

Discursive Transformations: Maternal Desire Among Older Single Women in Northern Việt Nam

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Introduction¹

Chị Hạ, born in 1956, came of marital age in 1974, but there were no boys to marry. At ages 18, 19, and 20 they had all left for the front. Chị Hạ, like her classmates, joined the war effort for a few years. When she returned, she was 24 years old, too old to find a husband. One man asked her to be his second wife; she declined. Her parents encouraged her to find someone who would give her a child because she was too old to find a husband. So she developed a relationship with a man stationed at the nearby army base for the explicit purpose of “asking for a child.” She did not ask the man to take any responsibility for the child; their relationship lasted only until she got pregnant. Neither Chị Hạ nor her single women friends that also had borne children were criticized (by the community) for getting pregnant out of wedlock.

Chị Năm, born in 1945, gave birth at age 36 to her first child. She got pregnant with a man to whom she was not married. It wasn't that she didn't want to have a child with her own husband – they never had a chance. He died after going south to join the resistance, sacrificing his life and leaving Chị Năm a young widow. She remained in her husband's family's house to take care of her mother-in-law and did not take another husband. When she got older she decided to *xin con* [ask for a child]. She eventually met a man who agreed to help her get pregnant.

Chị Ngọc, born in 1952, refused the only offer of marriage she received; it was from an old man. Chị Ngọc attributes her lack of suitors to her poor eyesight and bodily disfigurement. As a young girl, she continually hoped that she would meet a man with whom she had *tình cảm* [love, deep emotion for]. One day, at age 41, she met a man while she and her sister were out and about. Chị Ngọc and the man fell in love and after two years she decided to become his second wife so that he might have a son. Yet, bowing to social pressure, the man abandoned her when she was two months pregnant; villagers had convinced him not to take a wife who was middle-aged and who had poor eyesight. When he later apologized and asked if Chị Ngọc would become his second wife, she refused. Her mother cursed her and threw her out of the house. Her relatives treat her with scorn. She has been fortunate to

have the help of two women, one of whom was chastised by her own relatives for adopting the child of non-kin.

The experiences of Chị Hạ, Chị Năm and Chị Ngọc offer brief glimpses into the lives of women who took the initiative to bear children of their own despite being unmarried. At the end of the Indochina Wars, a number of Vietnamese women were unmarried and past marriageable age.² Rather than accepting the fate of childlessness, some older single women³ took it upon themselves to *kiếm con/xin con* [ask for a child].⁴ The significance of an older single woman's boldness and determination to bear a child is remarkable given the dominant discourse of reproduction in northern Vietnamese society.

Conceptualized in terms of the patrilineal Confucian doctrine, childbearing in Việt Nam only has value and meaning for married women. A married woman gains status when she bears a child, particularly so when she bears a son who can continue her husband's ancestral line (Trần Lan Hương 1995). Unmarried women's reproduction does not figure in this patrilineal ideology; getting pregnant is not something unmarried women are supposed to do or desire. From this perspective, bearing a child out of wedlock is considered a serious breach of filial piety and results in a loss of status for the woman and her family. According to historians and social scientists, in "feudal times," before reunification, a woman who became pregnant out of wedlock had her nape shaved and smeared with lime (Mai Huy Bích 1991, Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết 1975, Mai Thị Tu and Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết 1978, Nguyễn Thị Khoa). She was forced to walk around the village with a bucket on her head to be publicly insulted. In extreme cases, a woman was bound naked to a banana palm raft and set adrift on a river. If she lived, she was supposed to "nourish her fault" and look upon her child with disgrace. She was not permitted to argue her case. Some women killed themselves, others left their natal villages. The woman's family, despite having to pay a heavy fine, was said to approve of this severity as it was considered "indispensable for maintaining social morality" (Nguyễn Thị Khoa 1993:47; 1996).⁵

² The age at which a woman is no longer considered marriageable has changed over time and differs according to residence. By 1996 older single women tended to be at least 25 years old; most were over age 30 when they decided to "ask for a child." Age was, for many of the women with whom I spoke, the principal factor disqualifying them from being considered (or considering themselves) as potential spouses. It was also the principal reason many chose not to marry if the opportunity arose.

³ I am defining "older single women" as women who have passed marriageable age. I continually refer to the single women who had "asked for a child" in order to distinguish them from younger single women, still of marriageable age, who have gotten pregnant out of wedlock. Whereas older single women's decisions to bear a child out of wedlock are for the most part socially sanctioned, younger single women's decisions are not. Whereas, older single women may be encouraged to "ask for a child," younger single women will be encouraged to have an abortion.

⁴ The women and those who speak about them use one of two phrases to refer to their reproductive agency, "kiếm con" (finding a child) and "xin con" (asking for a child). I have chosen to use the English phrase "asking for a child" throughout the paper.

⁵ Repercussions were not limited to the girl herself. Because a child's actions were considered a reflection of her family, she could bring shame to her extended kin. Historical research on villages that maintained *hương ước* [communal statutes] in the 1920s and 1930s shows that, in some locations, fathers who had daughters that became pregnant out of wedlock were not allowed to attend common meetings in the village communal house (Nguyễn Hữu Minh 1998). Nowadays, this reaction is presented as an example of "traditional" Vietnamese society and has come to provide a cultural backdrop, an "historical other" against which contemporary society can measure the progress women have made in achieving equality with men. Nonetheless, despite the harsh proclamations against pregnant single women, there is indication that past society was willing to bend. If a betrothed young girl became pregnant, the family could request to move up the date of marriage (Nguyễn Hữu Minh 1998). And as Nguyễn Thị Khoa points out, there

The fact that older single women had started to "ask for a child" in the mid 1980s indicates that a shift was taking place in normative ideas about the importance of reproducing within the marital context.⁶ In 1986 the Vietnamese State revised the 1959 Law on Marriage and the Family⁷ to recognize every woman's right to have a child. The 1986 law⁸ was at one and the same time a recognition of women who had been raising children on their own and a practical move by the state as it began to incrementally eradicate social services as part of its new *Đổi Mới* [Renovation] policy.⁹

Nonetheless, social life continues to be principally organized around the paternal bloodline in northern Vietnam despite socialist efforts to eradicate "feudal" vestiges detrimental to women.¹⁰ Given the dominant nature of the Confucian-influenced patriarchal discourse on the meaning and purpose of reproduction, and the potential repercussions of going against a well established social order, what does bearing a child bring an older single woman? Single women do not need children to bind them to a husband,¹¹ nor to carry on a husband's ancestral line. Nor do they necessarily require a child to take care of them when they become too old to fend for themselves.¹² From the perspective of the patrilineal kinship system, it is not at all clear why an older *single* woman would desire a child.

This article examines discourses of maternal desire during a ten year period, from 1984, two years before *Đổi Mới*, through the autumn of 1996, when I concluded my research. By discourses of maternal desire I mean the words and actions of every day life that are shaped by the dominant ideology of reproduction – an ideology that entails the "syncretism of various kinds of appreciations regarding moral behavior that simultaneously encompass Confucian and Communist 'morality'" (Rydstrom 1998: 23). My interviews with older single women who have "asked for a child" serve as the pivot point of this discussion.

always have been opposition to orthodox conception of womenhood and childbearing 1996: 152), which challenges any notion of a monolithic concept of a correct Vietnamese behavior. Opposition and leniency are expressed in Vietnamese opera, poetry, and *ca dao* [popular songs].

⁶ One Hà Nội acquaintance portrayed the shift this way: when she was little, in the 1970s, she thought it *buồn cười* [odd/funny] to see an older single woman (unmarried) who had a child. It was considered so odd that a friend of her family, an older single woman who was unmarried, decided against *adopting* a child because she did not want to deal with the villagers' taunts. By the late 1990s, older single women with children were no longer considered odd.

⁷ Implicit in the 1959 Law on Marriage and the Family is the idea that bearing and raising children should no longer serve to perpetuate the Confucian-influenced patriarchal family, but should serve the nation. The law therefore, provided an opening for a different conceptualization of reproduction, for an alternative meaning of why women reproduce. This move away from the purpose of rearing children for the patriarchal family set the stage for the older single women I interviewed to "ask for children" outside the bounds of the patriarchal family.

⁸ The 1986 law addresses changes in the family that had occurred since the 1959 law. Article Number 3 recognizes all women's right to have a child; this article is interpreted to include older single women. For a discussion of the 1996 law, see Nguyễn Thị Khoa 1993, Thế Lan 1986, Nguyễn Thanh Tâm 1991, Báo Nhân Dân 1986a #11567, Phinney 2003.

⁹ For detailed explication of the changes embodied in the 1986 law see Nguyễn Hữu Minh 1998; Nguyễn Thanh Tâm 1991; Nguyễn Thị Định 1986; Báo Nhân Dân 1986a #11567; Báo Nhân Dân 1986b #11678; Báo (Nhân Dân 1986c #11725; Dư Hữu Liên 1987; Nguyễn Thế Giai 1987 & 1993.

¹⁰ See: Lương 1992, Liljestrom and Tường Lai 1991, Hoàng Thị Lịch 1995, Rydstrom 1998, Trần Thị Quế 1992, Vương Xuân Tinh 1994.

¹¹ Children are often thought of as the "string" [*sợi dây*] or "bridge" [*cầu nối*] that binds a couple together. Prior to the 1959 Law on Marriage and the Family, which instructed couples to marry for love, raising and nurturing children were thought essential for bringing a married couple together emotionally. This idea is based on a Confucian-influenced marital tradition whereby a couple was not expected to love each other upon marriage. Rather, love was something that would develop over time.

¹² Customarily, unmarried women will take care of their parents until they die and then will live with the eldest brother and his family.

What is interesting about older single women's reproductive decisions is the ways in which their explanations for bearing children are rooted in and yet challenge the dominant meaning of reproduction in northern Vietnamese society. Despite being unmarried, older single women draw upon discourses of maternal desire that are embedded in existing essentialist notions of what it is to be a Vietnamese woman inherent in patriarchal ideology, notions technically reserved for married women.

In my discussions, women would initially displace their own desires for a biological child by referring to it in terms of the desires of "all Vietnamese women." Cognizant of feminist critiques of essentialist portrayals of non-western women and women in general,¹³ I sought to move the women's discussions onto a different ground, to disrupt the timeless trope of "Vietnamese Women" reiterated in everyday discussions, newspaper articles, and social science journal articles. It was difficult to do so, principally because social acceptance of the women and their children resides in these essentialist discourses of maternal desire. It is here that the value of inquiring about older single women, rather than married women, in order to move beyond the tropes of maternal desire, proved beneficial. Not having fit nicely into the normalized route for reproducing, older single women who "asked for a child" experienced desire and childbearing from a marginalized context. They, like infertile women, had to bear the burden of being unable to participate in the role of motherhood at the age when most other women in Vietnamese society experience it. Yet unlike infertile women, they were able to reproduce, though not within the socially acceptable frame of marriage. Having moved beyond the bounds of reproductive space defined in terms of the patriarchal family and patriarchal state, older single women physically and emotionally experienced not only motherhood, but also its converse, maternal lack.

Three themes of desire emerged from my conversations with older single women, concerns that also resonated and reverberated in the popular media:¹⁴ old age support, escaping loneliness, and the transformative qualities of bearing and nurturing children.

In examining these themes it becomes clear that while the women's discourses of maternal desire are based in essentialist patriarchal notions of what it is to be a woman (which is to be a mother), older single women who "ask for a child" (consciously or unconsciously) subvert the dominant portrayal of the meaning and purpose typically assigned to reproduction in Vietnamese society. Older single women demonstrate not only that husbands are not necessary for creating a family, but also that women reproduce for themselves.

Methodology

In the autumn of 1995 I traveled to Việt Nam to conduct ethnographic research on older single women who had "asked for a child" and the state's interest in these women. Like a number of foreign researchers living in northern Việt Nam at the time, I was cir-

¹³ See Barlow 1994; Butler 1990; Gillmartin, Hershatter, Rofel, and White 1994; Liu 1994; Mohanty 1991; Sears 1996; Viswewaran 1994.

¹⁴ I collected articles from print media on older single women "asking for a child" and related topics from 1984-1996. My decision to collect written materials starting in 1984 was based on my interest in learning whether discussions related to older single women's decisions to "ask for a child" had been taking place prior to the 1986 Law on Marriage and the Family, which recognized for the first time every woman's right to bear a child.

cumscribed in the research I was able to undertake by domestic political concerns. Once I received permission from the necessary provincial, district, and commune officials to conduct my research, I was not permitted to move about on my own and was accompanied on all interviews at all times. The answers to my questions were given in the presence of a Women's Union official. Due to these factors and to the time constraints of the Women's Union officials who accompanied me, I was only able to conduct in-depth interviews, not life histories as intended. I interviewed 35 older single women who had "asked for a child" and a number of key individuals at the *Hội Phụ Nữ Hà Nội* [Hà Nội Women's Union], *Báo Phụ Nữ Việt Nam* [The Vietnamese Women's Newspaper], *Báo Phụ Nữ Thủ Đô* [The Capital City Women's Newspaper], and the Ministry of Justice as well as social scientists from the *Trung Tâm Nghiên Cứu Phụ Nữ và Gia Đình* [Center for Research on Women and Family Studies], Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development, The Ministry of Health, and *Trung Tâm Sức Khỏe Phụ Nữ và Gia Đình* [The Center for Reproductive and Family Health]. The knowledge I gained was shaped by my position as an American researcher coming into northern Việt Nam and by the Vietnamese officials responsible for me at a specific period of time, the mid 1990s.

My conversations with older single women who had "asked for a child" were at one and the same time formal but personal. In this regard, I have tried to evoke the emotional components of the topics I address. "Emotion activates distinct dispositions, postures and movements which are not only attitudinal but also physical, involving the way in which bodies together with others articulate a common purpose, design, or order" (Lyon and Barbalet 1994: 48). My reactions to women and to their situations, as well as my understanding of the way other people treated me, first as a single woman and later as a married woman with no child, greatly inform my understanding. It is in the process of these interactions that my understanding of reproduction in Việt Nam was formed. In order to keep the reader continually aware of the subjective and political nature of my representation, I insert myself into my ethnographic text.

My research is based on women living in Phú Lương District of Bắc Thái Province and in Sóc Sơn District of Hà Nội Province, both of which are rural. Women were also interviewed in Hà Nội and in the village of Thanh Liệt, which is situated on the outskirts of Hà Nội by the Hồng River. The majority of women I spoke with in Phú Lương and Sóc Sơn were farmers, some of whom were engaged in an additional income producing activity. Other women I spoke with were schoolteachers, seamstresses, shopkeepers, or factory workers. The women in Thanh Liệt were farmers, employees at the local Women's Union, or engaged in small businesses. The women in Phú Lương, Sóc Sơn and Thanh Liệt had low educational levels not exceeding grade 7; many left school after grade 2 or 3. The Hà Nội women tended to have a higher educational level (secondary or beyond) and had white-collar jobs working in offices. The women I interviewed were born between 1945 and 1969, the majority born in the 1950s. Whereas some women left home for a period of time during the Indochina Wars to participate in mass mobilization movements, many had rarely, if ever, left the confines of their district or commune. I am unable to provide any population data on the number of older single unmarried women who "asked for a child" because the Vietnamese government has not collected statistics that allow identification of such women.

Chỗ nương tựa [Someone To Lean On]

"At the end of the wars we were 25, 26 years old. So the women of my age group asked for child in order to be able to have our own child to lean on and take care of us when we became old." (Chị Hà, age 40)

"Taking a husband is something you are compelled to do, must do. Having a child is more important, much more important. Women really take a husband to have a child, in order to have someone to lean on." (Chị Nga, age 48)

I began my inquiry into the social construction of maternal desire by asking older single women who had given birth the seemingly obvious question, "Why did you want a biological child?" The most consistent reason single women cited for wanting a child was to have someone to take care of them in their old age, to have a *chỗ nương tựa* [a place/person to lean on]. It was also the first and foremost reason cited by everyone I spoke to regarding women's need for a child, regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, education, or residence.

Because of the frequency with which women stated needing children for old age support, I was interested in whether single women preferred to give birth to a boy or a girl. In the areas where I conducted research, women commonly move to their husband's homes upon marriage. Therefore, a couple hopes to have a boy they can rely upon in old age – in addition to taking responsibility for the ancestral altars and graves. However, research on family strategies indicates that there is flexibility when it comes to making sure that parents are taken care of and ancestral rituals performed. Bousquet's (2001) research shows that families with solely daughters transfer the responsibility for duties typically held by the eldest son to the eldest daughter. The daughter marries, her husband will take up residence with her family, and their children will pass on the wife's father's ancestral line. Another strategy is for a nephew to assume the role of worshipping his uncle's ancestors and maintaining his ancestral altars and graves.

To what extent do single women want boys for old age support? Responses varied. Chị Ngọc had been asked to become a second wife in order that the man could have a son.¹⁵ Initially she agreed, but later declined. A number of the women initially wanted boys, but were happy, nonetheless, when they had girls. Chị Nga and Chị Yến felt it was important to have a son, Chị Nga so much that she gave birth twice since the first was a girl: "When girls are older they take husbands and leave the house; a boy will stay at home with me. That is why I had to have a boy." Neither Chị Nga nor Chị Yến discussed the possibility that a daughter could bring her husband home to live with her mother. Other women who had daughters were not concerned, because they felt that girls are more compassionate than boys and would therefore be willing to take care of their mothers. Chị Thâm, one of

¹⁵ Lê Nhâm's (1994) research results from An Hiệp Commune in Thái Bình Province indicate that many of single women had a preference for sons. In part, this was related to the man's interest in having a son and therefore willingness to give extra payment should the woman have a boy. In contrast, the women I interviewed said they were not interested in maintaining any on going relationship with the father of the child. It is also important to point out that older single women are expected by the rest of society to break off all relations with the man who has gotten them pregnant. This is a key factor in the social acceptance of such women and thus has become part of the women's narrative.

the more highly educated women I interviewed from Hà Nội, had very much wanted a boy, but for a different reason. She did not want a boy for old age support but because she feels that Việt Nam is a harsh and difficult society for girls and women. She also worries that her daughter will have trouble getting married because she was born out of wedlock. Potential in-laws may look down on her or prohibit their son from marrying a girl who has been raised without a father. As the proverb *lấy vợ xem tông, lấy chồng xem giống* [Marry a wife for her ancestry, marry a husband for his breed] prescribes, when choosing a wife a young man and his family should pay close attention to the girl's family because that is where she has been trained to be a good wife and mother. By implication, a girl without a father may not have been adequately socialized.¹⁶

Given the variability with which women voiced concern that a son or daughter would ultimately take responsibility for them as they aged, I began to wonder whether there had been any discussion of families neglecting to care for unmarried daughters. During the course of my research I did not encounter any such stories or rumors – which is not to say that the situation does not exist. I turned to print media in order to gain an historical perspective. Here too, in the newspapers, magazines, or social science journals I collected from 1984 to 1996 there was no evidence of a problem. There was no mention of abandoned single women. In part, this could be due to the fact that many single women did not return home after the wars but went to work in state enterprises. And, in line with the goals of the new socialist state that sought to insert itself into the family, single women may have been sufficiently taken care of by their state offices or the commune in which they lived.¹⁷

Yet with the advent of *Đổi Mới* and the increasing privatization of the economy, the state is relinquishing the responsibility of caring for all members of society. Instead, the state is enabling and encouraging its citizens, households, and associations to provide individuals with the support previously offered by the state.¹⁸ Older single women who have "asked for a child" are taking responsibility for their own future welfare, thus fitting in with the new market based socialism and its concomitant tactics of government.¹⁹

Many of the women I interviewed lived with widowed mothers, some with brothers on family land, a few with both parents, and some in housing provided by their state office. These arrangements are consonant with my general understanding of living situations for other older single women. If they do not work for the state and receive state housing, women live with their parents. When their parents die they remain in the house and are incorporated into their brother's family. In many families, sisters are seen as valuable for contributing to house-

¹⁶ When a girl considers marriage she is supposed to look carefully at the boy's lineage; it is his blood line that is important. These ideas are consonant with Rydstrom's (1998) findings regarding different conceptions of boys' and girls' bodies: "The fact that boys are perceived to incorporate inborn 'honor' means that a boy's body is not considered to be blank in biological terms or symbolic terms. A boy's body incorporates his patrilineage in the past, present, and future and it is in this sense overdetermined with symbolic meaning condensed in the meaning of the penis...A girl's body is defined as blank because she has no inborn 'honor' and, in this sense, is outside the patrilineal social structure. Girls are therefore 'socialized' to a greater extent than boys as a strategy of compensating for what is seen as a lack of symbolic and biological meaning with respect to their bodies" (1998:54).

¹⁷ See Malamey (1993) and Phinney (2003) for discussions on the manner in which the communist party sought to intervene in people's lives, particularly in reference to the 1959 Law on Marriage and the Family.

¹⁸ See Phinney (2003) for further discussion on changing governmentality as it pertains to single mother. See Bùi Thế Cường et al. (1999) regarding the shifting relationship between the state and the elderly.

¹⁹ Still there is no discussion on single women being abandoned by family members. If anything, newspaper articles calling for state subsidies for all types of single women headed families indicates a belief that the state has a duty to support women who sacrificed marriage for the good of the nation.

hold chores, helping take care of nieces and nephews, and contributing to the household economy. Whether or not these women consider this an ideal situation remains to be learned. It likely depends on a woman's personal desires and her relationships with her parents, brothers and their wives, as well as her nieces and nephews. Juxtaposing two proverbs on familial relationships suggests that there is likely to be some tension in such a living arrangement. On the one hand, the proverb *Anh em là ruột là rà, vợ chồng như áo cời ra khó gỡ* [Siblings are tied together by blood relations; husband and wives are like clothes which can be taken off easily] speaks to the overriding importance of blood/sibling relations – indicating that a woman will be taken care of by her brothers. On the other hand, the proverb *Vợ chồng là ruột là rà, anh em có của có nhà anh em* [Husbands and wives are bound by intimate ties; siblings have their own homes and families] suggests that the sibling relationship becomes strained with marriage. Clearly a daughter who has not married and remains in her natal household will need to negotiate her space and place with her sister-in-law, who would normally, upon the mother-in-law's death, take charge of the household.²⁰

Old age support is a socially and politically acceptable explanation for bearing a child out of wedlock, particularly in the *Đổi Mới* era when the state has withdrawn social welfare subsidies and the elderly are on their own or must rely on their families. It is also an acceptable reason for not adopting a child and for deciding to keep a child even if a woman had not intended to get pregnant.²¹

Overall, most of the single women I spoke with did appear to have options for old age support other than bearing a child of their own. And given that the women did not state that they would have to live alone should they not have a child, I began to question my understanding of *chỗ nương tựa*. My initial understanding of *chỗ nương tựa* came from the population and development discourse, which portrays *chỗ nương tựa* in terms of the economic and physical support older persons need once they become too old to fend for themselves.²² When I queried further, I found that discussions of women's maternal desire evoked much more – their emotion, their bodies, and their identity as women. Contained within the discourse on old age security are a series of other concerns, values and beliefs that assume and reinforce a particular social construction of women's identity, women's needs and women's character – and a specific notion of women's appropriate embodied/spatial place in society. The question still remains, what does a child bring?

Vui vẻ [Happiness and Joy]

"In my opinion, for a woman to live alone is very lonely. Therefore, she should have a child, a child brings *"vui vẻ"* ["joy/happiness"]. Since I have had a child, I no longer think about getting married" (Chị Dân, age 39).

"I wanted a child because single life is very sad" (Chị Lan, age 35).

²⁰ Bélanger and Khuất Thu Hồng (2002) have begun to address the changing roles and positions assumed by an unmarried daughter as her natal household composition changes in their research on singlehood.

²¹ See Phinney (2003) for a discussion on the discourse of adoption with regard to older single women.

²² The focus on economics is part of the population and development discourse, which in its drive to chart and control fertility focuses on elements of reproductive decision-making that potentially could be changed by development inputs.

"When I had a child, I felt very happy, exceedingly happy because I saw myself at that moment really as a woman" (Chị Thâm, age 37).

Women without husbands are sometimes portrayed as "lonely women" (Nguyễn Thanh Tâm 1992).²³ Yet, as Nguyễn Thị Khoa (1993) has noted and my research bears out, unmarried women themselves define loneliness not in terms of being unmarried and without a husband, but as childlessness. Chị Minh said that when she had a child she thought, "Now I don't have to live such a lonely and solitary life," even though, she was living with her mother at the time. Her feelings echoed that of many other single women's who were living with or had relatives nearby. Speaking about her life before she had a child, Chị Nga said she would *"đi chơi"* [go out, play, have fun] with anyone, but still felt very sad since she did not have a child. She added "though having children is very difficult, it is happier, they fill me with enthusiasm, ardor."

According to Dr. Nguyễn Thị Hoài Đức, Director of Trung Tâm Sức Khỏe Phụ Nữ và Gia Đình [Center for Reproductive and Family Health] in Hà Nội, society tends to look down on women who do not have children. For example, she said, if a woman goes to the market and she does not have a child, people will look down on her. She will not have any good friends or good relations with the community. Dr. Nhơn,²⁴ a general physician in Phú Lương, explained: "Women who are not married *đi chơi* [go out/have fun] very little because they are sad, they often think of the proverb *cây khô không mọc, người độc không con* [a dead tree is not a tree, a wicked person has no children]. In particular, I was told, it is difficult emotionally for a childless woman to go out with women who do have children.²⁵ Before getting pregnant, Chị Thâm in Hà Nội said, "There were times when I would go to a friend's house to *đi chơi* and I saw them with their family and I was affected, I felt sad. It was an emotion I was never able to avoid at all." In a similar vein Dr. Ngô mentioned that "In the office there are some women over age 30 who have not yet had a child. They don't want contact with anyone, it is difficult for them to mix with others because of their situation although they very much love and value young children." In reference to these women, Dr. Nhơn confided that when a childless woman over 35 goes to a doctor, the doctor will generally advise her to raise a child because "when a woman has a child, she can go out more. It makes her life *vui vẻ* [happy and joyful], and this is because she is not lonely."²⁶ Thus loneliness was typically framed in terms of having to *đi chơi* by yourself: coming home to an empty house after visiting friends or relatives who have children, not being able to talk with other women about the childbearing experience and listening to other women talk about their children.

²³ The phrase *phụ nữ độc thân* is often used to refer to single women. *độc thân* also means "lonely." It is noteworthy that single and lonely are equated. *độc thân* also can be used to refer to celibate people.

²⁴ Dr. Nhơn is a pseudonym.

²⁵ Similar emotional difficulty has been expressed to me by a number of infertile women in the United States who are trying to get pregnant. A number of women have talked to me about how hard it is to be around pregnant women, how hard it is to share in a woman's joy in giving birth, how alienating it is not to be able to participate in "the mommy club." These emotions also are discussed in a number of books on infertility and on single women seeking to have children. See: Davis-Floyd (1992), Inhorn (1994), Kahn (2000), Ludtke (1997).

²⁶ Dr. Nhơn said that it is common for doctors to advise couples who have been married for quite some time but do not yet have children to adopt a child, as a child is said to bring happiness to a family.

Not only does going out with women friends who have children highlight a childless woman's lack, but a married woman with a child has created other social obligations that render her less available to *đi chơi* with her single age mates.²⁷ A single childless woman's friends, in turn, have not been replaced by a new set of conjugal relatives, leaving her with fewer people with whom to *đi chơi*. It became evident in talking with many different women that having a child provides a woman with greater geographic mobility: her child becomes a reason for getting out and going places she otherwise might not go. Chị Sán expressed her desire for a child in terms of wanting to be "independent" from her natal family, to be more mobile. A child necessitates that a mother establish mutually beneficial relationships with other women, with doctors and with schoolteachers, thus connecting her to the larger community. This is especially important for women who are not living in their natal villages.

Having a child provides common experiences with which to connect with other women. In addition to creating new relationships as a result of having a child, a woman's previous relationships change – they become more focused around the child – establishing and reaffirming a woman's identity as a mother. One could say that it is not a husband who provides daily mobility through social spaces, but a child. Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài²⁸ has reflected, "The story of a Vietnamese woman does not end in marriage, her life truly begins when she has children." Tine Gammeltoft's research in a commune outside Hà Nội in Hà Tây Province provides a telling anecdote: "To my question, 'Why do women have menstruation?' women would often answer, 'Because otherwise one has no future'" (1999: 113). Wanting to have a child goes beyond fulfilling a universal imperative to motherhood, it is also a common means of securing her position within the family and hence within her community.²⁹ According to Nguyễn Thị Khoa, a researcher at the Center for Research on Women, "A woman who has a child or a son will prove to others that they are not lonely due to *số phận* [fate] or position. They have *sức sống* [vitality] that comes from their children" (1996: 134). What is remarkable is that *older single* women are also granted social and familial status by virtue of bearing a child, status previously reserved for married women.

Loneliness due to childlessness transfers into an absence of personal physical experience. Women who don't participate in mothering activities come to embody a non-reproducing self: they are not participating in the on going reproduction of their society. Their absence from everyday "female activities" shapes both their perceptions of themselves and people's attitudes toward them. In many ways they are doubly absent; they do not participate in the "mommy club," nor do they participate in the state's agenda for producing the modern subject woman who is wife, mother, and citizen.

I would conjecture that these feelings of inadequacy have become more acute (and socially acceptable to talk about) since the end of the Indochina wars. During the Second Indochina War, women were encouraged to participate in the war effort and, after the war, to help re-build the nation. Nationalism was produced as a focal point for people's hearts and minds in the party's efforts to instill emotions that would link all Vietnamese people

together in sentiments of national unity (Anderson 1991, cf. Mankekar 1999). After the wars, the party no longer commanded the same fervor, attention, and devotion. The "horizontal comradeship[s]" (Anderson 1991:7) created during the war era likely took a back seat to family duties and responsibilities as people began to go home and rebuild their personal lives. The state's decision to revalidate the family through its *Đổi Mới* policy would serve to heighten women's desires/angst for a family and a child.

Revolutionary participation, war, and societal change since 1975 have created new social spaces for single women that did not exist before.³⁰ Nonetheless, contemporary images of single women are rarely seen in Việt Nam. When women are portrayed, they are typically accompanied by a child or children – as is the case with *Mẹ Việt Nam* [Mother Việt Nam], which is a statue of a woman with a boy on her shoulder in the lobby of the Hà Nội Women's Museum (she has successfully reproduced a male child), and in family planning posters scattered around Hà Nội and throughout rural areas depicting the happy family of a husband, wife and child.

In 1996 I interviewed a well-known graphic artist in his 50s, who had designed posters during the war and re-unification, about contemporary images of women. He provided a telling insight into the image of a lone woman. We spoke about a public health message produced in 1995/6 by an international family planning agency, the goal of which was to encourage the use of condoms and to spread awareness of the risks of contracting HIV. The video showed a single woman sitting in a chair with her back to us, her head down. She is alone on the screen. The caption that runs across the screen informs the viewers that the married woman in the film (of course married, as they are the ones having sexual intercourse) has contracted HIV from her husband. The public health specialists advise women/wives to have their husbands wear condoms. The graphic artist's immediate reaction to the video was, "Of course she isn't going to use a condom, she doesn't yet have a child." For him, the image of a woman alone meant one thing: she was childless. How is it that in 1996, the image of a lone woman evoked a lack, a particular kind of lack that was likely not present during the war years when women were portrayed with guns?

The feelings of loneliness, inadequacy and discomfort expressed by older single women, who have had to move about in a society largely structured around marital and familial relations, is reflected in a number of newspaper articles written off and on since 1987.³¹ Though the authors of these articles write in hopes of alleviating the difficulties of older single women, the solutions provided reiterate existing beliefs and assumptions that it is not possible for single women to be happy without a child or at least a husband. This is true as well of the questions posed to young married couples about their childless state.

What is this anxiety produced by older single women occupying public spaces? Bélanger and Khuất Thu Hồng note in reference to their research on single women that "the idea of a one-person, self-sufficient household is not very acceptable – it is perceived as a selfish,

²⁷ A married woman's mobility likely differs according to her educational level, socioeconomic status, her residential location (urban/rural) and whether she and her husband live alone with their children or live as part of a large extended family.

²⁸ Personal Correspondence 1997.

²⁹ Married women who are infertile may suffer greatly from being unable to bear a child – in some cases their in-laws pressure the husbands to divorce in order to marry another woman who can produce grandchildren.

³⁰ Young single educated urban women taking advantage of new economic opportunities that have emerged as a result of *đổi Mới* are enjoying being single and do not have qualms about putting off marriage and childbearing.

³¹ In 1996, the editors of the magazine *Hạnh Phúc Gia đình Phụ Nữ Việt Nam* devoted almost an entire issue to the subject of whether a single woman could be happy or not. The August 13 issue contains an article on fate and being alone, a translation of an article from the American magazine *Cosmopolitan* on whether it is possible to be happy alone, stories of single women and men, short stories and essays about single women, and accounts of women who have decided to remain alone, their love having died.

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 (2002:107).³²

Authors who decry the scorn heaped on single women reflect this opprobrium. The social scientist Văn Thanh (1992) writes, “Under the eyes of all people, especially men, women who live alone rouse feelings of resentment and hatred with neighbors and society. What can be done in order to not have this hatred and resentment manifest itself so savagely?”³³ Nhị Hà (1991), writing for *Báo Phụ Nữ Việt Nam*, describes the unhappy situation of a woman by the name of Cô Đình Thị Mật, who at age 30 decided to leave her family home to live on her own because she was treated poorly by her parents. Unmarried, Cô Mật, one of 7 siblings, was evidently a burden to her parents.

More typically, women who are alone are portrayed as unhappy people. An example is given in Võ Thị Hảo’s (1990) short story, “*Người Sót Lại Của Rừng Cười* [Left Behind in the Smiling Forest],” published in *Báo Phụ Nữ Việt Nam* in 1990. The story is about women who joined the army when they were quite young. Having had their beauty and youth snatched away by the war, they remained where they were, living in a remote mountainous area. Unable to bear their loneliness, their health deteriorated and they died.

I only came across two articles whose authors expressed the idea that a woman can be happy if she lives alone. In 1988, Hồng Liên interviewed a number of prominent women on the subject of single women bearing children out of wedlock and provided the text of the interviews in *Báo Phụ Nữ Việt Nam*. One woman, a teacher at the Marie Curie School, drew the distinction between living alone and being alone: “Nowadays being single does not mean living alone, because everyone lives among other people, has relationships with other people, friends, colleagues.” Hồng Liên went on to say that though there are women who do live alone and are not lonely, there are others who are lonely – and it is up to each (local) Women’s Union to “create the conditions whereby each woman can determine most intelligently the means to determine personal happiness” (Hồng Liên 1988: 6). Similarly, Lữ Đình Triều and Hữu Thiện (1992) conclude their article, “*Hạnh Phúc Một Mình?* [Happiness by Oneself?],” with the story of a 50 year old single woman who said that happiness comes from having established harmony within yourself, that having done so one can be happy alone or with others.

Despite promulgation of the 1986 Law on Marriage and the Family, which is interpreted to recognize every woman’s right to be a mother, many older single women continued to bear harsh social criticism for their reproductive behavior. Thus many authors write to draw attention to the emotional distress and needs of single woman. The overriding concern is that older women’s needs and rights to have children be recognized by all of society. In 1988, Nguyễn Xuân Trang wrote an article titled “*Phải Chẳng Họ Không Muốn Lập Gia Đình?*

[Could It Be That They Don’t Want to Have a Family?].” In this article Nguyễn Xuân Trang recommends that the Women’s Union should create clubs to introduce older single people to each other and should start a column for personal ads in the newspaper.³⁴ Her recommendations (based on knowledge of similar clubs in Russia and Poland) are premised on the assumptions that happiness can be achieved by creating a family, ‘singlehood’ cannot be a happy situation, and remaining single is more of a problem for women than for men, since men can marry younger women. Similar ideas appear in articles with titles such as: “*Lại Nói Về Những Người Phụ Nữ Cô Đơn* [Another Discussion about Women Who Are Alone]” (Giang Thu 1991); “*Khi Hôn Nhân Không Với Tới Họ* [When Marriage Escapes Their Grasp]” (Thanh Dám 1991); “*Nắng Muộn* [Late Afternoon Sun]” (Lê Nguyên Ngữ 1992); “*Những Mảnh Đời Cô Đơn* [The Frail and Lonely Lives]” (Phạm Hà 1996); and “*Một Vài Ý Kiến về ‘Những Mảnh Đời Cô Đơn’* [Some Ideas about ‘The Frail and Lonely Lives’]” (Nguyễn Châu Khanh 1996).

These authors’ messages are buttressed by other articles about women who, having enjoyed being single when they were young, now that they are no longer marriageable, having become *quá lứa* [too old to marry], no longer feel as happy. The point of the articles is to warn young women of the impending danger of loneliness. The authors all call for more social recognition and acceptance of a woman’s “legitimate right” to have a child to make her happy. In these articles, a child is more than someone to lean on in old age; a child constitutes a woman’s happiness.³⁵ “Children not only satisfy the need for *ình cảm*, but have a material and spiritual value – they provide happiness for women,” writes Ngọc Văn (1992) in “*Hạnh Phúc Của Những Người Phụ Nữ Cô Đơn* [The Happiness of Solitary Women].” Bùi Đình Nguyên’s 1993 article, “*Chia Sẻ Sự Đồng Cảm Với Những Phụ Nữ Đơn Thân* [Sympathizing with Single Women],” best evokes the emotional need that is believed to be the key to a single woman’s happiness. Let them have a child “...so they can hold a babe in their arms with all of a mother’s sentiment, hear the voice of a young child babble, make a happy house, and have someone to comfort and console, to lean on, to take care of them when they are old.”³⁶

As soon as a young couple marries, they will try to have a child as soon as possible. Should they delay having children, a newly married couple will likely be subject to taunts and advice from all directions. Friends may tease a newly married man with the question, “*Có mất gì không?*” [“Aren’t you missing something?”]. Or an older person might tell a younger

women lie, telling people that they do have a family. The article ends by asking people to recognize that just because a woman is over age 40 and is not married does not mean she is a horrible person; single women can still be beautiful and good people.

³⁴ The Women’s Union did start a club for older people to meet each other. It is not limited to women who are still of childbearing age; post-menopausal women and older men also are invited to participate in various activities to meet each other. Again, the idea that one should not have to live alone because living alone is inherently lonely is a fundamental assumption. Whether this also contains an assumption about the importance of marital love is another question.

³⁵ e.g. Phong Thu 1991.

³⁶ The importance of having a child to hold should not be underestimated. When I was in Việt Nam I was struck by how closely people sat next to each other; how frequently girl friends, women friends, and male friends walked arm in arm; many people’s preference for sleeping in a bed with a friend or relative of the same sex rather than sleeping alone; the extent to which women I had never met reached out to hold my hand and kept holding it long past when I would have let go; and the number of times women I was speaking with held my arm and stroked it. Whenever an opportunity arose, a child was scooped up into someone’s arms and hugged. The point here is that the enjoyment derived from the physical closeness/warmth/joy of a child is part of a desire that at some level is socially produced. A cross-cultural examination of child rearing practices and socialization over time would reveal differences in the way parents and adults interact with children and babies.

³² Bélanger and Khuất Thu Hồng also note, however, that more progressive families enable their unmarried daughters to be self-sufficient by providing them with the necessary education and skills necessary to do so. In 1950 Richard Coughlin wrote “... the celibacy of girls is considered to be very honorable if the girl does not marry in order to care for her old parents or for her brothers and sisters” (1950: 11). Noting that his research is based on French texts between 1913 and 1944 he adds in footnote (39), “This is probably closer to the traditional view than the actual one at present.” Coughlin’s research supports the notion that views on unmarried daughters likely differ in different time periods.

³³ In one issue of *Báo Phụ Nữ Việt Nam* (1990 #15), another author discusses the misperception that single women are somehow bad people who have committed a sin or a crime, that they have some sort of problem. In order to avoid such perceptions, some single

childless (married) woman, "*Có con đi!*" ["Have a child!"]. These sorts of questions and admonitions are not meant to be rude and are asked in good faith. They do, however, contain definite assumptions about what should transpire in other people's lives and are consonant with Rydstrom's (1998: 140) research findings that "all females are considered to be future mothers and all males as future fathers."

The social support for older single women's decisions to "ask for a child" is rooted in these expectations. Yet there appears to be a difference between the manner in which the older single women talk about loneliness and the manner in which the "experts" (psychologists, social scientists, doctors, Women's Union cadres) portray loneliness. Though the women and the experts perceive the same social phenomenon, the way they discuss it depends on their position in society. Older single women speak of loneliness as a personal matter, whereas the experts talk about social status. Embedded in experts' discussions of loneliness is the perception that childless women are inferior because they are lacking, they are without children. The expert's discourses of maternal desire are more than descriptive, they are productive, creating the idea that childless women are inadequate. Social expectation that a woman is really only a woman when she bears a child marginalizes those without children. Excluded from the social interaction that bearing a child begets, older single women's feelings of loneliness are testament to their embodiment of discourses of maternal desire. It is therefore a paradox that the social expectation of motherhood, in addition to providing justification for older single women's decisions to "ask for a child" so they won't be lonely, also contributes to and produces older women's feelings of loneliness in the first place.

Thoải Mái [At Ease]

"Whether a woman marries or not, we should have a child. Many women who are *lớn tuổi*, who don't have a child, their personality changes such that their *tính* [disposition] is not *thoải mái* [at ease], they *bực bội* [fret] as a result of being *một mình* [alone], lacking *tình cảm*. They are sad and *buồn phiền* [worried]. According to me, having a child is much better" (Chị Hạo, age 45).

"People who have a child are usually happy. If a husband and wife don't have a child their thoughts are scattered, not happy. It is the psychology of the woman to have a child" (Chị Nhan, age 38).

"I dreamt of giving birth to a child... I take care of my brother's children, but the relationship is strained. I thought that if I have my own child, then it would have more *tình cảm* with me" (Chị Hối, age 33).

Intimately related to the conception of the lonely woman is a series of beliefs regarding the relationship between motherhood and/or marriage and a woman's *tâm sinh lý* [psychosocial physiology]. A slur, which I occasionally heard made in reference to unmarried women, was that they are *khó tính* [have difficult characters]. And if these women were not difficult yet, they were in danger of becoming so. Unmarried women, assumed not to be

having intimate sexual relations with a man, are thought to suffer emotionally and physically. Chị Thâm's doctor told her that a woman can become *khó tính* if she does not have intimate sexual activity with a man: a woman without a man becomes *gầy đi* [thinner], *khô héo* [wilted], and her *âm dương* [yin and yang] gets out of balance.³⁷ Not all women agree with this notion of *khó tính*. Chị Hiền, who has yet to have a child or a husband said, "People say that at age 30, if you have not yet married a husband, then you will have a problem with your psychology, but I feel that my social psychological life is very normal." It would appear, given this understanding of "khó tính," that a woman who has sexual intimacy with a man would be happy and at ease. Yet, as one woman said to me, "If you get married and don't have children, then why marry?" Her statement reveals the assumption that a woman's sexual relations with her husband are (or should be) principally oriented to having a child. By extension it is the child, rather than sex per se, that is believed to enable a woman to be *thoải mái* [at ease].³⁸

Thus, *khó tính* is also used to refer to women without children, adopted or biological. The experience of nurturing and raising one's own child is said to make women more patient with other people's children and, by extension, the rest of society. Chị Hằng, who unintentionally got pregnant but was determined to have her child, described how her character changed upon having to raise a child: "In the past I spoke coarsely, rudely. Now even if I am angry I speak softly and sweetly to my child." Chị Oanh, who adopted a child (because her infertile husband did not want her having relations with another man in order to have a child), said that before she had a child, she was sorrowful and felt self pity. "Since having the child my mind has become at ease, at peace, happy." Chị Lý, who had a boy at age 30, said that before she had a child, she was often cross with people, but now she is "almost never cross or furious... my behavior towards everyone is more soft-spoken. I work at everything because of my child. I behave very well and show sympathy with other people... I must be more modest and courteous, soft-mannered with everyone, in order that people will love and esteem [*quí mến*] my child." Chị Lý attributes her change in mood and demeanor to finally having something of her own.

Tô Thị Ánh, a psychologist who was interviewed in 1988 about her opinion on the recent phenomenon of single women bearing children, pointed out that a woman's character is not stable over time. As she sees it, a woman's psychology becomes a problem if she is over 35 and not married. "A woman's character changes; it becomes excessive and intolerable, *khó tính*, and her capacity to work decreases." According to Tô Thị Ánh, "to realize the right of becoming a mother is to realize a woman's function" (quoted in Hồng Liên 1988: 6). Thus, it is not marriage per se that balances a woman's character, but the experience of having a child. "There are two moments which are the most important in a woman's life," a young mother told Dr. Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Phương, a doctor at the Hồ Chí Minh City in-vitro fertilization program, "The moment that she feels a baby formed in her womb move for the

³⁷ *Hâm hấp* which translates as "slightly crack-brained," is occasionally used with *khó tính* for older women who are virgins. Other phrases used are *ng nghiêm khắc* [strict, severe] or *khắt khe* [too severe, too strict].

³⁸ My interpretation of *khó tính* is based on a discourse of sexuality that portrays men as needing more sex than women and portrays married women with children as viewing sex as something they must do to please their husbands. Tine Gammeltoft's research, instructive on this topic, is consonant with my own investigations into sexuality: "...many women perceive sexual activity as just another physical burden on top of all the other exigencies of a normal work day; indeed, one of the many terms for 'having sex' is 'tâm việc, to work' (1999: 34).

first time and the moment a baby is born.”³⁹ Nguyễn Thị Hoài Đức indicated in response to my query about *khó tính* that a woman is not a woman if she does not have a child: she does not know how to give birth or how to breastfeed; she does not have the sentimentality or the emotion of a mother; she does not know how to love. She does not know how to be a mother. The lack of personal knowledge and experience, along with the scorn with which people treat her, make a woman *khó tính*.

Conclusion

Discourses of maternal desire are rooted in a belief that all Vietnamese women are essentially the same. Vietnamese often proclaim that “all Vietnamese women want children” or that “it is a woman’s instinct to want a child.” In many ways, the desire for motherhood turns on the promise of a transformation, of social acceptance, that having a child brings a woman. You will not be the same person you were before, but it is impossible to know that prior to actually raising children. The knowledge of the promise of transformation is what is projected onto those women who have not yet undergone childbearing⁴⁰. The assumption of “yet,” – “do you have a child yet?” – is a projection of a sense of inadequacy, lack and incompleteness that only a child can remedy⁴¹. It is not just that a woman becomes a true woman upon bearing a child but that there are a whole host of emotions, attitudes, and appropriate bodily behaviors that women learn as part of the child rearing process. These experiences and dispositions are what being a woman is supposed to be about.

In contrast to previous historical periods when single women were ostracized for getting pregnant out of wedlock, older single women in the Đổi Mới era become socially connected to the rest of society by bearing children. Older single women who have “asked for a child” gain familial and social status, regardless of the fact that they are not reproducing for a husband’s lineage. Older single women accept and draw upon conventional ideas regarding the importance of childbearing for women, and yet they clearly reject (unwittingly or not) the notion that they must be married in order to become mothers. Having taken the initiative to bear a child, to take their reproductive lives into their own hands, women who “ask for a child” challenge the trope that Vietnamese women are traditionally passive (Nguyễn Thị Khoa 1996). As a result, the reasons older single women give for wanting children and the discourses circulating about their maternal desire force us to broaden our understanding of the purpose and meaning of reproduction in Vietnamese society.

³⁹ Việt Nam News Service 2000.

⁴⁰ It is also validation for all the women who have internalized maternal desire and experienced reproduction. It confirms their choices (Ginsburg 1989).

⁴¹ In Việt Nam, married women and men are asked “Do you have a child yet?”, not simply “Do you have a child?”. As stated, the question assumes everyone will seek to reproduce and raise children.

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