a vulnerable status. The conflict posed by their presence may be solved if the unmarried woman eats separately from her brother's family. But in the eyes of the community, this degree of independence on the part of the woman is not well regarded.

Nguyệt, born in 1964, shares a house with her married brother since the death of her parents. A conflict between her and her sister-in-law made her decide to eat separately [*ăn riêng*]. She seems to enjoy her independence and freedom, but her brother is angry about this. He thinks what Nguyệt did is shameful and that, because of her behavior, he has lost face in the village.

He says, "She decided she would no longer eat with us [*ăn chung*]. It would be acceptable if she had decided to eat with my younger brother's family, but she eats alone! It is bad for our reputation because people from the village know about this."

Ultimately, never-married women belong to their parental home, even if the oldest brother has died. The tragic story of Cơn illustrates that, although the presence of an aging, unmarried woman may be very awkward for her relatives, this is where she belongs.

Cơn, born in 1947, was a state factory worker, but was forced into early retirement and does not receive a pension. Both her parents died, but since she went back to her village, she has lived in her parents' house, which her nephew has inherited. She lives in what used to be the kitchen of the house, a four-meter-square room without a window. She lives in constant conflict with her nephew, who treats her badly.

She says, "I know I have nothing to give him, but he does not even reply to me if I talk to him. I looked after him when he was a baby; now he is grown up, and he wants to turn me out from his house."

Lê, her nephew, complains about her, saying she is a difficult and selfish woman.

He says, "In general she is very difficult [*khó tính*]*—it is impossible to get along with her. Frankly speaking, she is rather untidy. For example, there are different wash basins for different purposes, but she is always confused. If someone reminds her about this she will curse him roundly.*"

Parents' views on their daughter's status and future may greatly affect her degree of autonomy. Women from older cohorts are often pressured by their parents to enter marriage at any cost, in spite of their age. For these parents, their daughter's future can only lie in marriage, even if it is not a good marriage. Some parents are willing to give their daughter part of their land on the condition that she marries. But the women we interviewed had no desire to enter marriage late in life and instead wished to accumulate capital and eventually become independent. But they faced family opposition if they did so. The idea of a one-person, self-sufficient household is not very acceptable—it is perceived as a selfish, undesirable, and lonely lifestyle—and the close relatives of a woman who tries to establish such a household often oppose her, fearing that she will damage the reputation of the entire family. Mũi's story reflects how most parents of unmarried women in the older cohort generally do not condone their daughters' autonomy.

Mũi is thirty-three and is the fourth child in a family of seven. She has three sisters and three brothers. There are two married sisters and an unmarried brother, nineteen years old, younger than she is. She lives with her parents and her younger brother in a nice, new house which was recently built for her younger brother. Her brother will also inherit the land Mũi cultivates for her parents. Her other brothers have already inherited their share. When asked about her future, she says she first has to work very hard to pay back the loan her parents took out in order to build her brother's new house. Only after that will she start to worry about herself. She would like to live by herself, but does not see how it will ever be possible.

In this example, the woman's labor benefits her unmarried brother and her parents, yet they do not feel themselves indebted to repay her with gifts of property or capital. Unless family members recognize the right of an unmarried woman to own property and accumulate personal capital, it is very difficult for women to aspire to autonomy, certainly so long as the parents are alive.

Cải, born in 1956, lives with her mother, with whom she has a difficult relationship. She wants to gain autonomy, but her mother interferes in everything she does to achieve this. Moreover, Cải's brothers and sisters criticize her careless treatment of their mother. They also pressure her to work harder.

She says, "I have to share [economically] with my mother [but would like to be more independent]. My brothers and sisters often blame me. They say that I cannot earn money for myself, but rather that I must help my mother to make and sell tofu. So I decided to raise pigs to have a personal income, but my mother did not agree. Now I have to live with my mother, and my

siblings decide for me. But when mother dies, they will have to shut up. They will eat their rice, and I will eat mine [meaning I will be independent].”

Parents of women in their late twenties more often envision the possibility that their daughter might remain unmarried for the rest of her life. This different perspective on their daughter's future encourages them to take the initiative to make their daughter more autonomous. The most progressive parents give their daughter an inheritance in the form of land or housing so she will be able to sustain herself in the future. Parents may take other initiatives to offer some autonomy to their daughter.

Hạnh, born in 1970, inherited land from her parents. They also promised to build her a house. Her parents think that by giving her this dowry, she will marry a man from the village and she and her husband will live with them. The father also says that he wants to give his daughter some capital to express his appreciation for the work she has done for the family over the years. If she does not marry, he believes that she must be able to take care of herself.

Trang's parents gave her some land to cultivate flowers. She is able to keep the money that she makes from selling the flowers in order to accumulate capital (*lâm vốn*) and eventually build herself a house.

She says, “My parents will give me some land in the future, then my nephew will inherit this land [when I die]. My parents have already given me one hundred square meters of land to cultivate ornamental flowers to accumulate my own capital.”

The fact that the attitudes and behaviors of older women's families differ from those of younger women's families suggests that the status of daughters is changing. With the exception of those from very poor families, young women usually face better prospects than older ones. The modest, but increasing, wealth of families over the last decade could also explain some of the differences we observe. Families with more resources put much less pressure on their daughters to seek marriage at any cost, and the few women who are willing to consider more marriage offers are from the poorest and most desperate families.

Reflections on their future brought tears to the eyes of most of the women. Since few can aspire to economic autonomy, the prospect of depending on reluctant siblings, nieces, and nephews is far from reassuring to them. We asked them about a number of options. Marrying at a later age only appeals to the most disadvantaged women. As mentioned, most women perceive themselves as permanently single. Informal adoption of a niece or a nephew is the solution considered most often. As aunts, they could take care of one of their nieces or nephews, who, in turn, would hopefully feel responsible for them in old age. Adoption of a non-related child has been considered by a few women, but is generally not perceived as a good solution. Women were split with regards to their desire for a biological child. Roughly half the women could not consider having a child as single women. “If I had absolutely wanted a child, I would have married” was the answer of some. The other half

seemed open to the idea, but worried that their family would probably disapprove or that the reputation of their family would be too negatively affected. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to expect that once they have reached their late thirties to early forties, some women might decide to become mothers. Childlessness, more than singlehood, worried these aging single women because children—not siblings or other family members—are primarily responsible for the elderly.

The four single mothers in our sample had a much more optimistic view of their future. Importantly, having a child entitled them to an inheritance, usually a piece of land and a house. These women lived much more independently and counted on their child (or children) to take care of them when needed. In contrast, housing and economic survival were the biggest concerns of never-married women without children. Structurally and legally, there is no room for them. They are not given land or housing. Without the bond of marriage, their right to autonomy is denied. Single women with children do not necessarily have an easy life, but they have more independence and social recognition than childless, never-married women. Ultimately, motherhood excuses singlehood, confers the right to autonomy, and gives women the social space and status that single, childless women must struggle to attain.

CONCLUSION

This chapter reveals the importance of women's agency in shaping their own lives in Việt Nam. Women not only refuse potential mates, but some go so far as to question marriage itself as the ultimate option in a woman's life, a state synonymous with happiness. Yet, marriage and childbearing remain the most highly desirable life paths for women in Việt Nam. Singles are constantly questioned about their intention to marry, and friends and family members continuously look for potential mates. But women's well-being and the family's respect for young women's preferences can override the social pressure to marry. The social, economic, and political processes that the country has experienced since 1954 have also proven to be important factors contributing to the decline in the incidence of marriage in Việt Nam.

The older women we interviewed were young during and after the war. Many of them did not consider marriage when they were most eligible to marry, since the situation required them to devote their lives to their own families. The shortage of men and women in families created a need for daughters to stay home. Nothing suggests that this strategy was new to this particular war, since Việt Nam underwent several wars and must have suffered low sex ratios at several periods in its history. What appears to depart from the norms and culture, however, is women's refusal to marry at an older age. If marriage was so highly desirable, one would have expected women to accept marriage proposals in their late twenties, even though their future spouses did not have much to offer them. It appears that the daughters' position in their families changed and their individual desire to postpone, refuse, or avoid marriage was more often respected. But for the older women who took care of family members, unmarried life means that they must struggle in an environment that gives them little social and structural space as unmarried and infertile women. While women may question marriage in later life, family members continue to perceive it as the most respectable and desirable way

of life. Unfortunately, a woman's conviction that "no man is better than any man" is not always shared by her close kin.

Younger women who took part in this study exerted agency much earlier in life than did the older women. In their late teens and early twenties they refused potential candidates for marriage or never agreed with their parents about whom to marry. Some expressed hesitations and even fears about marriage. For them, single adulthood did not pose the severe consequences it did for older women. Younger women usually enjoyed a good relationship with their parents and families, and they were not required to hand over their total income to family members. They were usually entitled to their own property, whether they obtained it through inheritance or bought it with their own earnings. We hypothesized that non-marriage may be considered a viable option by women and their families once young, unmarried women have passed age twenty-five; this change in attitude is due to changing relationships between parents and daughters, as well as more favorable economic conditions.

But does the falling rate of marriage in rural Việt Nam result from increasing opportunities for women, as postulated in the literature for Europe and urban Asia? Our evidence does not suggest so. Certainly, women have more say in their future and now have the ability to avoid an unhappy marriage, but this path exacts a high cost. Single women's desire for autonomy is granted little space in today's families and in the villages of rural North Việt Nam. The more optimistic prospects for young unmarried women may be a sign of more changes to come.