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INTRODUCTION Family and Society in Vietnam

When I first travelled to Can Tho in 1997, a province about 170 km from Ho Chi Minh City in southern Vietnam, the family life of farmers in the rural Mekong Delta was still hidden from me behind a veil.¹ While I looked for a field site and waited in Can Tho City for permission from the local government to conduct research in a rural area of the province, I spoke with some college students at Can Tho University, the main educational institution of the Delta.² These urbanites often believed that rural life was different from theirs. When asked about family life in Vietnam, many people would give answers that reflected these assumptions. For instance, explaining family structure, the students said, “traditionally, the family is extended, but now more families are nuclear. Things are changing. In the city, families are nuclear, but in the countryside, they still are extended.” Or, “in the city, people have only one or two children, but in the villages they have five to seven, or more”, “in urban areas, any child may take care of the old parents; in rural areas, they follow tradition, and the youngest son is especially responsible for supporting the parents when they are old”, and “in

the city, women get married at twenty-four or twenty-five, but in the countryside they marry early, at around eighteen."

These statements reveal the common assumption in urban areas that life in rural areas is more "traditional" than life in an urban setting. It is a widely shared view that rural life retains traditional patterns, family structures and relations, while life in the city is changing rapidly with modernization. *Moden*, or modern, is a word often used by contemporary Vietnamese, especially urban dwellers. The urbanites think of themselves as living in a time of transition from tradition to modernization, and perceive the world around them in terms of the contrasting framework of "modern vs. traditional". Often, "modern" is associated with "western", "foreign", and "new", while "traditional" refers to what is perceived as "Vietnamese", "indigenous", and "old". The words "countryside" (*nong thon*) or "homeland" (*que huong*) are used with nostalgic feelings as a place where their old good life is still preserved. One interesting example I liked is packets of postcards sold at post offices in towns which are named "countryside" or "homeland" and have pictures of the rural life.

To some extent, this picture of rural life presented by urban dwellers is accurate. In urban areas, older parents and their children sometimes live separately, while in rural areas, one of the children usually lives with and takes care of the parents, a pattern that may create more extended families than that exist in towns and cities. In villages, many families have three or more children, but in the cities, most young parents have only one or two children, in accordance with the national family planning policy. In rural areas few people are familiar with modern technologies, such as computers, and many people live in the same house that their ancestors lived in and toil on the same land the same way that their forefathers did. People's ideas may not be as influenced by foreign and global trends as in the urban areas. Change is slower in rural areas, while urban life seems to be transforming quickly.

However, this does not mean that rural life is static. On the contrary, my research on village life has shown that the life in the rural Mekong Delta is also dynamic. Particularly, during the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s people were experiencing a series of uncertainties brought about by many social factors. In this book, by

focusing on the family and its functions within the society, I will try to capture some crucial aspects of people's lives in the rural Mekong Delta in those years.

I focus on the family because much of village life in the Delta revolves around the family, which is not only the basic unit of society, but also the centre of people's everyday world in a special way. I examine what meaning and role the family gains, or has gained, through its relations with and interactions with society as a whole. I view the family not only in the social context of the village and the Delta region but also within national and international frameworks. This is because the family is not a unit that exists independently of the larger society, nor a closed space that rejects influence from the outside. To the contrary, my research strongly suggests that the family of the Delta exists in the midst of local, national and global influences. It is affected, both directly and indirectly, by social, economic, and political factors at the national and global levels. The family is not only affected by the larger society but also deals with it. In order to understand and portray family life in the Delta, investigating its precise structure and mechanisms in isolation is not sufficient.

This book portrays Vietnamese families in the rural Mekong Delta through their struggles against uncertainties in various aspects of their lives mainly during the end of 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s when the people were experiencing rapid social changes associated with a national economic reform. It is an attempt to capture how social factors affect the family's daily life by examining its roles and meanings in a specific cultural and social context. In many ways the characteristics of the family presented here are observed in today's rural Mekong Delta too.

DOI MOI REFORM

It is useful to look at larger social and economic situations in which the family of the rural Mekong Delta exists. Although the social and historical background of the delta is not well known and it often differs from that of the rest of Vietnam, knowing the national context is crucial.

It is generally considered that the nation of Vietnam has entered a new era since the reform was officially endorsed in 1986. It was at the Sixth Party Congress that year that the Vietnamese Communist Party declared a reform called *doi moi*, or renovation. What is *doi moi*? The reform was particularly aimed at the economic sector of the nation in order to build a new, distinctively Vietnamese socialism (Dapice 1993; Furuta 1996).³ According to Furuta, it is an attempt to transform the society, which entails three major changes. First, it is a departure from an old socialist model, in which poverty was shared by the whole society. Second, it is a quest for a new Vietnamese model of socialism that is different from the universal model. Third, it is an attempt to build a new society for the future generation (Furuta 1996, p. 3).

Before the reform, the Vietnamese economy was facing a crisis. One reason for its failure was that the development model adopted by the re-united country after the end of Vietnam War in 1975 was mainly based on the experiences of North Vietnam.⁴ This model did not function well in other parts of the country, especially in the south. Also, the failure of the socialist economy can be attributed to a lack of monetary discipline, state budget constraints, an inward-oriented development strategy, and discrimination against agriculture (de Vylder 1990). In addition to the inadequacies of state economic policies, the international environment also isolated the country. After the war, Vietnam, South and North united, experienced not only political but also economic separation from the United States. The United States-led trade embargo on Vietnam meant disconnection from one of the world's economic leaders. In 1978, Vietnam's invasion of the neighbouring country of Cambodia grew into a war with China, which had been a strong supporter of Vietnam until then. By opposing the northern communist country, Vietnam inevitably isolated itself in the international community. In 1981, to make matters worse, economic aid from the Soviet Union was suspended, leaving little international economic assistance to the country.⁵

Domestic and international economic conditions were not the only causes of economic difficulty for Vietnam. There were also natural disasters such as the nationwide drought of 1977 and the disastrous floods and climate fluctuations in 1978 that affected the national

economy, especially the agricultural sector (Tsuboi 1994). By the end of the 1970s, only several years after its victory in the long war, Vietnam was facing an economic crisis in which poverty threatened the population daily.⁶

The need for economic reform became more and more apparent and movement toward it began as early as 1981. That year, a “household contract system” was sanctioned for the agricultural sector. In this system, the collective land of the cooperatives was distributed to individual households that were then in charge of a certain amount of production. When a household harvested more rice than it was under contract to give to the cooperative, it could sell the excess on its own and keep the income. Some argue that this system was originally started by the peasants, rather than the government. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s the system was developed at the village level — without reporting to or requesting permission from higher officials — in order to stimulate the farmers’ labour and to enhance productivity, and peasants themselves dismantled collective farming and re-expanded family farm (Furuta 1996; Kerkvliet 2005). In 1981, after discussing the plan for two years, the central committee acknowledged this “household contract system” and decided to apply it to the whole country. At this stage, the contract system still functioned within the framework of collective farming. However, it was a significant change because it eventually led to the disintegration of collective farming, showing the effectiveness of the household as a unit of agricultural production. (Most studies on the reform of the agricultural sector come from North Vietnam and not much is written on the evolution of the process in the south. Those on the south include: Quang Trong 1987; Trung Dinh Dang 2010.)

Hence, the reform was part of the process that began in the late 1970s and stretched into the 1990s. 1986 marked the year when the authority endorsed this process (Forde and de Vylder 1996; Beresford and Dang Phong 2001; Kerkvliet 2005; Dang Phong 2009). Under *doi moi* reform, it was argued that Vietnam was in a long transition period on the way to ultimate socialism, and it was acknowledged that during this period, socialist disciplines should not and could not be achieved in haste. To ultimately achieve true socialism, free market economic disciplines could be incorporated into the system, enabling drastic reform of the

economic sector. Also, besides state-run and collective organizations, private companies and household firms were welcome, bringing about a mixed economic system. Though the phrase "market mechanism" was not yet used, market and commodity economic disciplines were being employed. The Vietnamese economy also aimed at participating in the international economic system and playing a part in the international division of labour by utilizing its unique strengths, rather than trying to build a nation within which all aspects of the economic system were achieved and completed.

A big change in the agricultural sector took place in 1988, when the Politburo of the Party Central Executive Committee, with the "Renovation in Agricultural Economic Management", also called Decision Ten, acknowledged each household as the basic unit of agricultural production. This guaranteed peasants more control over their lives and the fruits of their labour (de Vylder 1990; Ngo Vinh Long 1993; Dao 1995).⁷ The viewpoint of the government was that cooperatives are units of a self-controlled and self-managed economy, and a cooperative's households are units able to sign contracts with the cooperatives. However, this plan was not well received by the farmers, who wanted the cooperatives to return lands to each household, and as a consequence the cooperatives gradually lost their functions and went bankrupt leaving each household with more control over their land (Ngo 1993; Luong Hong Quang 1997).

It is important to note that while all these economic reforms were taking place, the political system remained socialist. The main objective of the *doi moi* reform has been to change and improve the economic situation of the country. From a political perspective, the ultimate goal has been to assure stability. Transformations in the political system have been attempted only gradually, and only if they will not threaten the political stability of the nation. It is a generally shared view that political stability is indispensable to the advent of the *doi moi* reform; thus unnecessary political transformations and confusions should be avoided.

Some studies suggest that the *doi moi* reform caused transformations not only in the economic sector but also in the social realm. Most of these studies come from the north, and their results may not apply directly to the Mekong Delta, but raise some interesting issues.⁸ One

large consequence of the reform that has often been reported is the widening gap between the rich and poor. As mentioned above, socialism was a system in which everyone was poor. Under the reform, this equality of socialism has been disappearing. Inequality and gaps in wealth have been emerging at various levels in the society: between urban settings and rural areas, among regions, between the major ethnic groups of the Kinh (or Vietnamese) and the minorities, across class, and gender. For instance, intra-village income levels and the gaps between the various household categories have been increasing since the beginning of the reform. Differentiation has grown more severe in areas close to urban centres or in regions where the market economy is more developed (Ngo Vinh Long 1993).⁹

As for gender, the period of socialism emphasized women's employment and gender equality. In the reform era, however, as Pelzer (1993) suggests, women's role and status may be changing. For instance, women's representation in political activities has been declining and their social status is diminishing. Gender relations are also changing, placing women in a more complex position between traditional roles and newly emerging demands. Leshkovich (2011), in a study of female traders at Ben Thanh market in Ho Chi Minh City, argues that both class and gender are negotiated and constantly in the making under the Vietnamese market economy generated by socialist government. Particularly in respect of gender, she states that qualities of masculinity and femininity are nurtured by the socialist regime as if they were innate, which the traders in turn enact in their everyday struggles as "petty traders" (see also Leshkovich 2000). Other studies suggest that other social relations, such as labour relations, have been changing under the economic reform, bringing about more inequality in society (Hy Van Luong and Diep Dinh Hoa 1991; Hy Van Luong 1993; Fahey 1995).

Changes in the systems of education and health have also been reported, though they have not been directly connected to the economy. The Socialist Republic of Vietnam has made notable achievements in health and education since 1975, and Kaufman and Sen noted in 1993 that "despite a per capita income of less than 200 US dollars a year, 84 percent of the female population is literate, the infant mortality rate is about 54 per thousand, and life expectancy

exceeds 65" (Kaufman and Sen 1993, p. 233). One of the reasons for this achievement is that during the socialist era, the building of schools and health centres was encouraged, and as a result, 90 per cent of rural communes have health stations. Not only were schools and health facilities built throughout the country, but also the fees for education and health services were covered by the state, making them free to the public. (Same as with agricultural cooperatization it is not well known how much health and educational systems shifted toward socialism in the Mekong Delta during this period.)

However, the achievements in these social domains are being threatened under the *doi moi* reform. In the years after the reform, education and healthcare were reconsidered, and because of shortages of funds, they are no longer offered free of charge. One reason for this shortage is decentralization. Until 1988, the central government underwrote the majority of the investment for public services (75 per cent in the case of water supply and sanitation), while the provinces provided the rest plus operating costs. However, since 1988, the provinces have been expected to bear a larger share of the burden as part of a decentralization effort by the state (Kaufman and Sen 1993). Many provinces have been unable to make up for the shortfall in central investment, resulting in an increase in fees for public services.¹⁰ This decline in the accessibility of education and health facilities has been one of the major challenges the population is now facing. These social factors combined with economic factors affect the farmers' lives in various ways and these will be examined in later chapters.

Family and Society

Family exists almost universally in any human society, and it is part of anyone's life, at least to some extent. While families in many societies share similar roles and meanings, it differs from one culture to another when looked more in detail in their everyday context. Therefore, the family offers a window for looking into different cultures and societies.

Studies in anthropology and other social sciences have investigated and captured the relationship between family life and society.¹¹ These

studies discuss how social conditions, including economic systems and a variety of cultural norms, affect the role of family and its meaning in people's lives. At the same time, they illustrate how individuals and groups deal with and cope with outside social conditions. Although different studies take different and oftentimes mutually exclusive approaches to it and they may reflect diverse backgrounds and contexts, a number of studies from East and Southeast Asia suggest the variability of the social factors in the larger society that affect families in their everyday life.

Some studies are indicative in understanding Vietnamese family that is experiencing a shift in the economic system. Goode's (1963) classical study, though not anthropological in method, argues that with growing economic prosperity, nuclear families will increase, and households will become more focused on conjugal ties. His model, which was heavily based on data from Europe and North America in the 1960s, was tested with cases in China after 1960, and also in the post-Mao era.¹² Some of these studies focus particularly on relationships among members of families and examine the dynamics of their forms in post-socialist China. Some studies argue that, as patriarchal kinship system was dismantled under socialism, the focus of kinship is shifting from the vertical relationship between father and son to the horizontal relationship of a conjugal unit which has gained more independence in agreement with Goode's model (Chou 2010; Croll 2006; Yan 1997; 2009).¹³

In contrast, other studies on post-reform China suggest, disagreeing with Goode's model, that family and kinship are becoming more important as economic, social and political resources for people as the economy is shifting toward capitalism, and the presence of state power in everyday life is diminishing from the heyday of socialism. At the same time, however, the increasing importance of family does not mean that the family is returning to its traditional forms. On the contrary, Chinese families, seemingly rigidly structured, also show flexibility and an ability to take advantage of the new conditions. While the family structure has remained much the same as in the pre-socialist period, characteristics such as the division of labour and relationships among members are continuously being reshaped (Davis and Harrell 1993; Harrell 1993; Johnson 1993). For instance, Ikels (1993) shows that both

parents and children have gained more control over their income than in the past, but at the same time, the strong sense of obligation for children to take care of their elderly parents financially persists in the society, especially in the post-socialist situation.¹⁴

In the late 1990s and the early 2000s Vietnam was experiencing changes in the economic sector similar to those of China, but the dynamics in the family may be somewhat different.¹⁵ Some scholars studied the changing family in the midst of social transformation in North Vietnam, families in the Red River Delta in particular.¹⁶ Discussing the parent-child relationship, for instance, Pham (1999) focuses on the socio-cultural meanings of reproduction, and states that this relationship still remains important and has not been replaced by a conjugal bond. Pham attributes this to both cultural and social factors.¹⁷ Nguyen Tuan Anh (2010), also examining economic, social and cultural aspects of kinship relations in a changing society in the north, argues that the importance of kinship has not only remained but also increased in the reform era. Belanger and Barberini (2009), while acknowledging the centrality of the family in people's lives, too, further notes that the meaning of generational and gender relationships shift within the family in the reform era as it adapts to the new social and economic settings.

Not only in post-socialist societies, but the family in other societies in Southeast Asia also receive the effects of cash economy. For example, studies in Thailand focusing on caregiving for the elderly show how the traditional family support system function in a new economic situation. In rural Northern Thailand, Caffrey (1992) investigates the effects of the change from a kin-based to a cash-based economic system and concludes that the financial condition of the family, and of the children in particular, becomes a crucial factor determining the welfare of the elderly and the caregiving provided for them.¹⁸ Another study by Siriboon and Knodel (1994) shows that the Thai elderly who, unlike tradition, do not live with their own children still live in situations in which the familial support system operates. They often maintain daily contact with their children or receive monetary support from them. Both these studies show the increased importance of financial support for the elder family members as cash economy begins to prevail.¹⁹

The effects of social and economic conditions on local systems are not confined to the family in the Mekong Delta. Other societies in Southeast Asia have also gone through economic changes and experienced their social effects, as shown in Grandstaff (1992)'s study in northern Thailand. There, economic uncertainty has led villagers to develop a twofold strategy of diversified agriculture and mobility in outside employment, and this strategy combines out-of-village employment with local resource utilization. Another work on Thailand by Piker (1968) illustrates how local social systems at the village level function in different ways under the influence of the outside world, national and international economic systems in particular. Traditional strategies no longer assure secure life of the villagers, as will be seen in later chapters.²⁰

Effects of national and global factors are often beyond the control of most villagers in the Mekong Delta. This situation is shared in many Southeast Asian countries. Appell (1985), who investigates the experience of the highland minority community in Malaysian Borneo, illustrates the social and economic conditions that the residents have little control over. The Rungus peasants struggle to secure their present and future life, by providing schooling for children, for example. Appell states, "The Rungus believed in the 1960's that their political and economic futures lay in the hands of others. They were deeply concerned that they would lose control over their land...." (1985, p. 127). This is a very similar situation to that the peasants of the Mekong Delta are experiencing.²¹

One of the social changes that the rural residents of the Mekong Delta experience is industrialization of the area. Studies focusing on women in East and Southeast Asia during rapid industrialization are particularly informative in this regard. These studies, which examine the impacts of industrialization on relationships between family members, show varied conclusions. Focusing particularly on the workplace, some studies on Asian women working in factories show that existing social and cultural norms structure family relationships and raise tensions, particularly in terms of gender differences, in the new social conditions brought about by industrialization. For instance, in a case study of labour relations of women workers in urban Vietnam, Fahey (1995), discussing the place of working women in their

family settings, shows that the existing norms are not much affected by industrialization, which results in women not being able to enter a new space, the workplace outside the family.²² Salaff (1995) also discusses the complex family relationships of working daughters in Hong Kong under industrialization. She finds that working outside the home offers daughters opportunities for higher income, but existing cultural norms require them to use their income for the family welfare. Although Salaff observes that daughters are gradually gaining independence from their parents, she stresses that their independence remains limited.

The female urban migrants in Bangkok studied by Mills (1997) present more complex picture that they have retained their traditional roles as daughters at the same time as they have gained new functions. They are struggling to live both a “modern” way of life in the city, and at the same time, be “good daughters” who are morally committed to rural kin and community. Although these two aspects of the lives of migrants may seem contradictory and mutually exclusive, according to Mills, the migrants’ “self-construction [does] not necessarily involve an explicit, self-conscious choice between clear and distinct identities” (1997, p. 37). Rather, they manage to accommodate the requirements of both city life and rural ties, a situation manifested in rural rituals. Similarly, residents of outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City presented by Harms (2011) negotiate seemingly contradictory social positions as city dwellers and “rural” residents.

Working daughters in Malaysia, also caught between a capitalist ideology on the one hand, and the local non-capitalist morality on the other, experience more significant shifts in the relationship with their parents (Ong 1987). For example, the workers have become important contributors to family income, which challenges the traditional patriarchal family system. Working in factories has led them to spend increasingly more time outside their home, and this new place has given daughters room to negotiate and challenge their underprivileged status in their families. In rural Java, according to Wolf (1992), industrialization had drastic effects on the families of working daughters, in which the relationships between members are constantly redefined and negotiated. “[D]aughters were at once caught in a web of obligations toward the corporate entity of the household while attempting to exert their own

autonomy during a fairly new and unexplored life-cycle state.... Factory daughters frequently negotiated their position as they tested the limits of parental boundaries and responded to differing family needs and situations.”²³

The female workers in Japan that Kondo (1990) studied act as the point where family and outside spaces interact and intermingle with each other, not only making the boundary between the two blurred, but also contested. Here, both company and family stand as metaphors for each other, but not in a static way. Different actors, both the management and the workers, appropriate notions of “family as company” and “company as family” differently, in different contexts and for different purposes.²⁴ In a study on a small urban community in Java, Brenner (1998) also shows how women entrepreneurs transcend the boundary between the two spaces of home and outside society, making the boundary more flexible.²⁵

In contrast, for Chinese women domestic and outside work seem completely separated, making it difficult for them to traverse the boundary between the two (Wolf 1985). According to Wolf, it is impossible for young mothers in rural China to work in the nearby factory or brigade enterprise because they have to take care of their children and housework. In China, kinship ties and hierarchy within the family continue to be so strong that young women are confined to their houses, and the boundary between domestic and outside society is perhaps not as easily contested and negotiated as in the case of Japanese and Javanese women.

One of the issues that I will explore, drawing upon some of the works introduced in this section, is intra-familial relationships, such as vertical relationships between generations and conjugal relationships. I will also examine relationships between the family and outside society. The following chapters pay special attention to the way these two types of relationship together determine family life in the rural Mekong Delta.

Methodology

The research for this book was carried out mostly in a rural village of Can Tho Province in the Mekong Delta between 1997 and 2000, with

some additional research in 2001 and 2014.²⁶ In the beginning when I first started my research in 1997, it was not easy to obtain a permission to conduct a field research in villages since there had never existed an ethnographic research conducted by a foreigner in the province or most of the surrounding provinces before. Although I was permitted to visit rural areas on my own as I liked, I was not allowed to stay in a village.

Therefore, in the early phase of the fieldwork, I made daily visits to several villages, which I could commute from Can Tho City. Surprisingly, although my visits were unexpected and I was a stranger to them, most of the time the villagers were friendly and welcomed me. Knowing that people would appreciate formality, when I met villagers for the first time I usually started by formal interviews rather than casual conversations, but many villagers were open and seemed to enjoy talking with me that I sometimes spent the whole day with one family. Sometimes people offered us tea and fruit, and when I happened to visit at lunchtime, they offered to share their meal with me. Some villagers were excited about a visit by a stranger, and would insist that I should spend the night at their houses, an offer I always had to decline with regrets, because I did not have official permission. Eventually I was able to live with a Vietnamese family that I knew in town, after waiting for a few months to get permission from the local government. By living with them, I familiarized myself with a number of their customs closely related to the family life such as weddings, death anniversaries, and New Year celebrations.

Fortunately, I was able to get permission to stay and conduct fieldwork in a village between 1999 and 2000. I had an idea of the region I wanted to go, but I left it to the government to decide whether I should choose a village to stay in and a family to live with, or whether they should choose for me. They selected the village and family for me, not in the particular area I was thinking of, but a village I had known from my previous research.

Over the next several months, I developed a close bond with some members of my host family in the village. It took me a while before I could see that they felt comfortable with my presence. After several weeks in the village, however, Uncle Bay, the head of the family (he asked me to call him "Uncle Bay" or Seventh Uncle, using a kin term,

which term I use in this book) started to disclose more of his feelings and opinions, although this may not necessarily mean that he told me everything. He often told me he cared for me like a real father using the Vietnamese word *thuong* which indicates affections of parents toward their children, and sometimes said he wanted to adopt me if I had been a Vietnamese. Of course, we did not become like a real father and daughter, but our deepening relationship helped me understand the emotional aspects of Vietnamese family relations. Although his wife Aunt Tam ("Eighth Aunt") was more shy about expressing her feelings and ideas, she took care of me affectionately, which also helped me experience the mother's affection toward her children. I also made good friends with some of the children in the family. I sometimes had tea with some of the daughters and daughters-in-law and talked to them about their families and other aspects of their lives as well as my family and my life in Japan. The sons and sons-in-law were often eager to help me understand village life better and took me around their gardens, taught me how to do some of their farm work, or explained their lives to me over a meal. One son who is a schoolteacher also helped me learn about education in the area. Some of the grandchildren also became my good friends. From our conversations, I found out about how the young see their future. One of the grandchildren took me to his school and introduced me to his teachers. Also, they introduced me to their other grandparents, and this gave me an opportunity to observe relationships between affinal relatives.

I spent most of my time in the village with my host family, and much of my knowledge about family life comes from what I observed in this family and what I learned from conversations with them. In addition, I visited their neighbours to interview them. In the beginning I was expecting that neighbours would come to the house of my host family, possibly out of curiosity, and hoped to have conversations with them informally. I thought if some neighbours were close to my host family and they visited regularly, I could get to know them quite well. However, I stayed in the village for a few weeks, and no one came to our house. I thought at that moment that maybe the villagers simply did not know about my presence in the village or in this house, or they were not interested in seeing me. After a while, however, I realized that they knew about me, and that they wanted to meet me,

but instead of coming to see me, they were waiting for me to visit their houses. After some time I learned that neighbours seldom visited each other except on formal occasions such as weddings and death anniversaries unless they are relatives (and even then people do not make frequent visits). Therefore I decided to make formal visits to talk with the neighbours.

My host family did not think it was safe for me to be alone in the village and they thought it was their responsibility to introduce me to other villagers, so I always visited neighbours with a member of my host family. It was usually Uncle Bay who took me around the village and introduced me to the neighbours, but when he was busy with other things, such as farming, or attending death anniversaries of relatives, someone else from the family, often Youngest Brother or Second Brother, guided me.²⁷

Because my host family considered it their responsibility to assure my safety in the village, even when I thought I was sufficiently acquainted with the villagers and their life, they took the trouble of accompanying me everywhere. When I went to visit the house of one of the children of Uncle Bay and Aunt Tam (located about 500 metres away from our house), I said I could go home by myself and started walking. But when I had walked for a couple of minutes, the daughter-in-law came running after me and walked with me back to the house. At another time, when I went to the market with Aunt Tam early in the morning, I stopped at a noodle shop to have breakfast, while the mother went shopping. As I waited for her after having had a bowl of soup noodles, I decided to walk around a little and take pictures of the morning market. When one of the daughters of the family found me strolling in the market, she looked shocked, asked me what I was doing, and hurriedly went to look for the mother.

My host family also always made sure that I observed the proper formal procedures not only when I visited other villagers, but also when I visited village institutions. When I was thinking of visiting the village school and interviewing the teachers, I learned that one of my friends in Can Tho was a friend of one teacher at the secondary school. I thought I could use this connection and talk with the teacher rather informally as friends. However, when I told my host family about my intention to visit the school, they looked concerned. They

asked me why I wanted to visit the school, and said I should make an official visit with permission from the village committee. Since one of the sons of the family was a schoolteacher at another village, he said he would make the necessary contact and arrangements for me to get permission. Also, at another time, I wanted to see a pagoda in the village, which was located a short distance from the hamlet. When I mentioned I planned to go there, they wanted to know what my intention was. When I went to visit the People's Committee of the village, I forgot to take pictures, so the next day, I wanted to go back there just to do that. The family members discussed whether it was a good idea for me to take pictures of the office, particularly without asking the officers in charge. After one of the sons finally took me back there and I took pictures and came home, another son was still concerned that I did so without official permission. However, after the first visits, I had more freedom to revisit these places.

With my research organized in this way, the data collected for this book come from a number of sources. A large part comes from my host family in the village. I observed their daily activities, shared some, though certainly not all, of their everyday experiences, and had casual conversations with them. I also sometimes organized formal interviews with the family members in order to have focused conversations on certain topics. Other information was mainly gathered from interviews with their neighbours in the same hamlet and their relatives in the village or neighbouring villages. I also conducted interviews with village officers, schoolteachers, and clinicians. In addition, I visited factories in other villages and conducted some interviews with workers.

Furthermore, my two assistants, Ms Lan and Mr Hiep, also helped me understand some of the customs of the area and answer my questions about the geography and the history of the region, as well as the local traditions. They always took trouble to explain to me something I did not understand well in interviews and sometimes brought me books and articles they thought were useful for me. I also gained some knowledge from Can Tho University teachers, who often ran research and development projects in the rural areas throughout the Mekong Delta.²⁸ Sometimes they let me accompany them on field visits to villages for their own research.

I mainly conducted archival research in two libraries in Vietnam. One was the group of libraries at Can Tho University, the central educational institute of the Delta region. Though their collection mainly dealt with agriculture at the time of my research, I was able to get most of my information on the Mekong Delta from these university libraries.²⁹ In the College of Agriculture Library, I collected data and information on the socio-economy of the Mekong Delta, and in the College of Education Library, I found sources on the Vietnamese family, especially on family education. It was at the Central Library of the university that I learned about the history of the Can Tho region, the customs of the Mekong Delta as well as of Vietnam, and geography. The other library I accessed was the General Library of Ho Chi Minh City, the central library of southern Vietnam. There I collected sociological studies on the Vietnamese family, material on national agriculture and development, and economic studies on poverty and wealth.

Notes

1. Some readings such as Sakurai's (1995) and Tsuboi's (1994) introductions to Vietnam had given me a good general view of the people and life in contemporary Vietnam, but little had been known about the Mekong Delta, and about the rural area in particular.
2. There are different uses of the word "Mekong Delta". Sometimes, especially in Western literature, it covers the whole of southern Vietnam, including Ho Chi Minh City. In this book, however, the Mekong Delta does not include the city, and refers to the area that covers the provinces of Long An, Tien Giang, Dong Thap, Ben Tre, Vinh Long, Tra Vinh, An Giang, Can Tho City, Hau Giang, Soc Trang, Kien Giang, Bac Lieu and Ca Mau as it reflects a more common use in Vietnam.
3. Some studies by economists (e.g. Dapice 1993) also stress the peculiarity of Vietnam, which differs from other Asian countries that went through similar economic developments. Other studies, such as Marr (1995), interpret the reform in the context of a larger region of East and Southeast Asia.
4. See also Marr and White eds. (1988) on social and economic problems that the shift to socialism encountered in the country.
5. Although the reform is mainly concentrated in the economic sector, Williams (1992) also examines the political and international background for the reform.

6. There are a number of other studies, especially by economists and political scientists (e.g. Beresford and Fforde 1996) that discuss the background of reform in the early 1980s.
7. Tran Hoang Kim (1995) also summarizes the Vietnamese economic situation from 1945 until 1990.
8. See, for instance, Dahm and Houben eds. (1999) for discussions on the different responses to economic reform in different regions of the nation.
9. See also Ffords and de Vylder (1996) on social differentiations under the economic reform.
10. Houghton et al., eds. (1999) discusses the health status of the population in contemporary Vietnam.
11. Many anthropological studies have studied kinship and family in the last century. Fox (1967) claimed that “kinship is to anthropology what logic is to philosophy or [the] nude is to art.” Kinship was studied not only to understand the structures of different societies (e.g. Levi-Strauss 1969). For example, Maybury-Lewis (1979; 1989) discusses how a kinship system shows the principle of thinking of the Central Brazilian peoples. Also, see Brettell (2001) for a brief comment on the significance of the study of kinship in contemporary anthropology.
12. Goode’s linear model based on dichotomy was also argued against theoretically (e.g. Yanagisako and Collier 1987; McDonald 1994).
13. According to Yan, this does not necessarily imply that the son and daughter have become more independent as individuals, but it does mean that as a conjugal unit, they have gained more independence from their parents. However, Yan shows that this shift in generational relationships does not always take place peacefully. There are tensions and negotiations between the two parties not only about power and wealth, but also about emotional attachment and moralities. Chou also notes that it is “increasingly difficult for older Chinese to receive support from adult children”, resulting in Family Support Agreement system (2010, p. 3).
14. Watson (1997) examines the effects of global culture in Hong Kong. The author argues that children enjoying American-style food have brought about changes in their relationships with the older generation.
15. Belanger (1997) investigates the transformations of the Vietnamese family, particularly in the north over a longer span of time since the 1960s, but does not focus on the contemporary changes due to the economic reform.
16. There are some studies from Northern Vietnam, which look at social changes in the area, although most of these works focus on village

- structures and not on the family. These include: Malarney (1994; 2002), Miyazawa (1998; 1999), Kerkvliet and Porter, eds. (1995), Kleinen (1999). Also, Leshkovich (2000) examines social changes under *doi moi* in urban South Vietnam.
17. Culturally, children, especially sons, remain important because of their economic value, their obligation to take care of their parents, and their responsibility to continue ancestor worship. Socially, according to Pham, the state has not offered an adequate welfare system to replace family ties.
 18. In Thailand, filial obligation is still a strong cultural value and continues to play a powerful role in the family, especially in decisions regarding the elderly. In this situation, the economic condition of the family, and of the children in particular, becomes a crucial factor determining the welfare of the elderly and the caregiving provided for them. Caffery concludes, "When land is limited, children leave to find employment elsewhere and will try to send money to help their parents as they are able" (1992, p. 105).
 19. On the family in Thailand, especially in relation to economic situation, see also Piker (1968), Foster (1978), and Limanonda (1995). For traditional Thai family norms, see Smith (1979) and Foster (1984).
 20. Piker discusses that traditionally in Thai society, strategies of dependence and independence functioned at the village level, making the villagers' life secure in times of economic crisis. However, during the historical development over the past hundred years at the national as well as international levels, this has changed. He argues, "Traditional and widely adopted strategies for both dependence and independence, beyond the confines of the normative life cycle, have all but disappeared." Koentjaraningrat (1982) compares the urban dwellers and rural residents and argues that in the former, the norm of dependency ceases to function and a more individualistic attitude becomes prevalent.
 21. In a more historical context, Steedly (1993) illustrates the interactions between kin and market economy among the Karo people during the colonial period in Indonesia.
 22. Fahey states that working women in Vietnam remain responsible for the domestic arrangements of shopping, cooking, cleaning, and organizing family ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, which makes it harder for them to enter the workplace. Fahey argues, "As a consequence, women, and especially married women, are leaving paid employment" (1995, p. 49).

23. Blanc-Szanton (1990) also discusses the effects on woman of employment and modernization in Thai society under industrialization. She discusses that the change in gender relation brought about by industrialization works negatively for women.
24. Not only do the Japanese female workers, by having jobs outside their home, bring a family atmosphere to the workplace, but the company is also required to accommodate such an atmosphere.
25. Another case study of the relationship between family and modernization is by Korson (1978) on Pakistan.
26. Can Tho Province was split into two administrative units — Can Tho City and Hau Giang Province in 2004. Can Tho City includes the city itself as well as the surrounding rural areas.
27. Siblings call each other by their birth order. The first born child is called Second Brother/Sister so there is no First Brother/Sister. The second born is called Third Brother/Sister and so on.
28. Being the educational centre of the Mekong Delta, the university is engaged in a variety of developmental projects, mainly in agriculture, often in cooperation with foreign governments and NGOs.
29. At the time of my research the college (department) of agriculture was the main and largest college of the university, though it also had colleges of medicine and foreign languages. It eventually opened other colleges such as economics and law later on.