

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

*Between 'Still Society' and 'Moving Society':
Life Choices and Value Orientations of Hanoi University Graduates
in Post-Reform Vietnam*

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vi
List of Illustrations	vii
List of Abbreviations	viii
Chapter 1 Introduction: The Research in the Vietnamese Social Context.....	1
1. A Brief Overview of Social Organisation and Family Structure.....	1
1.1. Traditional Vietnamese Society.....	1
1.2. Colonial Vietnamese Society in the North (1883-1954 [or 1945])	5
1.3. Under Socialism (1954 [or 1945] to present)	7
2. Differences Between The Old and The New under <i>Doi Moi</i>.....	8
3. Researching Youth in the ‘Year of Youth’.....	11
4. Organisation of the Thesis	19
Chapter 2 Young Graduates and Their Value Orientations as the Subject of Research	23
1. The ‘Bad’, the ‘Male’, and the West: The Conceptualising of Youth in Western Societies	23
2. Reviewing Studies of Asian Youth	29
3. The Vanguard and the Nation-Builder: The Conceptualising of Youth in Vietnam.....	33
4. Values and Social Change: A Conceptual Framework	40
4.1. Studies of Values and Social Change: A Theoretical Overview	41
4.2. A Range of Vietnamese Values.....	48
4.3. Young People and the Change and Continuity in Values in Post- <i>Doi Moi</i> Vietnam.....	78

Chapter 3	Research Methodology	81
1.	Understanding the Field	81
1.1.	Issues for a Native Researcher	81
1.2.	Reflexive Matters	86
1.3.	Problems Relating to the Search for Materials	89
2.	Timetable	89
3.	In the Field	91
3.1.	Interviewing Young Graduates and Participant Observation	91
3.2.	Interviews with Local Officials and Researchers	97
3.3.	The Use of Social Survey Data	98
3.4.	Media Analysis	99
Chapter 4	'Opening Doors' and 'Renovation'	102
1.	Background of Renovation	102
2.	<i>Doi moi</i> and <i>Mo cua</i>	110
3.	An Assessment of <i>Doi moi</i>	112
4.	Scenes of <i>Mo Cua</i>	119
4.1.	The Millennium Celebrations	120
4.2.	From Korean Movies to Korean Fashion	126
4.3.	Recreation and Commercial Leisure Establishments	131
5.	Making Sense of the Scenes	138

Chapter 5	Employment	142
1.	The Changing Perception of Employment	143
1.1.	Before <i>Doi moi</i>	143
1.2.	After <i>Doi moi</i>	145
2.	Change in Jobs: An Analysis of Employment Sectors.....	155
2.1.	Employment with the State.....	156
2.2.	Employment in the Non-State Sector	169
3.	The <i>Hoc them</i> Phenomenon	194
4.	Chapter Summary: Looking Towards the Future.....	205
Chapter 6	Family and Love Relationships	209
1.	Youth's Relationships with Parents	209
1.1.	Greater Freedom in Personal Life Choices, except for Marriage-Related Matters	209
1.2.	Explanations of Parental Influence	215
1.3.	Implications of the Parent-Child Relationship in Wider Social Contexts	220
2.	Diversity of Relationships and Marriage.....	222
2.1.	Criteria for an Ideal Partner	222
2.2.	Career versus Marriage.....	225
2.3.	Pragmatism and Flirtation.....	231
2.4.	'Modernity' in Courtship	241
3.	Chapter Summary: The 'Old' versus the 'New'.....	260

Chapter 7	Change and Continuity of Values amid Social Change	265
1.	Preserving 'Traditional' Values in Relationships with Parents and Older People.....	265
2.	More Liberal Attitudes and Behaviour towards Courtship and Sexuality	272
3.	Gender Relations.....	278
4.	They are 'Open-minded'	281
5.	They are 'Materialistic'	286
6.	The New Perception of Success.....	288
7.	Is 'Individualism' Imminent?	295
Chapter 8	Summary and Conclusion.....	302
Appendix A:	Glossary	313
Appendix B:	List of Interviewees.....	317
Bibliography	331

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1.1	'Fostering revolutionary generations for the future is a very important and necessary job'	16
1.2	Volunteering youths in blue uniforms	17
2.1	Stelae with inscriptions of the names of people who passed the mandarin examinations at <i>Van Mieu</i>	62
2.2	Confucius altar inside of <i>Van Mieu</i>	63
2.3	Propaganda poster: 'Work hard and self sacrifice to liberate the South'	69
2.4	Propaganda poster: 'All for the building of socialism'	70
4.1	Propaganda poster: ' <i>Doi moi</i> in order to go forward'	109
4.2	Millennium celebration on the square of the Opera House	123
4.3	Traditional dance and drum performance in the courtyard of <i>Van Mieu</i> as part of the millennium celebrations	124
4.4	Two Dilmah cafés in Dien Bien Phu Street	136
4.5	An overview of <i>Thanh nien</i> road	137
5.1	Graduated but will still need <i>hoc them</i> to secure a job	204

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIDS	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945 – 1976)
GDP	gross domestic product
GSO	General Statistics Office
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JV	joint venture
NCSSH	National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SOE	state-owned enterprise
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1976 – present)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VCP	Vietnamese Communist Party
VIR	Vietnam Investment Review
WB	World Bank
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION:

THE RESEARCH IN THE VIETNAMESE SOCIAL CONTEXT

1. A Brief Overview of Social Organisation and Family Structure

1.1. Traditional Vietnamese Society

'Traditional Vietnamese' society as described in this thesis primarily refers to the society of the Kinh (Viet) majority in lowland Vietnam; the Red River Delta in North Vietnam has a particular relevance in this research both because of the location of the capital city, Hanoi, and because 'traditional' Vietnam in the nineteenth century comprised the Red River Delta and the central coastal plains regions (Jamieson, 1993: 6). By 'traditional' I mean the social structures, rules, customs, values and ideas that existed in Vietnam until around the mid-twentieth century. However, I recognise that prior to this period 'traditional' Vietnamese society was not static, but had experienced some changes during the pre-colonial and French colonial periods.

'Traditional Vietnamese society' was essentially an agricultural society ruled by the king. Before the fifteenth century A.D., Mahayana Buddhism and the spirit cults were the main forms of popular belief (Whitmore, 1984: 298; Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993: 49-52). However, Confucianism had made an early appearance in Vietnam, as seen in the construction of *Van Mieu*¹ (the Temple of Literature) in the capital city in 1070 A.D. under the Ly dynasty. Dedicated to Confucius, *Van Mieu* was initially a school where the sons of high-ranking dignitaries received moral education and training in administration, and later became the place where national mandarin competitions were held for the first time under independent Vietnamese rule in 1075

A.D. (*Vietnam: A Historical Sketch*, 1974: 52; Jamieson, 1993: 9; Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993: 52-53). Subsequently with the development of an increasingly complex social hierarchy, and the need to unite the nation in the face of natural calamities and foreign invasion, Confucianism, with its conception of social and political stability based upon strict hierarchy and moral instructions, grew in importance (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993: 52-55). During the Le dynasty (1428-1788 A.D.) the Confucian doctrine was adopted as the state ideology (Whitmore, 1984: 298; Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993: 52-55). As Confucianism continued its dominance, it had become the basis of the strict social structure and moral instruction for members of the society, especially among the élite (Taylor, 1983; Whitmore, 1984; Tran Dinh Huou, 1991; Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993). It has been argued, however, that Confucianism was not 'a monolithic, historically coherent set of ideas and practices in Vietnamese society' (Graw, 2002: 1124). Therefore, while acknowledging Confucian influences in Vietnam for the purpose of this research, I shall not engage in a definition or a critical reflection of the doctrine of Confucianism, but rather I am interested in certain aspects of the popular perceptions of Confucian influences in the context of 'traditional' Vietnam (see chapter 2).

Traditional Vietnamese society comprised four major social strata or social status levels which from the highest to the lowest were: *sy* (Confucian scholars), *nong* (peasants), *cong* (artisans) and *thuong* (traders). In the agricultural society, *thuong* were small in number; they played an insignificant role in social life, and had the lowest social status, as people did not look upon trade as an appropriate, long-term and stable way to earn a living (Nguyen Huu Minh, 1998: 7, 8). Confucian scholars, on the other hand, were held in high esteem. They could accede to public offices and

become mandarins through the yearly mandarin examinations taking place at *Van Mieu*. Therefore, many ordinary men strived to study to become Confucian scholars: even if they failed the mandarin examinations, they would still be able to move outside the class of peasants by becoming *thay do* or village Confucian teachers (see chapter 2, section 4.2). Learning was then an important channel for upward social mobility, particularly for peasants.

However, seen from a politico-economic ‘class’ perspective, traditional Vietnamese society consisted of two main classes: the ‘ruling’ class (*giai cap thong tri*) and the ‘ruled’ (*giai cap bi tri*). There was no middle class as in the case of modern industrialised societies (Dao Duy Anh, 1938/1992: 373; Buttinger, 1967: 116). The ‘ruling’ class comprised the royal family, mandarins, holders of large domains, and landowners from great families. The ‘ruled’ or the ‘ordinary’ class comprised peasants, craftsmen, and traders (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993: 36). Generally speaking, it has been noted that what we know today of ‘traditional Vietnam’ was primarily the ‘traditional Vietnam’ of the élite; much less was known about the life of peasants who made up the majority of Vietnamese society (Phan Ke Binh, 1990; Nguyen Tu Chi, 1993; Nguyen Huu Minh, 1998; Papin, 2001).

In traditional Vietnam, the influence of Confucian doctrine was reinforced by the state (Tran Dinh Huou, 1991; Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993: 52), and by Confucian scholars who lived and taught in villages (normally upon their return to the village after failing the mandarin competitions). As I shall examine in the next chapter, Confucianism viewed the family as the cornerstone of society. It emphasised the value of *hieu* (filial piety) and the devotion of children to their parents. Furthermore,

it allowed for little equality between men and women. Although in Vietnam the woman, as a wife and a mother, often managed family finances and performed domestic chores, the eldest man was normally the head of the family and representative of the household in social life. There was a *modus vivendi* of external public male domination and internal domestic female primacy (O'Harrow, 1995: 169). Nonetheless, the woman was subject to the three submissions (*tam tong*): she had to obey her father when young, her husband when married and her eldest son when widowed.

Alongside this strong male domination, kinship in the Vietnamese family was patrilineal and post-marital residence was normally patrilocal (Sorensen, 1993: 108). The bride usually left her natal family and joined the family of her husband. Patrilocal residence did not only reflect the traditional expectation that children had to care for elderly parents and parents wished to help their children before they established an independent household, but also that the new daughter-in-law had to be helped to become accustomed to the husband's family (Nguyen Huu Minh, 1998: 177). However, as portrayed in popular folklore and literature as well as through the accounts of older people living in pre-colonial Vietnam, the relationship between *me chong* (mother of the husband) and *nang dau* (daughter-in-law) in the patrilocal family was often full of tension and conflict.

In traditional Vietnam, marriage was universal, and the common age of marriage was about thirteen for women and fifteen for men (*gai thap tam, nam thap luc*). There was also a saying *trai khon tim vo, gai khon tim chong* (a wise man looks for a wife, a wise woman looks for a husband), which reflected the need and the importance of

marriage. The wedding of a person was the most important affair for the entire patrilineal family. The wedding would not take place without the approval of the two families, and the marriage was valid only when organised by the family and at the familial home (Khuat Thu Hong, 1996: 9). One of the most important functions of marriage and the family was to produce male offspring to assure continuity of the patrilineage and to perform the rites of ancestor worship (Tran Dinh Huou, 1991)².

1.2. Colonial Vietnamese Society in the North (1883-1954 [or 1945])³

Under French colonial rule during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Vietnamese social structure underwent significant changes. New social classes 'unknown in pre-colonial Vietnam' (Buttinger, 1967: 160) were born, including the bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie. By this time, Vietnamese people in cities could engage in a range of new professions such as doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, interpreters, clerks, secretaries, technicians, schoolteachers, and journalists. Other social changes were expressed in new ideas (for example, the notions of the 'individual' and 'marriage of love') as well as lifestyles. In urban centres during the early 1930s, especially in Hanoi, there was a 'sudden and self-conscious rush to replace the old with the new, to Westernise, to be modern' (Jamieson, 1993: 101) together with a new consciousness of the individual and individual freedom. There were also a number of social movements fighting for and promoting education for women, gender equality and freedom to choose one's spouse (Jamieson, 1993: 85-87; 105-107). Girls by this time were admitted to schools although in reality these were accessible only to the daughters of the well-to-do. Western-style educational systems introduced by colonial administrators had indeed been a powerful impetus to cultural change (Jamieson, 1993: 101).

But these social and cultural changes took place mainly in cities directly exposed to the influence of Western ideas and lifestyles. Due to the relatively small urban population, the impact of urban society upon rural society was gradual. Even in urban centres, the changes introduced by the French were often superficial rather than fundamental. As Jamieson remarks

Even among the literate, urban middle class, life in its essentials continued to conform rather closely to the traditional model. For most people, life still revolved around the family, and families had changed very little. Young people still married mainly to please their parents; and most parents, with other senior family members, felt it to be not only their right but also their duty to exercise control over the younger generation's choice of marriage partners. The marriage ceremonial still consisted of an elaborate set of rites designed to transfer the bride from one family to another more than to join two individuals (1993: 104).

As a result, the traditional Vietnamese family, marriage patterns, and the related value system and cultural norms, survived with few changes beyond the arrival of the French, and even then continued with only a few modifications (which mostly occurred in major urban centres and among a small proportion of the population) into the late colonial period. The impact of the French was, therefore, more evident in the introduction of new ideas (to do with the emancipation of women, gender equality,

free choice of marriage partner, and individualism), rather than promoting actual change in social and familial organisation for the majority of people.

1.3. Under Socialism (1954 [or 1945] to present)

The socialist transformation implemented in the North and after 1975 in the whole country had brought about profound socio-political and economic changes, which in turn led to transformations in the wider social structure and marriage practices. Collectivisation and the abolition of private ownership were aimed at establishing an egalitarian society, and abolishing the old system of 'class society'. The socialist state regarded peasants and workers (who were the proletarian class) above intellectuals, businesspeople and traders. In socialist values, marriage practice was no longer a transaction between two families, but also involved the state through the requirement of official approval, and the need to check individual life histories and the political compatibility of marriage partners (see chapter 2).

Also during the socialist period, the government implemented a wide-range of laws and policies aimed at widening occupational opportunities outside agriculture, enhancing gender equality, increasing literacy and popular education whilst abolishing polygamy and the practice of 'child marriage' (*tao hon*).

An important feature of this period is that Marxism-Leninism had become the exclusive ideology, replacing Confucianism as well as any other competing ideologies. The new ideology emphasised collective action and the eventual triumph of collectivism. At the same time, as it attempted to implement socialist egalitarianism, the state told people to sacrifice and put the grand cause of building

socialism above all else, including their parents and the duties of filial piety (fieldwork interview, 2000). The family was replaced by the 'superfamily' of fellow countrymen or of the entire nation, although 'the individual had no more freedom of action in his new "superfamily" than individuals had ever had in the Vietnamese families of traditional times' (Jamieson, 1993: 256-257). I shall return to these points later in chapter 2, but to summarise, under socialism Vietnamese society was stripped of all that normally constituted 'traditional' customs, values and beliefs (including filial piety, propriety and respect towards the elderly, and religious practices), only to become something akin to a homogeneous 'mass', in which the individual, though being equal to all others, was atheist and indoctrinated, and had no personal characteristics, values, beliefs, and goals.

2. Differences Between The Old and The New under *Doi Moi*

In June 1987, a year after the introduction of the *doi moi* reforms, one of Vietnam's most prominent writers, Nguyen Huy Thiep, published a short story under the title 'The General Retires' (*Tuong ve huu*)⁴ in *Bao Van Nghe*, the prestigious journal of the Vietnam Writers' Association. It attracted instant and widespread attention, for it was an 'unusual stark construction of Vietnamese society' (Lockhart, 1992: 3) never portrayed before in the pre-*doi moi* socialist literature nor recognised by people as part of the pre-*doi moi* socialist reality. This represented a break from 'socialist realism' (*hien thuc xa hoi chu nghia*) in Vietnamese literature, and from the tradition of serving state propaganda and 'pay[ing] little attention to the task of describing the destinies of people and establishing original images of individual persons and their lives' (Le Ngoc Ta, quoted in Lockhart, 1992: 6).

Although 'The General Retires' is not about young single university graduates, what makes it worth mentioning here is the fact that for the first time since the *doi moi* reforms, a literary work raised the question about the relationship between the old and the new, and acknowledged the existence of inter-generational differences and conflicts in the market society. Prior to this story, the younger generation had always been depicted as 'following in the footsteps of their fathers and elder brothers' (*tiép buoc cha anh*) in the path of building socialism, and therefore the relationships between young people and their seniors had always been portrayed as harmonious.

'The General Retires' is about a seventy-year-old general returning to his son's house after a long life of devoted service to the country. Coming back from 'far-flung campaigns' to live among his son's family in the outskirts of Hanoi, he found himself suddenly confronted with a cast of characters who gave expression to a social reality that the general had never experienced before. His son 'was able to study and to travel overseas', his daughter-in-law was 'well educated and live[d] the life of a modern woman', his two granddaughters (one fourteen and one twelve) studied foreign languages and music and 'were always busy', his half-brother and his half-brother's son were ox-cart coolies who were 'big as giants' and talked like 'daredevils'.

The general was discontented with these lifestyles. He was 'saddened' that his wife was kept in a room in the outbuilding, because she was senile. He was shocked and angered at the way his daughter-in-law brought aborted foetuses home from the maternity clinic where she worked, to feed a pack of Alsatian dogs she was raising to make money. Then, as the master of ceremonies at the wedding of his half-brother's

son (the ox-cart coolie nephew whose first wife divorced him), he over-prepared his speech only to find that 'a clarinet punctuated each sentence by blaring stupidly after each full stop. Firecrackers went off noisily. Young children provided a nonsensical commentary. [...] He was hurt and frightened by the motley mob that milled around and was rudely indifferent to his speech.' Only a few days after the wedding, the bride had a baby and was thrown out of the house by her drunken father-in-law. As she had no means of supporting herself, the general became involved and took her in. Even with his little grandchildren, he experienced distance and incomprehension as they 'rarely went near their grandfather'. On one occasion the general said to his granddaughters, Vi and Mi: 'What books have you girls got for me to read?' Mi smiled and Vi said: 'What do you like to read, Grandfather?' 'Whatever's easy,' he replied. 'We haven't got any books like that,' the girls said in unison.

The story demonstrates the emerging contrasts and contradictions between parents and children, husband and wife, the old and the young, old and new perceptions of life, and the rich and the poor. On the one hand, as seen from the viewpoint of the older generations, the transition to a market economy highlights individual motives, especially the motive of making money, as a source of moral crisis. On the other hand, the abolition of state subsidies and the lack of a social safety net combined with the conditions of fierce market competition left people with little more than their own resources to earn a living. 'The General Retires' brought into the critical spotlight the conflicting perceptions, values, and lifestyles that had begun to emerge between different generations and between different social classes in a market society. It is, at the same time, a first sounding alarm for social deterioration.

Precisely because of this, the story contrasts sharply with the literary works prevailing in Vietnam before the introduction of *doi moi* in 1986.

Soon after its publication in *Bao Van Nghe*, in early 1989 the film version of 'The General Retires' was released, and most recently, in 2002, it was aired again on state-controlled national television, testifying to the fact that it still maintains its timeliness and popularity. In my view, it remains a sharp, powerful (and also satirical) observation, embodied in a literary work, of the socio-economic consequences of market transition. Ever since its publication only a year after the introduction of *doi moi*, inter-generational incomprehension, interpersonal relationships, and contrasts and contradictions between the old and the new have intensified and become increasingly apparent in Vietnamese society. Nguyen Huy Thiep's portrayal of market realities provided me with the inspiration to study and understand the voices and experiences of both the young and the old. It has culminated in this research into life choices, and the construction and orientation of values among young educated Vietnamese in post-*doi moi* Vietnam.

3. Researching Youth in the 'Year of Youth'

In Vietnam, people belonging to the age group of 15 to 30 years old account for approximately 30 per cent of the national population. University students and graduates account for a mere two per cent of this 30 per cent, which is only 0.6 per cent of the national population (Nguyen Van Trung, 1996: 66-67), and the majority of youths still live in rural areas (Nguyen Van Buom, 2000: 11). Although young people with university education make up a very small proportion of the national young population, university graduates are interesting subjects for research for two

reasons. Firstly, in the context of a modernising Vietnam, knowledge has been increasingly recognised as crucial in achieving the goal of socio-economic development and modernisation. In fact, like never before, the state and government are exerting efforts to promote a learning society (*xa hoi hoc tap*). Thus people with education and knowledge, including university graduates, have been given greater attention by the state, as compared to the pre-*doi moi* socialist period when it was mainly peasant and worker youths that were placed in the spotlight.

Secondly, as university graduates tend to concentrate in large urban areas – because of the urban location of major universities in Vietnam and because the intellectual élite these graduates belong to is largely urbanised – where the impacts of the ‘open-door’ and socio-economic reforms are greatest, it is this segment of youth that is most exposed to the ongoing economic changes and social transformations. Therefore, by studying them and their responses to socio-economic change, my aim is to gain insights into some of the socio-cultural consequences of market transition.

After three years studying abroad, I came back to Vietnam in late 1999 to carry out my field research in Hanoi. During the early days of my fieldwork, I regularly heard news reports on the national media that the year 2000 was designated *nam thanh nien* (Year of Youth). To start with, I was fascinated by this fact, as it seemed that the time could not possibly be more auspicious for a research project on young people. However, I soon realised that my interviewees were uninterested in this official pronouncement, nor did it have any direct impact upon their daily lives. Unless directly involved in the activities of youth organisations such as the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League (*Doan Thanh nien Cong san Ho Chi Minh*) and the

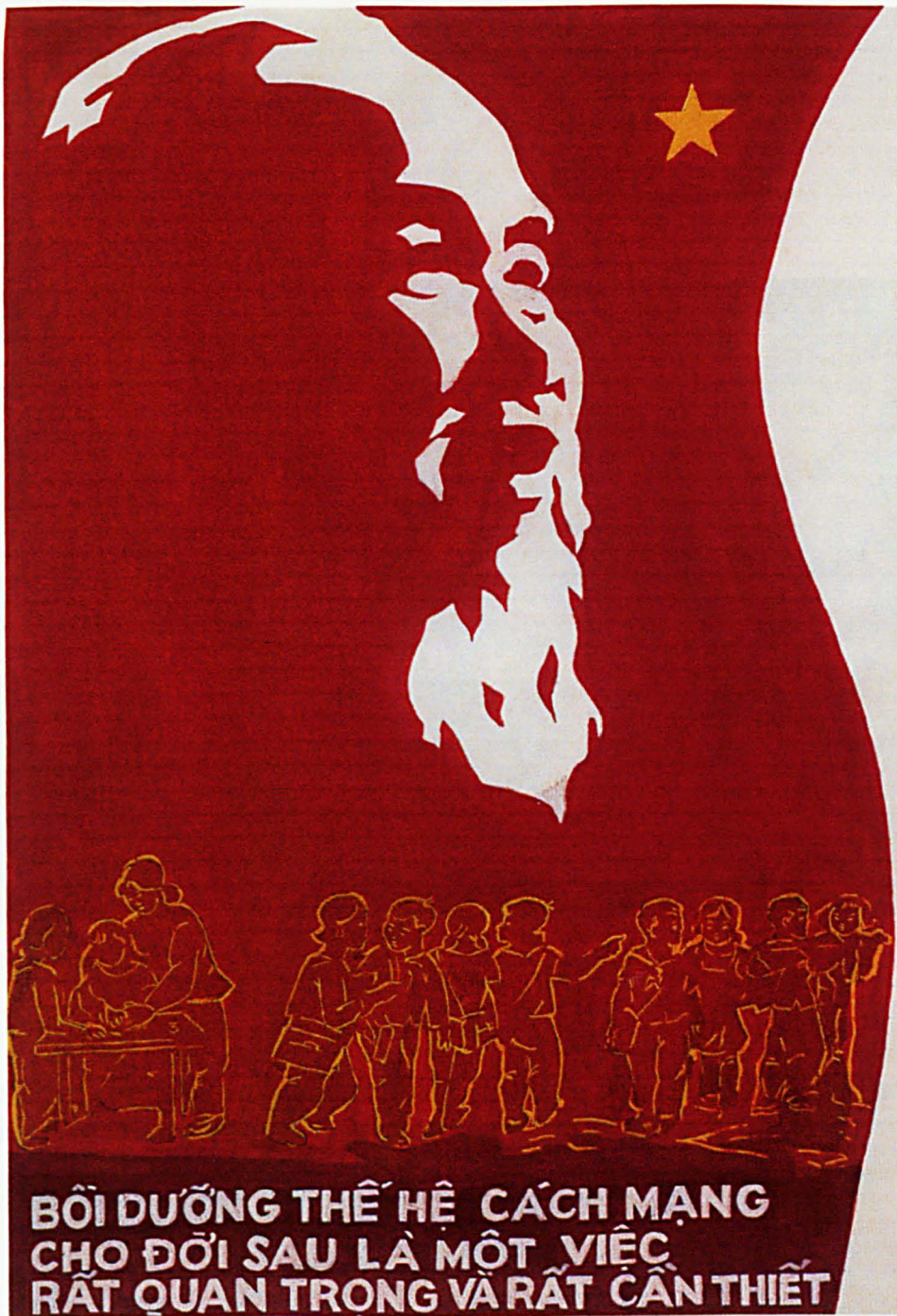
Vietnamese Student Association (*Hoi Sinh vien Viet Nam*), people would not have normally been aware of this special year, and would have carried on their life in a market-oriented society as usual. That is to say, only through the participation in an official organisation, would one be involved in the various campaigns (*phong trao*) that comprised *nam thanh nien*.

According to an announcement made by the Central Committee of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League, it was 'in compliance with the wishes of the youth' and 'in response to the appeal of [Party] Secretary General Le Kha Phieu' that the 'party and state decided to choose the year 2000 as the Year of Youth' (Vu Trong Kim, 2000: 33)⁵. The Youth League subsequently initiated *phong trao thanh nien tinh nguyen* (the movement of volunteering youth), whereby youths should 'volunteer to work to exceed the [state's] production plans; volunteer to study, to conduct scientific research, and to apply technological advances; and volunteer to go anywhere and do whatever the people require' (ibid: 33). It called upon the entire membership of the Youth League as well as young people in general to 'actively participate in teams of volunteering youths to build up the economy, eradicate hunger and alleviate poverty, protect the environment, and fight unemployment, illiteracy, and social vices, especially the evil of drugs'. In addition, 'each unit of the [Youth] League and the [Students'] Association should register to undertake a youth project or youth work; to organise for all youths to participate in activities of traditional education, political education, physical exercise, and cultural activities' (ibid: 33).

On the one hand, the announcement acknowledged the importance of science and technology, and hence the importance of educated youths in the country's socio-economic development. On the other hand, it testified to the continuation of a die-hard tradition by the socialist state to emphasise youth mobilisation and to extol the importance of young people as 'nation-builders'. At the same time, it ignored some aspects of a market reality: people are no longer willing to work merely because they volunteer to do so or because the Party and the Youth League tell them to. This was why it failed to attract the attention of a significant proportion of youths, including my research subjects, who seem to have been mainly directed to matters relating to their own personal lives (for example, finding a 'good' job and earning enough money in the competitive market place). As a result of this lack of significance of the Year of Youth among my interviewees, and because my research essentially examines young graduates' experiences in their own terms, *nam thanh nien* subsequently bore little relation to my research project as well as to the lives of my research subjects, and is therefore not referred to hereafter in this thesis.

Despite the relative importance of educated youth in post-reform Vietnam, until recently not much independent research on youth in general, and educated youth in particular, has been undertaken. On the one hand, despite the communist and socialist regime's continuous strategic deployment of the notion of youth as the vanguard and as nation-builders, young people were not recognised as a subject worthy of social research until the mid-1980s (Dang Canh Khanh, 1996a: 22). On the other hand, Vietnam was still closed to scholarly social research by Western scholars until after the adoption of *doi moi* reforms in 1986. Even now when 'the doors are open' (*mo cua*), scholars from overseas still face various difficulties in studying

youth, including such difficulties as cultural, language and age barriers (In chapter 2 I will discuss in more detail the reality of researching Vietnamese youth).



Picture 1.1

'Fostering revolutionary generations for the future is a very important and necessary job'.

This propaganda poster exemplifies the way in which young people are recognised for their strategic importance in the discourse of the socialist state.



Picture 1.2

Youths attending the various campaigns that made up *nam thanh nien* were normally distinguished from other young people by their blue uniforms.

My research project is based on first-hand experience and extensive fieldwork in Hanoi. The aim here is to explore and describe the life, behaviour and attitudes of under-thirty-year-old single university graduates in Hanoi, and analyse how their life choices and value orientations have changed during the *doi moi* reforms from the late 1980s to the beginning of the twenty-first century. In focusing on young graduates in Hanoi, I am neither suggesting that Hanoi's educated youths are leading the country's socio-economic and cultural development in the same way as the emerging urban middle class did in the 1930s and 1940s (Jamieson, 1993: 93), nor am I pretending that this is ethnographic research covering the entire educated young population. My intention is simply to let Hanoi young graduates speak for themselves, tell their stories and experiences, and express their perspectives on issues that they consider most important to them amid the new conditions of a market economy. This is in contrast with most studies of young Vietnamese that focus mainly on state policies, official discourse, and, more recently, gender aspects relating to young people's lives (such as prostitution, sexual health, and marriage). As the thesis describes and analyses the life choices and value orientations of young graduates in Hanoi, I hope it will help to raise awareness of the real issues facing educated young people, and lay a first paving stone towards the understanding of the young generation in post-reform Vietnam. Besides, since values are bound up with particular socio-economic and political structures (Evans, 1993: 25), understanding change and continuity in values will help to understand broader processes of social, economic and political change taking place in the country. Of further significance is the fact that my research serves to begin to make good the paucity of studies on

young people in Asia, particularly in (post-) communist countries such as China, Laos, and Vietnam.

4. Organisation of the Thesis

Apart from this introductory chapter, my thesis includes seven chapters. The purpose of chapter 2 is twofold. First, it is intended to situate my research in the context of the relevant scholarly literature. This includes the large body of literature on youth in Western societies (and by Western academics), the moderate number of scholarly works on a rather limited number of themes relating to aspects of young people's lives in Asia, and lastly the very modest number of studies on young Vietnamese. The second aim is to outline a range of 'traditional' values and perspectives that I detected as being most relevant to my study of Hanoi young university graduates amid social change. I therefore review a range of virtues relating to morality and social hierarchy, gender roles, and marriage, as well as the evolution of the perceptions of success and the notion of individualism through different socio-historical periods from pre-colonial times to the commencement of the *doi moi* reforms. This framework of 'traditional' values is a useful point of reference and comparison for an analysis of present-day young people's value orientations.

Chapter 3 focuses on research methodology. I discuss how I carried out ethnographic field research with regard to gaining access, establishing contacts, finding informants, and conducting in-depth interviews and participant observation. I also highlight the issues facing a native researcher, and specifically the advantages and disadvantages of studying one's own society.

Chapter 4 discusses the background of *doi moi*, as well as offering a brief assessment of the reforms, particularly in socio-economic terms. I attempt to present a real-life picture of *doi moi* realities through a selection of scenes and stories that I observed, experienced and recorded during my fieldwork. This helps the reader to better imagine and understand the current socio-economic and cultural environment in which young graduates in Hanoi live.

As shown through data from my interviews, employment, family, and interpersonal relationships, including love relationships, are the major domains in which urban educated youths face a multitude of difficult choices and consequently test out new social roles and express their ideas and values. Chapter 5 and 6 demonstrate how in the context of 'traditional' and 'modern' values young people exercise their choices over a wide range of life situations. Chapter 5 analyses aspects of employment whilst chapter 6 examines issues relating to the family and interpersonal relationships. Following the examination of how young people arrive at their choices as presented in chapter 5 and 6, chapter 7 is a discussion of young graduates' value orientations and attempts to offer generalisations where possible, and relevant comparisons with the experiences of young people in other Southeast Asian countries. It also reveals concerns by the state and older people over young people 'losing their roots' (*mat goc*) as expressed in the condemnation of materialism, pragmatism and sexual licence as well as anxieties about the erosion of traditional values and the rise of individualistic values. In chapter 8, I present concluding thoughts. Apart from highlighting the trends in value orientations emerging among young graduates, I stress the complexity and diversity of the process of socio-economic change and development in Vietnam, because the 'old' is neither simply replaced by the 'new' in

a linear direction nor does it obstruct it. In the scenario of 'tradition' interlocking with 'modernity' in complex ways, an important finding has been the fact that educated young Vietnamese have found for themselves a middle path to navigate between 'traditional' and 'modern' values so as to pursue the lifestyles that they desire without disrupting family cohesion and alienating themselves from society.

Finally, there are a glossary in which definitions to key Vietnamese terms are provided, and a list of interviewees. I would also like to note here that when citing Vietnamese authors throughout my thesis as well as in the bibliography, I adopt the Vietnamese common usage, according to which names are always written with the family name first, then the middle name and finally the given name. In the West, Vietnamese names have been transcribed in a variety of ways, and sometimes the given name is cited instead of the family name. There is also a restricted number of Vietnamese family names; about half of the population share the surname Nguyen and there are only eleven other common surnames, including Pham, Le, and Tran (Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 1992: 7). As a result and to avoid confusion, family, middle and given names are provided.

Notes to Chapter 1:

1. Vietnamese special letters and diacritics have been omitted from the text, purely for technical reasons.
2. I shall not examine the Vietnamese kinship system and family structure in detail, because it is not the focus of my research. The interested reader can consult Tran Dinh Huou (1991), Jamieson (1993), O'Harrow (1995), Khuat Thu Hong (1996), and Hirschman and Nguyen Huu Minh (2002).
3. Although the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was declared independent on 2 September 1945, it was not until 1954 after the decisive victory of the Dien Bien Phu campaign and following the Geneva Conference that French troops finally pulled out of Indochina. Therefore, I put the year 1945 in brackets in order to reflect the reality that socialist transformation did not in effect take place prior to 1954. The DRV was changed into the current Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) on 2 July 1976.
4. Nguyen Huy Thiep. 1992. *The General Retires and Other Stories*. Translated from Vietnamese with an Introduction by Greg Lockhart. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
5. Author Vu Trong Kim was a member of the Central Committee of the VCP and the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League.

Chapter 2

YOUNG GRADUATES AND THEIR VALUE ORIENTATIONS AS THE SUBJECT OF RESEARCH

1. The 'Bad', the 'Male', and the West: The Conceptualising of Youth in Western Societies

Although this research focuses on young adults in the context of Vietnamese society, it is necessary to consider the body of literature on young people in the West. It is not only because research on the subject of youth originated in the developed world, but also because general studies on youth to date have been primarily conducted by Western researchers.

In the 1950s, 'youth' began to emerge as a subject of interest to sociology and the popular media in the developed world (Amit-Talai and Wulff, 1995: 2; Wyn and White, 1997: 8, 18). Since then, writings and analyses have revealed a central and recurring theme that the subject of youth is a problematic issue: 'problematic' to conceptualise and to address (Wyn and White, 1997: 9; Cohen, 1989: 11). In reviewing the ways in which young people have been conceptualised, I have to point out a number of tendencies which have led to 'youth' being problematised.

First is the relevance of 'age' and the concept of 'youth'. 'Youth' is frequently used and perceived as a categorisation of people based on their age. Such a categorical approach has been applied in sociological studies on youth, since much of the literature about youth has 'inherited assumptions from developmental psychology about universal stages of development' (Wyn and White, 1997: 8). The approach is in itself problematic and confusing, as there is no clear theoretical basis of the

categorisation based on age (Wyn and White, 1997: 8), and it is difficult to define precisely the 'young' as an age category (Frith, 1984: 1). There is no clear-cut answer to such questions as 'At what age do children stop being children and become young people?' and 'At what age do people become adult?'. Similarly, it is no simple matter trying to answer such questions as to why many eighteen-year-olds behave like children while many others of the same age behave like adults. The categorical approach has proved to be overly simplistic and of an 'ahistorical and static nature' (Wyn and White, 1997: 12), as it assumes similarities among those within the age category, overlooking the differences and disregarding the continuities linking past, present and future.

'Age' and the concept of 'youth', as a matter of fact, refer to different phenomena, with the former referring to a biological category and the latter – as a subject of social studies – referring to a socially and culturally constructed category. Whilst biological processes seem to be acknowledged as similar everywhere, social and cultural experiences of youth vary greatly. In social science analysis, the relation between aspects of age and the concept of youth should only be seen to the extent that 'youth' describes aspects of people's social position and cultural categorisation which are an effect of their biological age but not completely determined by it (Frith, 1984: 2). Therefore, the challenge in conceptualising youth is to maintain a balance between 'recognising the importance of physical and psychological changes which occur in young people's lives and recognising the extent to which these are constructed by social institutions and negotiated by individuals' (Boyden, 1997: 191).

Secondly, writings on youth have shown another apparent generalising tendency and that is to portray youth as the 'bad', the 'male', and as a potential threat to the stability of society. This image is reinforced by the popular media. As soon as 'youth' started to emerge as a subject of interest to sociology and the popular media, young people were presented as rebels in films like *Rebel Without A Cause*, *The Wild Ones*, and *The Blackboard Jungle*, as rock'n'roll stars like Elvis Presley, Gene Vincent and Jerry Lee Lewis, and in the ubiquitous image of the slouched, leather-clad, mumbling street-corner gang (Frith, 1984: 12). This theme was later carried on in post-1950s popular conceptions, as 'newspaper articles on youth are inevitably about young working class men... who are seen as a threat to the assumed values of a "majority"' (Wyn and White, 1997:19). Similarly, academics conducting studies on youth had also focused primarily on the 'deviant', the 'juvenile delinquent', and the 'rebel'. A large body of literature on youth and youth culture has in common the idea and the assumption of youth as a 'problematic' social class, group or category, a 'deviant generation'. Early examples are to be found in the work of Erikson (1962), Coleman (1971), Clarke et al (1975), Hebdige (1979), and Hall and Jefferson (1976). More recently, youth continues to be seen as 'troublesome', and a 'problem', both to society and to themselves. In the mid-1980s, a typical adolescent portrayed in the British press was 'criminally inclined, unemployed, sporting, and the likely victim of various crimes and accidents' (Furnham and Stacey, 1991: 2). Such an attitude can also be seen in the introduction, into studies of youth, of such concepts as a youth 'underclass', a 'lost generation', and 'folk devils' (Daniel and Cornwall, 1993; Robinson and Gregson, 1992; Cohen: 1980).

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Interestingly this conceptualisation of youth as 'problematic' has essentially been constructed by older observers and writers. It suggests that research on youth has generally been conducted etically. In other words, these studies have rarely been based on young people's own perspectives, but rather on the criteria imposed by older people. What is more, although Furnham and Stacey observe that from the mid-1970s and through the 1980s researchers in a variety of disciplines did express greater interest in how young people come to perceive and understand their social world (1991: xi), these studies mainly focus on various aspects of the process of socialisation, rather than with the actual perspectives and viewpoints of young people.

In such a context, *Young People's Understanding of Society* by Furnham and Stacey (1991) is an attempt to bridge this gap. By reporting, comparing, and analysing results of various studies and surveys carried out by Western researchers during the 1970s and the 1980s, the authors strive to explore young people's attitudes toward, and understandings of a wide range of issues, from politics, economics, social stratification and employment to sex, religion, and race. Although the research examines young people's understanding of society, much of the work was still directed to answering the question of how and when young people gain knowledge, i.e. the process of socialisation. 'Young people', essentially referring to children and teenagers, comprise those 'roughly from the ages of 5 to 19' (p.1), across Western societies, including Western Europe, North America, and Australasia. Therefore, findings presented in the book do not necessarily apply cross-culturally, and they concentrate on 'Western' contexts and not those in the developing world.

The tendency in the social science literature to focus on youth in Western societies is very pervasive, inasmuch as research on this subject originated in the West. Furthermore, most studies so far have been conducted by Euro-American researchers. As Jo Boyden remarks, most literature on youth tends to focus on young, often mainstream, people in Western societies, and tends to be 'culturally and historically bound to the social preoccupations and priorities of the capitalist countries of Europe and the United States', rather than providing conclusions cross-culturally (1997: 192). But even in Europe, there are considerable variations in cultures and social institutions. In one specific area of research, Boyden observes that:

...the idea that the street is morally dangerous... was a peculiarly northern European conception...Whereas in northern Europe street life – especially in the poorest districts – was equated with a criminal sub-culture, in the Mediterranean countries the street was crucial to a variety of social and commercial activities (Boyden, 1997: 195).

This has served to raise another complicated issue in conceptualising 'youth', and that is the need for youth to be considered in relation to specific social, cultural, political, and economic conditions. The fact that these conditions vary greatly in different countries and societies results in an extraordinary diversity in their experiences. Liebau and Chisholm, like Boyden, illustrate such complexity by suggesting that even within Europe there is no such thing as 'European youth'. Young people in different countries and regions grow up in very different

circumstances that are shaped by both the material, 'objective' aspects of particular cultures and societies and by the ways in which they 'subjectively' interpret their circumstances (1993: 5). Ignoring the diversity in the experiences of youth in different societies has led to misleading generalisations in research analysis.

Today in the context of a growing trend of globalisation, the serious lack of studies on non-Western youths by non-Western researchers has led to the assumption and impression that youths worldwide are becoming Westernised. Nowadays, processes of globalisation with increasing economic interdependence, physical mobility, and the growth of mass communications have resulted in an increasingly common belief in the stereotype of 'global youth' all of whom are assumed to share an interest in Western pop music, hang out in shopping malls, and consume 'global commodities' such as McDonald's fast food and Coca-Cola. Although globalisation has indeed brought about similarities amongst young people across countries, it is misleading to view these similarities in terms of a centre-periphery relationship, a concept which was introduced by Ulf Hannerz (1991; 1992: 218-223), and which assumes that the 'core' comprises the Western world, essentially Western Europe and the United States, and the rest the 'periphery'. Even then young people in the West are not identical, as their experiences are still diverse because of variations in social, cultural, political and economic conditions both within and between different countries.

Therefore, notwithstanding the relevance of youth research from a Western perspective in making comparisons with other societies, too great a dependence on studies by Western researchers without due consideration of the differences between

societies may easily result in misconception and misunderstanding on the issue. In my specific research on Vietnamese youth, the challenge here is not to assume that young Vietnamese have become altogether Westernised in the current process of liberalisation and economic reform, but rather to examine and reflect on the extent to which globalisation processes have an impact on youth and to identify common threads among young people worldwide. At the same time, it is necessary to recognise the differences in the experiences of youth together with their resistance to processes of globalisation; in the Vietnamese case it is clear that this countervailing process has acted to preserve certain Vietnamese values and identities.

2. Reviewing Studies of Asian Youth

While there has been a focus on Western societies in studies of youth, there has been a serious lack of research on Asian youth. Generally speaking, the small body of literature on Asian youth comprises two main areas of interest. The first is literature on Asian youth in Western societies, mainly conducted by Western researchers. The second comprises studies by both Asian and Western researchers on Asian young people in selected Asian societies. Searches of library catalogues have shown that there have been more studies on Asian youth diasporas in the West as compared to studies on Asian youth in their native societies.

Overall, the two most common themes in the study of Asian young people in Western societies are cultural adaptation and problems of adolescence. As a subject of research young people of Asian descent are primarily from India, China and Vietnam living mainly in Britain, the United States and Canada. Studies of adaptation (for example, Anwar, 1976; Kurian, 1986; Ghuman, 1998) examine

cultural differences between the East and the West, the consequent difficulties for Asian young people in adapting to Western societies, and their 'identity crisis'. The general thesis is that because Western cultures are more open and liberal in contrast with the sometimes authoritarian and rigid Oriental cultures, young people not only find it difficult to adapt fully to life in the West, but, at the same time, also experience intergenerational conflicts with their own parents. Conflicts tend to arise between Asian parents' 'traditional' values and their children's desire for change, specifically in attitudes towards heterosexual relationships and marriage. However, research results indicate that these conflicts are normally due to differences in social environments and education, which have consequently produced a social and psychological gap between Asian children and their immigrant parents (Anwar, 1976). In other words, such intergenerational conflicts are primarily the consequence of problems of adjustment to Western culture rather than of a non-amicable nature in parent-child relations (Kurian, 1986).

The second common theme comprises the problems and troubles experienced by youth – apparently a very different research direction as compared to the first theme. Such studies (for example, Song et al., 1992; Cowart and Cowart, 1994) carry on the tradition of 'problematizing' youth, as they focus on Asian criminal gangs and violence in the West. Typically, they examine the causes of Asian crime, and the structure of Asian youth gangs in the United States. Findings from these studies suggest that Asian youths become involved in criminal gangs, because 'culture clash' and 'identity crisis' make them both detached from their families and cultures and generally render them marginal to American society. Consequently, they are attracted to gang membership, because it offers 'support, power, and mutual respect'

and 'because there are no language or cultural barriers' (Cowart and Cowart, 1994: 36). Generally speaking, Asian youth gangs are 'extremely violent and highly mobile', and tend to victimise their own people (Cowart and Cowart, 1994).

Although studies of Asian youth in Western societies provide us with some comparative perspectives, they are not particularly useful for studies of youth in Asia, simply because they do not research youth in specific Asian contexts. At the same time, however, publications on young people in Asia are few, sporadic, and are usually not based on an emic approach. The relatively small amount of literature on Asian youths in Asia pertains to a range of topics relating to gender, sexuality and the family.

The available literature tends to look at structural and institutional aspects of family, kinship, and marriage (Manderson and Liamputtong, 2002: 3). Examples can be found in a series of studies conducted by Asian researchers under the initiation and sponsorship of the United Nations, on family planning issues in countries in the South and Southeast Asian region (see, for example, United Nations, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1991d). Studies in this Asian Population Studies Series are typically based on surveys, mainly looking at the issues of family planning and accessibility to contraceptives for young people in these countries. More detailed research on the subject is *Youth in Singapore: Sexuality, Courtship, and Family Values*, by Saw Swee-Hock and Aline K. Wong (1981). The study was conducted in 1979 and surveyed a total of 1,000 youths in order to examine family and social change in the city state. However, its approach to data analysis was highly statistical, and its main emphasis was on the relevance of survey findings to the country's national

population control programme. Although studies in this vein relate to youth and aspects of their lives, they do not specifically provide insights into issues of social, cultural, and interpersonal relations as seen from the perspectives of young people.

More recently 'the time of AIDS' (Herdt and Lindenbaum, 1992) has seen a proliferation of studies on prostitution and sex work among young people. These studies have indicated that in Asia HIV is transmitted not only along the lines of trucking routes, through homosexuality, needle-sharing, and prostitution, but notably also because of specific political, economic and cultural conditions (Manderson and Jolly, 1997: 19). AIDS has been referred to as a 'poverty virus' (Dwyer, 1993), as poverty is a common factor forcing young women into prostitution. At the same time, new economically disadvantaged nation states have sought to reduce their foreign debt through the commodification of sex in association with tourism (Heyzer, 1986; Manderson, 1995). Prostitution sometimes also has the role of managing (male) desire while upholding conservative values and protecting the chastity of women (Manderson and Liamputtong, 2002: 4). However, writings on these issues are seen as more a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the subject of youth is largely overlooked.

Departing from the aforementioned trends of studying the structural and institutional aspects of family and kinship, and researching the economics of prostitution, *Coming of Age in South and Southeast Asia: Youth, Courtship and Sexuality*, edited by Lenore Manderson and Pranee Liamputtong, looks at an array of issues relating to courtship and sexuality in the context of 'modernity and the tensions that broad changes in social formation and economic organisation place on young people'

(2002: 15). The authors explore and illustrate the meanings and social experience of puberty, courtship, sexuality and marriage, and the pressures to reproduce in various ethnographic and cultural settings. Based on young people's own perspectives, findings from this research, presented in thirteen comparative chapters, point to a common fact that regardless of their backgrounds, Asian youths today face many similar contradictions, such as those between men and women, parents and children, the rich and the poor, the community and the individual, physical and emotional desires, and conventional rules as against the freedoms often associated with modernisation and Westernisation. Common to many other youth researches, authors of *Coming of Age in South and Southeast Asia* also face the conceptual difficulties in defining and addressing youth. Furthermore, although it covers Southeast Asia, it lacks accounts on such countries as Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Burma, and demonstrates that youth in post-communist countries, including Vietnam, have been largely overlooked in studies of Asia. Nevertheless, it does provide useful pointers for my own work.

3. The Vanguard and the Nation-BUILDER: The Conceptualising of Youth in Vietnam

Although youth has always been a subject of strategic interest and public propaganda in socialist Vietnam, not until the mid-1980s did Vietnamese social researchers start to recognise youth as a subject worthy of study (Dang Canh Khanh, 1996a: 22). Dang Canh Khanh remarks that 'today, activities in the life of young people are portrayed not only within the limited scope of public mobilisation work, but are also analysed in social research' (1996a: 23).¹

However, as soon as they became a subject of academic interest, 'youth' was immediately recognised as 'a challenge to social studies' (Dang Canh Khanh, 1996a: 21-23). A reason for this is because so far Vietnamese researchers 'have not been able to either establish a coherent set of concepts or develop standardised research methods required for explicit studies of youth' (Dang Canh Khanh, 2001a: 15). Furthermore, studies of youth in Vietnam started at the same time the country embarked on *doi moi* and 'open-door' reforms. Social transformations resulting from economic reforms have had an impact on all social classes, changing people's perceptions of values as well as their lifestyles. Young people are widely seen as being most exposed to, and affected by these recent social transformations and economic development (see, for example, Dang Canh Khanh, 1996a; Nguyen Van Trung, 1996; Ho Duc Viet, 1996). The result is that like never before, today's Vietnamese youth is 'no longer a monotonous, rigid, and uniformly moulded group as in the central planning time, but they now comprise diversified and energetic groups, which are becoming increasingly complex and difficult to recognise' (Dang Canh Khanh, 1996a: 23).

In such a context, youth studies in Vietnam have taken two main research directions and both of these make sweeping generalisations about young people as a homogeneous social and cultural category. The first, and also the most popular focus is to look at the positive side of youth. This research follows a tradition of constructing a forward-looking, developmental image of youth in the socialist state discourse. In other words, young people have always been portrayed in public propaganda campaigns as the vanguard in the process of nation-building, nicely expressed in Ho Chi Minh's words: 'For the home country to be strong or weak, it

largely depends on young people' (Ho Chi Minh, 1980: 166). In line with his view, the Resolution of the Fourth Session of the Seventh Central Executive Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) reads:

Today's youth is a mighty social force with tremendous potential. Inheriting the nation's traditional essence and the achievements of the revolution, and through expanding international exchanges, our youth nowadays possesses the fundamental strengths of higher knowledge, wider vision, [and] sensitivity to the times, being patriotic and passionate about bringing the country out of poverty and backwardness, and realising the goal of [a] prosperous people, wealthy country and civilised society (VCP, 1993: 80).

The Resolution then went on to identify clearly the pivotal role of youth in the country's process of reform and, more importantly, in the survival of the whole nation:

Whether the cause of *doi moi* will be successful or not, whether the country upon entering the 21st century will gain a deserving position in the world community or not, whether the Vietnamese revolution will firmly follow the path of socialism or not, it depends largely on the force of youth, and on the educating and training of young generations. The matter of youth is a matter of life and death for the nation, and one of the decisive factors for the success or failure of the revolution (VCP, 1993: 82).

Following these guidelines, research on young people in Vietnam typically gives a definition of youth as follows:

This is an age group that is *blooming* in physical, mental and intellectual strength, that is developing the personality and values of a citizen, a worldview and a moral ideology. This is also an age group that is constantly searching to understand itself and others, and that is self-asserting and searching to identify its *mission* in society (Nguyen Van Trung, 1996: 12-13 [italics as in original]).

In this definition, although several dimensions of the relations between youth and the nation are touched on, the central characterisation is to recognise and portray young people as a whole as 'responsible citizens' who are always striving to fulfil their duties and responsibilities to the larger society. Those who follow this research direction are generally social scientists and state activists, who work in government research institutes and mass organisations such as the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League. Therefore, most studies by Vietnamese researchers to date have been politically oriented and policy driven, typically focusing on youth as seen from the state's perspective. For example, Pham Tat Dong (1996: 17) argued that 'the celebrated features of youth' such as 'activeness, vitality, responsiveness to reforms, and bravery' would enable young Vietnamese to undertake and fulfil 'tremendous tasks' entrusted to them by the nation. Similarly, Ho Duc Viet (1997) described the positive attitudes of young people towards the country's process of international integration; Nguyen Phuong Hong (1997) emphasised the participation of university students in the country's efforts at modernising and industrialising; and Dang Canh

Khanh (2000) praised the active role of the youth in the preservation of humane cultural values. The results of such research are usually conceptually and methodologically thin and over-generalised. This is a summary of the results and conclusions typically drawn by recent studies of youth in Vietnam:

Social research and sociological surveys [on the Vietnamese youth] in recent times have shown that the remarkable successes of the reform process have created a confident and energetic generation of youth who are looking forward to the future. This fact is indeed demonstrated by the remarkable increase in the number of youths striving to become members of the [Communist] Youth League and the Party (Dang Canh Khanh, 1996a: 24).

The second direction in Vietnamese research on youth is to look at social phenomena – ‘social evils’ – emerging over recent years, such as prostitution, drug addiction, illegal motorbike racing, and crimes. This focus is not very common as most Vietnamese social researchers are affiliated with a government or state institute. They are therefore commissioned to conduct research in line with the official policies of promoting a positive image of youth, and to avoid touching on topics portraying young people in a negative way. As a result, little has been done in terms of researching the ‘negative’ aspects of youth in Vietnam. Such writings are generally found in newspapers and magazines in the form of news stories and features (see, for example, Mai Nguyen Vu, 1999; Ta Quang Dung, 1999; Mai Linh Giang, 1999; Hong Anh, 1999), but they are rather more prescriptive than analytical.

The overall conclusion is that the majority of research projects on youth in Vietnam to date have worked within policy guidelines, starting with the state's conceptualisation of youth, whilst largely ignoring the possible negative aspects of youth culture, and more importantly, the voice of young people themselves. Perhaps this is something that government researchers at the National Institute of Youth Studies and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment have also come to realise. As a result, a national research programme was launched in 1995. Project number KX07-10 on *Studying the Vietnamese People: Perspectives and Approaches*, which constituted part of *Chuong trinh Khoa hoc Cong nghe cap Nha nuoc KX-07, 1995* (The 1995 State's Science and Technology Programme KX-07) was the first such effort by local researchers to explore young people's viewpoints and perspectives on eight main themes. These themes are 'recognising the meaning of important issues and events', 'attitudes towards the present situation', 'interests in a number of areas', 'motives for a number of activities and social relations', 'hobbies and ideals in personal lifestyles', 'personal feelings and experiences', 'assessing and explaining phenomena in a number of aspects of life', and 'expectations in the context of *doi moi*'. The project surveyed a total of 1,542 people under thirty years of age from five major cities and provinces of Vietnam: the cities of Hanoi, Hai Phong, and Ho Chi Minh and the province of Nam Ha in the North and Nghe An Province in central Vietnam. Findings of the research programme were published in *Nghien cuu con nguoi Viet Nam: Cac quan diem va phuong phap tiep can* (Studying the Vietnamese People: Perspectives and Approaches), edited by Thai Duy Tuyen (1995). As a matter of fact, this research is not only the first, but also to this day the only published attempt in Vietnam, by Vietnamese researchers, to study youth by investigating their own views. Since then, almost all analyses on young people have

been based upon findings from this national survey. However, while this is so far the only comprehensive research available on youth in Vietnam, it still lacks analytical depth. Based on quantitative survey methods, the findings provide few opportunities for explanation and analysis. Therefore, although my thesis frequently makes cross-references to this national survey, it hopes to help bridge the gap by adding in-depth qualitative perspectives to it.

Apart from these studies conducted by local researchers, there have also been a very small number of projects by foreign researchers. During the course of my research, I have found only three directly relevant research papers by David Marr (1996), Pam Nilan (1999), and most recently Chris Sakellariou and Harry Patrinos (2000). This modest number of studies on young Vietnamese in itself testifies to the serious lack of attention to this topic in the wider context of an already insufficient amount of comparative research on youth in Asia. Furthermore, as Nilan (1999) rightly points out, not much has been written about young people in post-Communist Asian countries undergoing radical change towards a market economy such as China, Laos and Vietnam.

These analyses by foreign scholars are much less biased towards state priorities simply because the researchers are not under pressure to follow policy guidelines. However, as published research findings are mainly in the form of essays or journal articles, they are rather restricted in scope, and lack depth of detail and insight. To a certain extent, the reason for this can be attributed to particular obstacles to soliciting information and conducting interviews in the social sciences in Vietnam. There are a number of restrictions imposed on foreign researchers by the authorities, as well as

other barriers such as language and cultural differences. For example, David Marr, although fluent in Vietnamese, felt that

In my own enquiries, it unfortunately was not easy to talk with young women at length, and I'm sure my 58-year old 'elder uncle' status inhibited conversation with some young men as well (1996: 3).

My present research seeks to rectify some of these inadequacies – political, cultural, linguistic – inherent in the works of both local and foreign researchers. I have also diverged from other studies by engaging in ethnographic research and by letting the voices of young Vietnamese speak for themselves about their experience and attitudes. This is the first study of its kind on the post-socialist region of mainland Southeast Asia, and indeed one of the few in-depth studies of Asian youth.

4. Values and Social Change: A Conceptual Framework

Since the early 1990s the experiences of young people in larger urban areas in Vietnam have undergone significant changes. These changes are a direct result of *doi moi* – the restructuring of the social and economic system and the labour market. They have, in turn, affected relationships with family and friends, experiences in education and employment, lifestyles and attitudes. The hypothesis here is that the country's process of renovation has not only brought about social transformations and changes in the experience of young people, but also resulted in many changes in their attitudes and value orientations. The aim of the thesis is to test the validity of such a hypothesis, and if it is valid then uncover the change and continuity of the

value system in Vietnam resulting from, and seen through, the changes in young people's lives and attitudes in the context of *doi moi* and globalisation. In order to do so, I shall start by looking at theories of socio-economic change and value analysis in search of a relevant analytical framework.

4.1. Studies of Values and Social Change: A Theoretical Overview

In common parlance, the term 'value' symbolises most of the time the power of money to measure everything, and the worth, desirability or utility of something (cf. *Collins English Dictionary* 2001: 1682; *Concise Oxford Dictionary* 1995: 1549, *Chambers Encyclopaedic English Dictionary* 1994: 1343). In social anthropology, however, the term – mainly used in the plural – has its origin from philosophy. The difference between philosophy and anthropology in the study of value lies in the fact that philosophy deals predominantly with individual values while anthropology takes values as essentially social (Dumont, 1986). It is this latter sense of the term that is applied in my research, and the focus is on the beliefs, concepts and ideas which are used to guide and evaluate cultural behaviour and social action.

Values and social change have been central to many theoretical debates, especially by Western theorists. Various frameworks and theories have been constructed in attempts to illustrate, conceptualise, and explain the processes of social transformation. At one end of the spectrum is the Marxist approach, which, for obvious reasons, has been popular in Vietnamese social science and which stresses the interrelations of political economy and social structure, within the framework of historical materialism and class analysis. However, Marxist-inspired studies of social transformation tend to 'seriously neglect the dimensions of cultural history' and are

'weak in their treatment of religion as a social phenomenon' (Clammer, 1996: 3). In Vietnam, it has been a very common trend for social and political scientists, along with politicians, to attempt to analyse Vietnamese society and social change using Marxist perspectives. This trend is characterised in the findings of recent social research projects published in the *Tap Chi Cong San* (Communist Review). The Marxist approach has also been adopted in the study of youth in Vietnam. In a book chapter addressing issues of theory and methodology in the study of youth, Pham Dinh Nghiep started as follows:

As we all know, Marxism-Leninism and the thinking of Ho Chi Minh, with their essentially dialectic materialist world outlook, the dialectic materialistic methodology and a revolutionary outlook on life, have always been the lodestar for our every thought and action. Scientific research on youth and the overall issues of youth must of course be based upon the revolutionary and scientific nature of Marxism-Leninism and the thoughts of Ho Chi Minh (2001:18).

Marxist-inspired literature tends to ignore factors of values and culture pertaining to the Vietnamese people, but instead stresses the overriding importance of politics, economics, and class relationships in explaining social phenomena.

At the other end of the spectrum is the work influenced by the writings of Max Weber – equally important but rather unpopular in academic researches in Vietnam. Weber emphasizes the central role of religious values and action in the development

of modern Western society. His general thesis is that certain kinds of Protestant 'asceticism' were clearly interrelated with the emergence of European capitalism and the 'capitalist spirit' whilst Oriental religions did not offer such an encouraging cultural framework for the rational pursuit of economic gain (Weber, 1930/1995). The so-called 'Weber thesis' is far more complex than this simplified summary (see more in Clammer, 1996: 121-138), yet during the 1950s and the 1960s, among so-called 'modernisation theorists' in American social science there was considerable interest in the importance of core values in the processes of modernisation in the West whilst at the same time considering Confucianism and other Asian religions and ethical values as major obstacles to development in the East (Hill, 2000: 178-179).

Although the Marxist and Weberian schools strongly disagree on the importance of values and culture in the processes of social change, they do agree on one crucial point: that socio-economic change follows coherent and relatively predictable patterns. Thus, key social, political and economic characteristics tend to be closely linked, so that from a knowledge of one such trait, one can possibly predict the presence of other key traits (Inglehart, 1995: 1).

Another theoretical paradigm, emerging more recently, is one that focuses on theoretical debates about the concept of 'post-modernity'. Sociologists have been debating the question of whether recent socio-economic changes have brought about a new era, just as significant as the transition from 'traditional' to 'modern' society, or whether these changes represent developments which are still within the ambit of modernity (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997: 1). Post-modernists (for example, Lyotard,

1984; Baudrillard, 1988) argue that we now live in a 'post-modern' world in which patterns of behaviour and individual life chances have lost their predictability, and 'all that is solid about organised capitalism, class, industry, cities, collectivity, nation-states, even the world, melts into air' (Lash and Urry, 1987: 313). Therefore, grand theories such as those of modernisation, Marxism, structuralism, and functionalism are deemed to be no longer appropriate for understanding social processes. Other theorists have been more cautious in their interpretation of these changes and have used alternative terms such as 'high modernity', 'late modernity' (Giddens, 1990; 1991), 'reflexive modernisation' (Lash, 1992), 'post-industrialism' (Bell, 1976) or 'late capitalism' (Mandel, 1975). Nevertheless, critics are sceptical of the validity of post-modernist theories, seeing them as too broad, 'too loaded, confused or too associated with a particular anti-foundational epistemology' to be able to address the complex transformations of the past three decades (Clammer, 1996: 50-51).

None of the abovementioned approaches can be applied exclusively in the study of young Vietnamese and the changes in their attitudes and value orientations in the context of social and economic transformation. Instead, they offer useful conceptual elements for such a study. There remains the need for a more relevant analytical framework which links young people, their perceptions and values, and social and economic transformations in Vietnam, and which embodies both an 'indigenous' concept of 'Vietnamese values' and a conceptualisation of 'Western' ideas. Here I do not intend to construct such a theory: indeed, as Yao Souchou acknowledges, although there has been a healthy scepticism of the universal significance of Western theories, 'writing theory' in and from Southeast Asia is exceedingly difficult, due to

the region's 'different locations in the structure of global capitalism' and because 'its "traditional", colonial and pre-colonial pasts still demand reckoning' (2001: 3).

In the same manner as the scepticism about the universal significance of Western theories, a further point is worth stressing. It is the scepticism in an across-the-board application of the notion of 'Asian values'. Broadly speaking, 'Asian values' underpin the importance of the traditional family as a social institution, the supremacy of collective over individual interests, social order, strong government, and respect for authority (Oehlers, 2000: 208). From the 1970s up to very recently, the concept of 'Asian values' has been used as one of the explanations for the 'East Asian Miracle' (World Bank, 1993) or the extraordinary economic growth of East and Southeast Asia. It has also been promoted by some statesmen in Southeast Asia, notably Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, as an explanation of 'Asian resistance' against Western dominance in many spheres of cultural and economic life, and as a counter to the assumed confrontation, individualism and decay that characterises Western liberalism (Hill, 2000: 177; Yao, 2000: 16-17). However, this concept has 'serious methodological problems', as it presumes that the socio-economic, political and cultural characteristics of Asian countries are based upon a 'shared value system which is identifiable and distinct and which transcends national, religious and ideological differences' (Inoguchi and Newman, 1997: 3). Furthermore, in the wake of the regional financial crisis, there has been the suggestion that far from being a catalyst for progress, Asian values may actually have served to obstruct the development process, and have subsequently generated economic crisis by promoting nepotism, corruption and crony capitalism (Oehlers, 2000: 207). While

there have been continuous and vigorous debates about the definition, origins, role and relevance of 'Asian values', the political deployment of the concept is understandable in multi-ethnic societies such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which are in need of a coherent national culture and identity. However, in the context of Vietnam, such a 'collectivist' concept used as a starting point for this research would be difficult to operationalise in practice. In fact, the concept of values is complex, since values not only vary between cultures and social environments, but even within a given culture and society according to social class membership and 'the diverse departments of activity or experience' (Dumont, 1986: 237).

In suggesting a framework for the study of values, Clammer, in his work on Southeast Asian values and development, proposes that the concept of 'values' can be taken to mean 'the belief systems, world views and ideologies espoused by people and expressed through culture' (1996: 30). He goes on to elaborate this in the following terms:

Some values are very explicit, for example those enshrined in religious doctrines. Others are less explicit, for example those embodied in religious *practice* which may or may not have a clear relationship to formal beliefs or theologies. Some values derive from religion, some from politics and often from everyday practices such as agricultural cycles and orientation to nature, kinship relationships or the various ways in which emotional life is culturally patterned and modified, for example through literature or the media. Some values are of the kind that structure basic

experiences (cosmological attitudes and ideas underlying the nature of social structure), others are instrumental (moral values, treatment of the natural environment). Values will be embodied in and expressed through religion, cultural practices, social organisation, political ideologies, psychological structures, conceptions of human needs, quality of life and human rights (Clammer, 1996: 30).

He also suggests a number of perspectives in the analysis of values, which I find useful for the study of values and socio-economic transformations in Vietnam:

1. Values are not simply 'natural' or essentialist, but are socially constructed and as such have a history, are part of a field of power relations and have origins. The analysis of the genesis of values and the context of their first appearance is as important as their relationship in the present to other social forces.
2. Values are dynamic and strategic. That is to say they change; the 'same' values may mean different things in different social settings or in different historical periods. They are also used by people in pursuing individual or collective goals, and as such are highly politicised. [...] As such it is often more fruitful to approach values not in themselves (in which case they often appear as very abstract, generalised and free-floating), but through the social vehicles which embody,

express or attempt to advance them – for example, social movements.

3. Attitudes and values are extremely difficult to measure precisely, largely because they are not precise and people may not be clear what their attitudes are (or feel they 'should be') until forced to clarify them.
4. Values must be described ethnographically, i.e. identified in their social setting (1996: 35-37).

4.2. A Range of Vietnamese Values

Clammer's proposals provide a useful analytical framework for this research, particularly his proposal that values require ethnographic study. I also emphasise the need to put 'values' in specific settings rather than to study them as free-floating notions or perspectives. With regard to my research, I emphasise the significance of the triad of the linked concepts of youth, socially constructed values and social change. At the same time, Clammer's framework also reminds us of the complexity of the concept of values and their dynamic quality. For this very reason and precisely because it is not the focus of this thesis, I shall not engage in an attempt to seek an overall definition of 'Vietnamese values'. Instead, I shall review a range of values that I have discovered as influential and relevant to young Vietnamese specifically. This will serve as a framework for me to present my analysis of the changes in values in the context of a liberalising and modernising Vietnam, and the ways in which young Vietnamese experience, understand and make judgements about behaviour and action in a rapidly changing environment.

Moral values and social hierarchy

Vietnam has long been influenced by Confucian doctrine, which became the basis for moral instruction for members of the society, and which is a profoundly 'social' philosophy. The core of the teachings of Confucius stressed that human beings are above all social beings bounded by social obligations. The duties assigned to everyone included service and allegiance to the king, honouring one's parents, remaining faithful to one's spouse until death, managing family affairs well, participating in the administration of the country and helping to maintain peace in the world (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 26). Each person had to mould and perfect himself/herself according to the virtues of Confucian teaching so that one could fulfil those duties. There was a set of five core virtues in Vietnam which provided the ethical cement for behaviour and action and which evolved into a more complicated system of other moral strictures and social formulae. These five virtues are *nhan*, *nghia*, *le*, *tri*, *tin*.

Nhan means humanity and humaneness, a value that involves love for one's fellow human beings together with compassion, charity, benevolence, and tolerance. Although the virtue of humanity is the most important and the supreme virtue making one the most human one can possibly be, it comprises qualities of a rather general, and usually abstract, goodness. By contrast, *nghia* (righteousness) has more concrete implications, as it refers to morality, ethics, justice, duty and obligation. *Nghia* dictates social roles and obligations of humans in general social settings, for example, obligations and duties of children to parents, wife to husband and family, friend to friend, and other social relations. Generally, the virtue of righteousness requires the practice of self-denial for the greater good, as one is expected to do what

is correct rather than what is of immediate personal gain, and to accept one's obligations within the system (Marr, 1981: 58). Interestingly, *nghia* is sometimes seen as the opposite value of *nhan* (Jamieson, 1993: 20). For example, a mandarin in service to the king, i.e. carrying out *nghia*, might have had to suppress the virtue of *nhan*, putting aside emotional feelings and sacrificing personal interests and favours to his family and relatives, in order to achieve justice and fulfil his duties. Similarly, a woman, when getting married, traditionally would have had to leave her parents to go and live with, and take care of, her husband and his parents. So, here the woman was to put aside the virtue of *nhan* to fulfil her obligations as a wife to a husband, i.e. to fulfil *nghia*. In other words, values are weighed in particular circumstances and may be in conflict with one another.

Le (ritual) means social conformity by means of careful attention to social forms, to decorum as well as to intricate ceremonies. There were rituals for every aspect of life, as Nguyen Khac Vien wrote:

There are rituals for honouring one's parents, for married life, for relationships between brothers and sisters and among friends, for behaviour toward superiors or inferiors. There are rituals to express joy, anger and mourning. There are rituals for eating and even for sleeping... A worthy man is watchful of his words, his gestures, his dress; he expresses his feeling according to the situation and circumstance. A 'barbarian' is someone who does not know the rituals, who does not control himself and his feelings (1974: 32).

Tri means wisdom or learning, emphasising the judgement of human character in order to maximise other ethical traits. Finally, *tin* refers to trust and the cultivation of trust in all social relations as between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, and so on.

The five virtues apply to all social connections among people, which are categorised into five relationships (*ngu luan*). These are relationships between ruler-subject (*vua toi*), father-son (*cha con*), husband-wife (*vo chong*), elder brother-younger brother (*de*) and friend-friend (*tu*). Although all relationships should comply with the five core virtues, traditionally there were specific and rigid codes of conduct prescribing every type of relationship. By far the two most important relationships, constituting the social fabric of traditional Confucian society in Vietnam, were those between ruler and subject and father and son. The ruler-subject relationship required loyalty and allegiance (*trung*), while on the other hand, filial piety (*hieus*) was the essence of the father-son relationship. Both *trung* and *hieus* were derivations of the above-mentioned five core virtues.

However, with regard to the influence of the Confucian values pertaining to youth, it is the case nowadays that the virtue of *trung* has lost its weight, as compared to *hieus*, in influencing the behaviour of today's generation of young people. In the present popular perception, *hieus* is one of the main parameters in the social judgement on youth. *Hieus* emphasises the children's duty to obey, respect and honour their parents, as they owe to their parents an immense debt of birth and upbringing:

Your father's bringing you up is like Mount Thai Son,

Your mother's care is like water from a mountain source.

To do your best to worship mother and respect father,

To be pious is a child's duty.

(Vietnamese traditional folklore)

As Mount Thai Son is grand and water from a mountain source endless, the saying implies that the debt is never repayable and that children for their whole life have the duty to contrive to meet the debt by making every effort to please their parents, and to sweeten and beautify their lives. As Jamieson says in his attempt to 'understand' Vietnam,

You were, simply by being alive, in debt to your family no matter how much you might have accomplished, no matter how wretched you might be. You still have to thank them for the food you ate, the house you lived in, your spouse, your land, your membership to the village, most of all for life itself. You benefited from the merit accumulated by other family members over time, and from the family reputation. Success only increased the debt, it could never serve to repay it fully (1993: 23).

Often children were told of classic exemplars of little boys who slept naked next to their parents to attract all the mosquitoes to their own bodies or children who warmed their parents' bed with their own body heat before they retired each evening. *Hieu* teaches children the importance of submission and family dependence and it is one of the most powerful and pervasive values in Vietnamese culture. For

everybody, training to become a worthy person always began with filial piety (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 33), as one cannot love other fellow human beings and fulfil other social obligations without first loving, honouring, and carrying out duties to one's own parents.

The teaching of Confucius had inscribed moral values based on hierarchy and it directed the mind of each individual towards his/her social obligations, obedience and loyalty to the monarch, and unconditional respect and submission to the social hierarchy. Through many centuries, the carriers of the ruling feudal structure in Vietnam had been propagating the doctrine, enforcing it as the state ideology in order to serve the interests of the ruling class and to maintain order, solidarity and stability. Confucianism certainly provided Vietnam with a social framework that was male-oriented, focused on roles and duties rather than on the individual with his/her own personal feelings, needs and desires.

Gender roles

In Vietnam, at least up to the end of the colonial period, it was common for women to assume the roles of wives and mothers at an age as young as thirteen or fourteen, and young women tended to assume a subordinate social role as compared to men. Young women only left their parents' home to enter married life, set up a family and typically live with their husband's family. No matter what occupation the husband engaged in, it would always be his wife who had to take care of all domestic matters, and frequently the responsibilities of her husband's extended family.

The submissive status of women was again a result of Confucian teaching, whereby men were placed higher than women in the social structure. Confucianism dictated to a woman 'the three submissions' (*tam tong*), according to which she had to obey her father when young, her husband when married and her eldest son when widowed. Besides, there were the 'four virtues' (*tu duc*): labour and diligence (*cong*), good countenance (*dung*), appropriate speech (*ngon*) and proper behaviour (*hanh*). In work, women needed to master cooking, sewing, and embroidery, but normally not reading or writing. In countenance, a woman learned to be attractive to her husband but not enticing to others. In speech, she was self-demeaning and rigidly polite rather than assertive or imaginative. And in behaviour, she was always honest and loyal to her superiors (Marr, 1981: 192). Being subjected to the rigid male-oriented Confucian teachings and practice, women were denied opportunities to assume social roles other than those which were submissive and subordinate, although in reality Vietnamese women did exert a certain degree of control within the family as exemplified by a 'distinct tendency' for women to control the family finances. (O'Harrow, 1995: 172-175). In other words, it would be fair to state that the teaching of Confucius contributed to gender discrimination and imbalances in the traditional society.

In post-colonial Vietnam, the social status of women and gender equality were improved thanks to policies and legislation promulgated and implemented by the socialist state. The first constitution of the DRV in 1949 stipulated that 'women are equal to men in all respects,' and it contained provisions for paid maternity leave and equal pay for equal work. Subsequently, the 1959 Marriage and Family Law provided for the protection of women from concubinage, forced marriage, child

marriage and other customs designated as 'feudal'. Ho Chi Minh, in addressing the national assembly of 1959, called the Marriage and Family Law 'an integral part of the socialist revolution... This law aims at the emancipation of women. It is necessary to liberate women, but it is equally necessary to destroy feudal and bourgeois ideologies in men' (quoted in Goodkind, 1995: 345). The socialist ideology written into explicit policies and legislation have brought about equal opportunities in education and employment, which in turn have resulted in significant changes in gender roles under socialism. As Goodkind remarks, by the 1960s and early 1970s women's positions in society had enjoyed significant gains, as they had begun to move into positions of power and authority (1995: 343).

Nevertheless, although greater equality is acknowledged in the public domain, there is still little equality in the family. Le Thi remarks:

Public services are underdeveloped and require that food-processing operations, such as cooking, water drawing, washing, caring for the sick and the old, be performed by the family itself. The one who does the most is the woman, mother, and wife. In addition to this great amount of work, the woman must also work in the rice fields, in society, in the office and factory (1996: 71).

As women have gained access to offices and positions of power in society, at home they are still 'the sole doer' (Le Thi, 1996: 71) of domestic chores and in charge of most childcare responsibilities. This means their overall situation is if anything worse, if they choose to take up jobs in both the public and domestic spheres. Recent

studies have suggested that greater equality achieved in the public sphere seems to have paradoxically increased the overall inequality endured by Vietnamese women. (Quinn-Judge, 1983; Goodkind, 1995; Le Thi, 1996; Fahey, 1998; Soucy, 2001). In chapter 6, I will elaborate on how women's disadvantages and gender inequality have increased since reunification in 1975.

Marriage

In traditional pre-socialist Vietnam during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, marriage was universal. It was an important institution, because it was a matter of *tram nam* (or lifetime happiness), and was also a central element in family and kinship networks (Tran Dinh Huou, 1991; Phan Dai Doan, 1994). The main function of marriage was seen as to provide male descendants to perpetuate the patrilineage and to perform the rites of ancestor worship, both of which were of primary concern and the highest expressions of Confucian filial piety (*hieu*) (Tran Dinh Huou, 1991). Also, the pressure to marry was particularly strong for women because of a traditional assumption that an unmarried woman was 'like a dais not nailed down', and that only within the framework of marriage could she find a secure base to live and act (Marr, 1981: 248).

Marriage was seen primarily as a transaction between two families. Spouses were chosen not by the individuals concerned but by parents, often with the active participation of other senior family members (Jamieson, 1993: 25; Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong, 2001: 251). Parents believed that with their wisdom and experience they could arrange the most 'suitable' match for their children. They feared that the children might be blinded by love and overlook areas of

incompatibility which in turn could cause problems later on in married life. When choosing a spouse for their children, the most important factor that parents took into account was family compatibility (*mon dang ho doi*), whereby it was important that the two families had similar social class backgrounds. In addition to social and economic compatibility, a marriage also depended on the partners being suitable in age (*hop tuoi*). The birth dates of the young couple were checked carefully according to the lunar calendar horoscope so as to make sure their birth signs and ages matched harmoniously. If the signs and the ages of the couple were not compatible (*khong hop tuoi*), the marriage process would not be advanced, as the Vietnamese strongly believed that certain couples could be predestined to unhappiness.

The virtue of chastity (*trinh tiet*) was supposedly required of both men and women. However, in practice, male chastity was almost never emphasised. As a matter of fact, since men were permitted multiple wives, they could 'theoretically be chaste within marriage and still enjoy variety', something forbidden to women (O'Harrow, 1995: 163). On the other hand, for women the principle of chastity included not only the defence of virginity before marriage but also absolute faithfulness and devotion towards the husband (Marr, 1981: 192; Jamieson, 1993: 27). Even when a woman became a widow, it was considered more virtuous for her to remain faithful to her late husband (O'Harrow, 1995: 163). Chastity of the woman was not only the utmost criterion of her dignity and morality, but also a matter of reputation or humiliation for her whole family and kin network.

Under socialism the family continued to play an important role, but the state was also involved in spouse selection. Drawing on their field research conducted in Hanoi in

1994, Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong (2001) point out that when seeking to marry one of their children, the family had its own preferences (for example, education and urban or rural origin of the future spouse), often inherited from the traditional marriage pattern prevailing until the middle of the twentieth century. But the state also influenced directly the selection of a spouse. During this time, the concept of family compatibility no longer related to the socio-economic levels of the two families, but to their political compatibility, which was to be defined by *ly lich* (life history). *Ly lich* is the inquiry made into one's family, normally going back three generations, on the moral and political antecedents of all members. A good *ly lich* was thus a guarantee of a good family as defined by the ideology (Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong, 2001: 253). In order for a couple to get married, they needed not only parental approval, but also the approval of *to chuc* or the workplace administration. Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong, however, suggest that, despite the state's efforts during this *pre-doi moi* period to replace the family by establishing and monitoring rules for marriage, 'it largely failed, as parents were still central to the process', particularly for the highly educated ones. 'Traditional criteria might have been replaced by new ones [i.e. political values and compatibility], but the traditional way of entering marriage was far from being transformed', as marriage was still 'far from being the [sole] result of the choice of two individuals' (2001: 256).

Perceptions of and attitude towards success

In my research on Vietnamese youth, it soon became clear that in addition to the abovementioned range of values which still had salience in their everyday experiences, the notion of 'success' was extremely important to them, and so it too is relevant as a working concept. My discussion of the idea of 'success' and ways of

achieving it in Vietnamese society starts with an assumption borrowed from psychology that all individuals acquire a 'motive to achieve' and a 'motive to avoid failure'. In other words, all persons have some capacity for interest in achievement and some capacity for anxiety about failure. Both are expressed in any situation when it is apparent to the individual that his/her performance will be evaluated with reference to some standard (Atkinson, 1974: 18). This is a useful starting point, because it provides the conceptual tool needed for analysing and explaining various patterns of behaviour, concerns, and activities of young people throughout this research. That is to say, as Vietnamese young university graduates have a 'motive to achieve', their activities and behaviour are characterised by the struggle to *achieve* an end, and upon achieving this end they consider themselves, and are considered by their peers and their society as a whole, as being *successful*. Within this framework of motivation, 'motive to achieve' is the starting point, and 'success' is the important end. Thus, success implies actually achieving something that one aims for.

The notion of success was discussed as early as the sixth century BC in the writings of ancient Greeks such as Hesiod, Solon, and Theognis (Pahl, 1995: 25). In the context of Greek society in the Antiquity, new sources of wealth permitted the emergence of prosperous landowners; the then conception of success was associated with possession of great wealth. However, already at that time, there had been questions about whether great wealth on its own was sufficient for achieving 'true success' (see more on the origin of the notion of success in Pahl, 1995: 25-31).

The rapid growth of modern industrial capitalism gave rise to a new, modern conception of success, and early writings on this new notion can be found in Weber's

work. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930/1995), Weber described modern capitalism as a social power that forces people to subject themselves to the social conditions it has created, regardless of whether or not they are willing (Mommse~~n~~ⁿ, 1989: 57). This is where the spirit of modern capitalism – the fierce competitive struggle – was set to work. Weber argued that ‘the conditions of capitalist success were implacable: those who could not, or would not, accept them either went under or, at best, stayed where they were’ (Pahl, 1995: 22). As a result, they had no choice but to be professionals; business became a necessary part of their lives, and they were trapped in competition with endless, restless business activities.

Early ideas of success had perhaps placed too much emphasis on a ‘rather narrow male, elitist version of success’, and primarily on the acquisition of wealth (Pahl, 1995: 18). Since then, during the past century or so, the notion of success has been constantly evolving. There exists many variants of success, including fame, occupational success, possession of wealth, or even ‘successful’ marriage. Furthermore, as one might expect, notions of success differ greatly from one culture to another; people of differing cultures interpret ‘success’ differently, and I now need to discuss the notions of success in the specific context of Vietnam through time.

Starting from the Tran dynasty (1225-1400) mandarin competitions, held at the *Van Mieu* on a regular basis, were open to educated common men (but not women) from all over the country.² At that time,

the mandarins were not a closed and self-perpetuating group, or selected only from one level of the people... They were recruited from the whole people, and recruited in one manner only, to which every aspirant for office was compelled to submit: in order to become a mandarin, a young Vietnamese had to go through the required studies and pass the prescribed number of official tests... The office of mandarin was neither hereditary nor for sale, and since education was always free in Vietnam, the mandarinate was equally accessible to the poor and the rich (Buttinger, 1958: 289).

Generally speaking, access to mandarin examinations opened the path to success for every man. Especially to an ordinary man, passing the examinations meant much more than scholarly success, as it would enable him to leave 'the ranks of the people to enter the mandarin "caste"' (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 26). Even if one failed to become a mandarin, one would return to village life as a Confucian scholar and a schoolteacher, and would be held in high esteem by all the villagers. Such prospects gave the incentive for many young men to study. As education became more popular with the opening of many private schools in almost all villages to train and prepare young men for the mandarin examinations, those of lower social background were then given the opportunity to compete for entry into the 'feudal' class.



Picture 2.1

Stelae with inscriptions of the names of people who passed the mandarin examinations at *Van Mieu*.

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Picture 2.2

Confucius altar inside of *Van Mieu*.

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The notion of success was associated with gaining social status, and solely restricted to men. Women, on the other hand, did not have access to study nor could they sit the mandarin examinations. It was thus common for women, regardless of their social and class status, to be content with assuming the roles of wives and mothers at an early age, though this did not mean that they did not share in the men's success. The dream of success by the young man was indeed shared by the whole family. Every family, no matter how poor, would do everything it could to free some of its male children from labour and send them to schools, and when a child showed aptitude the family would make great sacrifices, with clan members usually contributing towards the cost associated with education, so as to enable the son to continue his studies (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1974: 25). If it was the husband who was pursuing his studies, the young wife would assume all domestic responsibilities, sustain the entire family and support her husband to pass the mandarin examinations. If the young man passed the examinations, and went on to acquire a higher position in society, his parents, his wife, and his entire family would show pride in his achievement.

The notion of achieving success by means of study was held in firm popular belief until the mid-1950s, or until the end of French colonial times. This was the case, even though under French colonialism there was a sharp decrease in the number of schools, as the French efforts at developing education were negligible. Only 3,000 villages out of a total of 23,000 had their own schools (Duiker, 1976: 130). A few government *quoc ngu* (national language) schools were established along with an *école normale* to train Vietnamese clerks and interpreters. A few Vietnamese from

wealthy families were sent to France to study, but their numbers had risen only to about ninety by 1870. Three *lycée* (secondary schools) located in Hanoi, Hue and Saigon, were opened in the early 1900s, using French as the language of instruction. The University of Hanoi, founded in 1907, was closed for a decade the following year because of fear of student involvement in a 1908 uprising in Hanoi, and its total number of students was only 600 after thirty years from its foundation (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993: 161-163; Cima, 1989: 35). Education was not widespread and was by this time limited only to the urban middle class. However, the route to success was still widely perceived by the Vietnamese as being through study and education. Tran Trong Kim, French-educated and a prominent writer of the time, wrote in 1929 that

Any one of these young people who obtained an education became a success. They all gained some position of status, never mind how, sufficient to win the respect of the general public. [...] It is recognized that for making one's way in this world it could not be otherwise.... (quoted in Jamieson, 1993: 95).

After the French period the socialist state in northern Vietnam called for an era of 'building socialism in the North and liberalising the South'. It was around this time that a drastic change in the notion of success occurred. As everybody was drawn into this national cause, the notion of 'individual success' was increasingly undermined, and instead a new collective notion of success was conceived. The 'masses' were mobilised to contribute to the revolutionary cause. The notion of collective success was widely disseminated, with novels and songs being highly effective means to communicate the idea to the socialist citizens (Jamieson, 1993: 222). At the same

time as being an effective means of indoctrination, songs were easy to memorise and helped to motivate and sustain the spirit of the rural labourers, urban workers, soldiers and officials in striving for the cause. One such striking song was simply called 'Operation':

Our group goes to carry out new duties with resolute will and firm hearts;

Carrying heavy loads over long roads for the Party, for the People;

Over mountains, across rivers, through jungle, through streams.

Still we are joyful. These are hard times, achievement comes tomorrow!

Upon meeting adversity, we gaily sing; the road of struggle is a road of adversity;

The more confidence by revolutionaries of one red heart of steel, the firmer our strength.

To pass through perils is to triumph over the enemy troops.

(Translation by Jamieson, 1993: 223)

People were told 'This is the time to compete' for the whole nation to achieve success, towards a brighter future:

This is the time to compete.

With ardent hearts the entire patriotic population of Vietnam is competing.

Here the old, the young, boys, girls are of one determined heart:

How to live up to the encouraging words of the old father [Ho Chi Minh]?

Compete, compete in what? Compete, compete in what?

Officials, farmers, labourers, tradesmen, soldiers!

Compete against hunger, compete in destruction, compete in resisting the foreign invaders.

Work quickly, work well, work hard! Lead our race to success!

Attention all! Unite! Tomorrow is arriving!

Independence, happiness, and freedom at last!

(Translation by Jamieson, 1993: 224)

Behind this new, state-derived notion of success was the ideology that stressed the power of collective action, praising the triumph of Marxism-Leninism whilst denouncing individualism. (In the following section, I will discuss in greater detail the notion of 'individualism'). Ho Chi Minh, speaking in 1969 at the thirty-ninth anniversary of the founding of the Vietnamese Workers' Party, emphasised that those who were 'burdened with individualism' would

flinch from hardships and difficulties and sink into corruption, depravation, waste and luxury. They crave for fame and profits, positions and power. They are proud and conceited, look down on the collective, hold the masses in contempt, act arbitrarily and tyrannically. They are cut off from the masses and from realities, and are affected by bureaucratism and commandism.

He then went on to call upon people to 'make a clean sweep of individualism' in order to 'elevate revolutionary ethics' (Ho Chi Minh, 1969).

In period of the war to liberate the South (1954-1975), the notion of collectivism meant collective action and collective strength. In other words, as Jamieson rightly puts it, 'extreme uniformity was desired, even demanded, because it was essential to the operation of the system. The key value was collectivism, with all the conformity and suppression of individualism that implied' (1993: 283).

However, moving into peacetime after the country's reunification in 1975, the ideology was reinterpreted to refer to the eradication of private ownership. Now that the 'great victory' of reunification was achieved, the next step was for the nation as a whole to contribute to the cause of building socialism and achieving prosperity in the entire country. The Vietnamese communist leadership was quick to apply the ideological guidelines of Marxism-Leninism to the Vietnamese reality. Their first move was to nationalise major industries, banks, and appropriate the land of the feudal landowning class to allow the poor to use it under strict regulations. Subsequently the Party collectivised agriculture, and nationalised commerce and industry (Duiker, 1989: 5). As a result, there was virtually no private ownership and it was impossible to become individually rich. Individual success stories were stories of farmers and workers, in cooperatives and factories, with high production records. As they were prime examples of those contributing to the cause of socialism, they were bestowed with the title '*anh hung lao dong*' (hero of labour), and then often portrayed in poetry and literature.



Picture 2.3

Propaganda poster calling upon people to 'work hard and self sacrifice to liberate the South'.



Picture 2.4

Propaganda poster: 'All for the building of socialism'.

There was yet another route to success accessible to the masses in post-1975 socialist Vietnam, and that was again through the age-old customary practice: study. Bright young men and women, who passed university entrance examinations with high results and had the right political credentials, would be sent to universities across the communist world, including the USSR. As in the Confucian-oriented past, the families of the young people who were sent abroad to study, took great pride in their academic achievement. Many of the students returning from studying in Eastern Europe and other socialist countries went on to hold key positions in the government. In other words, they achieved to some extent professional success as individuals, and by extension their family with them, but they had to put this 'personal' achievement to the service of the greater success of the collectivity. As they were sent abroad by the People, represented by the socialist state, they were told that they were the best seeds, and their efforts at study were to contribute to the cause of socialism.

In sum, success was a restricted notion. There existed no socialist conception of 'individual success' in the sense of choosing one's own route in life to achieve one's own personal goals. Personal achievements would not have been perceived nor recognised as success unless they categorically contributed to the cause of socialism. In the centrally planned and subsidised system, where the state possessed control over the distribution and circulation of goods and daily life necessities for the people, the notion and the measure of success were defined in terms of those many things – from food and essential goods, jobs, housing to ideology – distributed by the state.

Against this background of the evolution of the notion of success and based on data collected from the field, my research aims to examine differences and similarities in young graduates' perceptions of, and attitude towards success as compared to older generations. Questions such as on what term(s) they define success and how to achieve such success(es) will be particularly investigated.

Individualism in Vietnamese thought

Inasmuch as the term 'individualism' embraces 'the utmost heterogeneity of meanings' (Weber, 1930/1995: 222) and yet it is here a relevant working concept, it is necessary to examine its operational definition. In illustrating the complexity and the shift in meaning of the term, Wilfred McClay identifies a number of ways in which 'individualism' has been used:

It may refer to the self-interested disposition of mind that Tocqueville described, or to the passionate egotism Maistre deplored, or to the self-reliant frontiersman or self-made small businessman praised in American popular lore. 'Individualism' may refer to an understanding of the relationship between the individual and society or state, wherein the liberty and dignity of the former is to be protected against the controlling pressures of the latter. More radically, it may point toward a philosophy of the state or society in which all political and social groups are viewed as mere aggregations of otherwise self-sufficient individuals, whose social bonds are entirely governed by consensual contract. Even more radically, it may point toward the increasingly popular view

that, to the maximum degree possible, the individual should be regarded as an entirely morally autonomous creature – accountable to no person and no putative ‘higher law,’ armed with a quiver of imprescriptible rights, protected by a zone of inviolable privacy, and left free to ‘grow’ and ‘develop’ as the promptings of the romantic self dictate. All these meanings of ‘individualism’ have in common a presumption of the inherent worth of the individual person. But they diverge in dramatic ways (2001: 396).

In theorising the notion, Steven Lukes (1973) identified a range of germinal ideas of individualism: this includes the dignity of the individual, autonomy, privacy, self-development, and the individual as an abstraction in political, economic, religious, ethical, epistemological and methodological terms. He provides the conceptual outlines and definitions of these basic ideas, while also examining the logical and conceptual relations between them. In addition, Lukes provides an excellent in-depth analysis of the development of the Western tradition, including the different, and sometimes even contrasting conceptualisations of ‘individualism’ and aspects of it by various social thinkers and theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The question of the self and the individual in the value system of contemporary Western culture has also been the subject of comparative studies. For example, Louis Dumont (1980) in his studies of India (which for him represents ‘traditional society’) and the West (which represents ‘modern society’), contrasts the defining principles and ideologies of traditional and modern societies, which are holism/hierarchy and individualism/equality respectively. According to him, the individualistic West and

holistic India represent two diametrically different conceptualisations of society, and, although the former Western ‘liberal’ model is enshrined in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (recognising the inherent dignity and equality and the inalienable rights of all individuals), it is the latter conceptualisation which still represents the common type (Rapport, 1996: 4). Dumont further provides a definition of individualism as an opposition to holism which is an ideology (that is, a ‘set of ideas and values’) that ‘valorises the social whole and neglects or subordinates the human individual’. In contrast to holism, individualism valorises the individual – ‘the independent, autonomous *moral* and, thus, non-social being’ – and neglects or subordinates the social whole (Dumont, 1986: 279; italics as in original).

In Vietnam, the term ‘individual’ (*ca nhan*) entered the Vietnamese vocabulary during the first decades of the twentieth century. However, Western ideas about the individual circulated long before that, for from as early as the 1860s the Vietnamese encountered a host of French words such as ‘*individuel*’, ‘*personnalité*’, ‘*société*’, ‘*le peuple*’, ‘*nation*’, ‘*liberté*’, and ‘*progrès*’ (Marr, 2000: 774-777). The first attempt by Vietnamese intellectuals to address the concept of individualism is believed to be in the 1920s, when Nguyen An Ninh delivered a speech, in French, titled ‘*Idéal de la jeunesse annamite*’ (The Aspirations of Annamite Youth), in which he challenged members of his audience to dream lofty dreams, to ‘flee from their fathers’ house’, to climb to a peak in order to ‘feel all one’s strength and possess one’s soul’, to embrace the whole world, and then to return to utilise one’s newly found creative forces to the full (Marr, 2000: 777; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 1992: 72-87). In reviewing the subsequent Vietnamese perceptions of individualism, we can see the influences of a

wide range of thinkers, including Nietzsche, Bergson, Kant, Rousseau, and Marx. Other ideas such as John Locke's on individual rights, defense of private property, restrictions on the power of the state, Adam Smith's arguments on self-interest and economic individualism, and Darwin's concept of the 'survival of the fittest' as the basis for individual behaviour seemed to have been either unheard of, unattractive, or rejected by Vietnamese intellectuals during the first half of the twentieth century (Marr, 2000: 774-781).

Generally speaking, the term 'individualism' (*chu nghĩa cá nhân* or *cá nhân chủ nghĩa*) is a 'broad-brush pejorative employed by both traditionalists and collectivist radicals to warn young Vietnamese away from anarchism, hedonism, weepy romanticism and nihilism' (Marr, 2000: 789). The reason for this contest of the 'individual' lies in the fact that the Vietnamese conceptions of the self had always been regulated by a Confucian doctrine which does not recognise human beings as isolated entities. As such, the self and the individual never existed outside the hierarchical context of *ngũ luân* (the five relationships), which I mentioned earlier under the heading of 'Moral Values and Social Hierarchy'. As Marr puts it: 'for the self to succeed, it must fragment and function according to the five relationships' (2000: 774). Thus, the self had been subordinate to the community – the family and the village. Even self-cultivation (*tu thân*) – in fact a Confucian notion – is not a matter of free choice of the individual, but rather hundreds of cultural prescriptions for the self to achieve personal enlightenment and virtue (for a detailed discussion on the concept of self-cultivation, see Marr, 2000: 772-774).

Since the Vietnamese Revolution (1945-1975), individualism has been subject not just to stronger criticism but even total rejection. For example, Ho Chi Minh speaking at the Twenty-First Students' Festival on 7 May 1958, directly attacked individualism, and specifically so-called 'bourgeois individualism':

To a greater or lesser extent, you [that is, members of his student audience] still carry the trace of the old society, and that is the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie [*tu tuong tieu tu san*]. What exactly is the ideology of the petty bourgeoisie? It is individualism. Individualism gives birth to the thought of being after honours and privileges [*tu tuong danh loi*] that you would only desire to become this monsieur or that monsieur and this madam or that madam. Subsequently the thought of pursuing honours and privileges would give birth to its children and its grandchildren... they are two contempts: contempt of manual labour and contempt of the manual labourer, and two fears: fear of hardship and fear of misery.

In order to rectify individualism, when doing any job, one should not think of oneself above all, but one needs to think of one's fellow countrymen and the whole people (1962: 192).

Today, the party and the state have continued to condemn 'individualism' as a Western-inspired threat to Vietnamese identity. For example, state researcher and director of the Youth Research Institute (*Vien Nghien cuu Thanh nien*) Dang Canh Khanh condemns the 'wave of material culture and the domination of individualistic

ideas' that 'has flooded the so-called advanced societies and is now permeating the society of developing countries' (1996b: 5).

In summing up the Vietnamese concept of individualism, David Marr also specifies those institutions and elements with which it is contrasted as follows:

Since 'individualism' was first denounced from both the right and the left eight decades ago (i.e. in the 1920s), its favourable opposite has been the spirit of 'collectivity' (*tap the*) or 'community' (*doan the*). Since 1945, politicians and prominent intellectuals have variously identified 'the nation', 'the people', the 'working class', the Party, or the Fatherland Front as suitable points for communal devotion and commitment. In recent years, the village and the family have been revived as valid communal foci as well (2000: 794).

Marr's sharp observations in his essay on the Vietnamese conceptions of 'individualism' as well as views on individualism taken from the Vietnamese official policy line, as presented above, provide significant points of reference for an analysis of the concept and value of individualism in relation to today's young Vietnamese and Hanoi's young graduates in particular. In my research, so as to enable an analysis of the value of individualism as seen from the perspective of my graduate interviewees, individualism is identified only in a context which is limited but relevant to the experience of young graduates. That is to say, based on data available in my research, the value of individualism will be examined within the parameters of

the family, occupation, and the community with its inherent interpersonal relationships.

4.3. Young People and the Change and Continuity in Values in Post-*Doi Moi* Vietnam

The system of Vietnamese values is much richer and more complex than the above brief survey suggests. The range of values I have presented above is highly selective, focusing only on aspects that I consider as most relevant to young people, at the same time reflecting the change of values and norms over different periods of time up to the late 1980s. Based on this range of values, I have examined what has been happening to young graduates in Hanoi when the country was opened up for economic development and its culture and people encountered Western cultures. These observations are presented in chapters 5 and 6 of the thesis, and eventually they will serve to answer a range of questions on young people and their value orientations in the process of globalisation and social transformation.

More specifically, by reflecting on various complex and intertwined real-life scenarios facing young graduates in Hanoi, this thesis seeks to explore the changes in the perception of values relating to a wide range of social relationships, including those between parent and child, partners, friends, and the young and the elderly. In this regard, I have posed a series of questions. Amid the 'commercial culture' brought about by *doi moi* and a market economy (Carruthers, 2000: 133), do young people still subscribe entirely to the range of values described in section 4.2 of this chapter, or have they adopted different values that allow them to place individual needs and desires above all other social relationships? Or are there 'grey areas'

where there are combinations or balance between 'old' and 'new' values? If so, what are these 'new' values and how different are they from the range of 'traditional' Vietnamese values described above? How do young people negotiate between their different social roles in order to balance and/or reconcile differences between the 'old' and the 'new', the 'traditional' and the 'modern', 'East' and 'West', and 'male' and 'female', and at the same time achieve their goals in life? I trust that my answers to these questions will not only serve to provide an in-depth account of Vietnamese educated youth today, and more generally the post-*doi moi* young generations, but also to describe and explain the socio-economic transformations currently taking place in the country, and to anticipate the kind of Vietnamese society that is likely to emerge in this new century.

Notes to Chapter 2:

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Vietnamese are mine.
2. The mandarin examinations were first instituted in 1075, but at the beginning only sons of mandarins or from great aristocratic families had access to these competitions (*Vietnam: A Historical Sketch*, 1974: 52).

Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. Understanding the Field

1.1. Issues for a Native Researcher

Before embarking on my fieldwork I had anticipated that Hanoi would promise to be a fascinating case to study the impact of the *doi moi* reform on the attitudes and behaviour of young people. Whilst the opening-up of the country from the late 1980s has brought about a great deal of foreign influence, especially on the youth and the impact of such a process and the *doi moi* reform have been obvious across the country, it is particularly interesting to observe how substantial and profound those impacts have been on the capital city, which had once been, in the people's common perception, a more strictly governed and closed centre. Furthermore, as I myself was born and grew up in the city, but had recently been away from it, I had a chance to be able to see the differences and make a comparison between the city as it is at the start of the new century, and the city of the 1980s and 1990s.

In my field research, the fact that I come from Hanoi gave me a number of advantages: I did not need to spend the first stage of my fieldwork trying to learn the Vietnamese language, to familiarise myself with the setting, the local culture and the social networks. Hence, I did not experience culture shock, and I could start on the fieldwork immediately on my arrival. Besides, constant encouragement and the support of my family were available throughout the fieldwork period which helped to

heighten my energy and spirit, eliminating the depression and loneliness that a field-researcher working in an unfamiliar setting might sometimes feel.

Nevertheless, carrying out a study in one's own society has its disadvantages with regard to the question of bias. Stephenson and Greer (1981: 123), for example, have assembled a list of issues and problems, and posed questions such as: Will the researcher recognise patterns in a society in which he/she is thoroughly acculturated? Will the native researcher cover the full range of informants who can provide different sources of information? Or, are the informants sought out who are most like the researcher? In short, they consider that the main problems confronting ethnographers who work within their own culture, are recognising cultural patterns in familiar situations, and interpreting meanings attached to events and problems relating to participation, observation and field relations. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 103) point to the fact that it is difficult for the native researcher to suspend preconceptions of his/her own society. Nevertheless, the problem of preconceptions faced by native researchers are not unique to the study of one's own society, as non-native researchers can also have preconceptions, and even prejudice, of a social reality that they may be unable to discard completely (Jones, 1970: 257).

However, issues and problems encountered by the native researcher tend to be even more acute, when the society is undergoing rapid transformation (Srinivas, 1969: 147, 159). This is exactly the case in Vietnam, where economic reforms together with the open-door process have brought about profound and rapid transformations in both the economy and the society. One of my key informants told me:

The thing for you to always bear in mind, when looking at today's youth, is that the society nowadays is very much different in comparison to the one you knew and used to live in four or five years ago. Today, there are many new phenomena, new attitudes and behaviours, and of course, new social problems that you never heard of a couple of years ago, and that have now become common among the young segment of the society.

(Nguyet, female interviewee)

In my view, there are a number of ways to avoid the danger of oversimplification, prior judgement, and the inability to recognise cultural and social patterns in familiar situations which in turn can lead to the potential distortion of the field data, and miscommunication of reality. Generally speaking, they require that the researcher have a break away from the field to be able to reflect upon the research and to gain a more balanced view of the society, the culture, and the subjects under study.

Regular exchange with foreigners throughout the fieldwork period is the first resort. These tend to be of different cultural and social backgrounds, and they often had different perspectives on Vietnamese society as compared to my own way of understanding it. They include the community of foreigners working and studying in Hanoi, scholars, researchers and other doctoral students, as well as foreign tourists and a number of university friends coming to visit me in Vietnam. Naturally, the type and the nature of the conversations varied. With some people I could discuss in detail my research project, and exchange views on a wide range of issues relating to Vietnam. With others, conversation was limited to the more general matters of life,

business, and culture in Vietnam. Sometimes the conversations were interactive, at other times, they were more like sessions where I would be answering various questions and explaining matters of our culture and traditions to the foreigner. Exchanging ideas and information with foreigners is a method that gives the fieldworker/participant observer a chance to play the role of an outsider, whilst the exchanges with local researchers and officials may help to gain a better insight from an insider's perspective. The latter process will be discussed later in this chapter. On the whole, such exchanges were particularly useful, as they enabled me to question my familiarity, make topical comparisons between Vietnam and other countries, see things I might have taken for granted or neglected, and come up with some additional hypotheses.

A second resort is access to supervision in the field. By this I mean the interactive, face-to-face supervision with the mentor in the field in the middle of the researcher's fieldwork. Six months into my fieldwork, one of my supervisors came to Vietnam for two weeks. During this time, I not only received moral and professional support and discussed further work plans, but I could also present my preliminary findings and research results, be challenged and get further specific advice. I then had a chance to reinforce my awareness of the various dangers of a native researcher thoroughly acculturated in the society under study, and discuss fresh ideas with the supervisor, who then helped me to see various issues from new perspectives. In my view, in-the-field supervision served as a crucial support to help improve the substance and quality of the fieldwork, but this certainly is the sort of 'luxury' not to be enjoyed by every student.

A third way to overcome problems relating to the over-familiarisation of the society is for the researcher to take a break away from the field. In order to do this, I split the fieldwork into two stages with a period of time back in the United Kingdom. The first stage of my fieldwork was for one year, from late December 1999 to late December 2000. Subsequently in early 2001 I spent one-and-a-half months in Hull, before spending another three months in the field, from mid-February to mid-May 2001. The break away from the field was valuable as I was able to synthesise the materials and data collected, reflect upon my own fieldwork experience and research progress, and determine what further information I needed to gather on returning to the field. In other words, it enabled me to take on the roles of both an insider and an outsider, hence, in my view, attaining a degree of objectivity in findings and results from the process of participant observation. Furthermore, it allowed me access to academic supervision and libraries in the United Kingdom, since libraries in Vietnam generally lack many of the relevant academic books.

To summarise, the combined methods of *regular exchange with foreigners* (or effectively people of different cultural backgrounds), *gaining supervision in the field*, and *a break away from the field* provided invaluable ways for me, as a native fieldworker, to gain a better, more objective and more balanced understanding of the field. In other words, it allowed me to remove myself 'from the local context of life in order to subject the data gathered... to more external social scientific considerations' (Hastrup and Fog Olwig, 1997: 1).

1.2. Reflexive Matters

Literature on methodology sometimes mentions certain reflexive matters as obstacles to the fieldwork. By 'reflexive matters' I mean a range of factors such as the fieldworker's personal biography, personal experience and background in relation to specific social and cultural contexts that can potentially influence the field researcher's role, field relations and the research process. For example, Khalil Nakhleh (1979) reflects on problems arising from his background during his fieldwork in two Arab villages in Israel during 1970-71. In his case, the status of someone, whose father had a connection and reputation among the local authorities, facilitated access to relevant local officials, yet it caused the people concerned and informants to be more cautious in providing information. In a different experience, William Whyte in embarking on his study of a community not far from his university in Cornerville, the United States, encountered problems in finding and approaching informants, and gaining their trust. This was due to his 'very consistent upper-middle-class background' which made him an outsider to the studied community and setting (1943: 280). These examples suggest that reflexive matters causing difficulties in the field research tend to arise from the status of the researcher in relation to the attitudes of the informants in the field.

However, while doing research in Vietnam, there are other reflexive matters to address, resulting from a combination of the characteristics of the Vietnamese language and the general attitude of members of the local academy towards young students. In Vietnam, it is common to find senior men in the more important positions as respected specialists and experts. The academy in Vietnam also consists

mainly of male scholars. In my fieldwork, all scholars and professors, whom I met and consulted in Hanoi, were older men. My status as a young female research student sometimes caused people to regard me as too young to be either serious, worthy, or capable of doing independent research. In fact, various researchers have identified the age and gender of the investigator as factors that might have to be overcome when conducting field research and establishing relationships with informants (for example, Lofland, 1971; Frankenberg, 1976; Morgan, 1981).

The barriers of age and gender were aggravated by the complicated use of personal pronouns in the Vietnamese language, in which social hierarchy is stressed and all forms of address are strictly kinship-based. In social conversations, it is compulsory not only to bear in mind the golden rule of *Xung thi khiem, ho thi ton* (referring to oneself in a humble manner, referring to others in a respected way), but also use the familial forms of address. Therefore, in conversations with senior male scholars and officials, I would identify myself as *em* (little sister) or *chau* (niece), and the other party as *anh* (elder brother), or *chu* (uncle, who is a younger brother of your father/mother) and *bac* (uncle/auntie, who is an elder brother/sister of your father/mother). This mode of personal communication naturally inhibited an equal, constructive and active atmosphere for academic discussion. Even on other social occasions and in other encounters, as Professor of Linguistics, Hoang Trong Phien remarks, such a way of social address 'seriously affects the efficiency of work, and refrains people from expressing their views and opinions in an honest and frank way'.¹

A perfect example of the sort of problems resulting from a combination of language usage and the general attitude towards young researchers was one of my first meetings in Hanoi with a Professor who was in his sixties. In the introductory session, I was feeling quite comfortable in addressing him as *chau* and *bac*, but he asked me to address him as *thay* (master, professor) and call myself his *student*. Before I said 'yes' to his request, the question of 'How come he suddenly becomes my master?' sprang to my mind. Nevertheless, I had no choice but to call him *master* out of respect. In our subsequent meetings, this mode of addressing him certainly caused a psychological blockage in my mind, as the conversations resembled sessions where I was merely seeking his advice, and hardly had a chance to express my views.

There is no real solution to this type of issue, since the characteristics of the language and the inherent attitudes towards young female researchers cannot be changed. However, I tried my best to negotiate my way through these matters. The first step was to identify who was the right scholar in the field of research and then try to get to know more about them. After obtaining more information on them, I determined who among my contacts would be able to put me in contact with the scholar concerned. That way, I was able to forge a rapport or relationship on a more personal basis with the elder scholar. This, in effect, helped to ease the restrained atmosphere and encourage assistance and cooperation. Being 'assertive' is not particularly helpful in overcoming the barriers of age, gender, and forms of address whilst doing fieldwork in Vietnam.

1.3. Problems Relating to the Search for Materials

In general, it is a long and difficult process in Vietnam locating and getting access to the necessary research materials, including local survey data, reports and research papers. This process was especially difficult because most Vietnamese in official positions tend to regard data and primary source materials as 'personal assets', and choose not to share them with other researchers, especially those who are attached to universities and institutions outside the country.² At the same time, to make the process of searching even more difficult, infrastructure for social research is still rather poorly developed; major libraries were not equipped with computerised catalogues³, and customer service by librarians hardly exists. Again, the issue for me was to establish close connections with the relevant people, so that they were either willing to share materials and data, or facilitate my entry to the major libraries and my access to materials and documents produced by the relevant organisations and institutes.

2. Timetable

As discussed earlier, my fieldwork was divided into two main periods: the first lasted for twelve months, from late December 1999 to the end of December 2000; and the second for three months from mid-February to mid-May 2001. The months of January through to mid-February 2001 were spent at Hull University in the United Kingdom, on synthesising materials and data gathered from the field. The two periods of fieldwork totalled about fourteen months. One follow-up visit of seven weeks in late 2001 early 2002 allowed me to revisit key informants, conduct new

interviews, observe again young people in everyday interaction, and consider recent social developments in the country.

Whether the time the researcher spends in the field is sufficient is always difficult to answer. The amount of time depends in part on how familiar the researcher is with the field. In comparing the native and the non-native anthropologist, Delmos Jones points out that the former has a number of obvious advantages such as knowledge of the language and culture, and ease of developing relations with the people (1970: 252). As I mentioned earlier in section 1.1 of this chapter, these are precisely the advantages that I have in comparison with students whose field research is undertaken in a culture other than their own. Therefore, I did not have to spend an additional period of time learning Vietnamese and familiarising myself with Vietnamese culture. This, however, still does not answer the question of whether the time I spent is sufficient, because 'no matter how many years one remains in the field, no matter how well one speaks the language, and no matter how far one thinks he has got under the skin of the native', no researcher can claim a complete understanding of the field, its culture and people (Jones, 1970: 257). What I can claim here is that, within the framework of doctoral research, the total of nearly sixteen months in the field was the maximum period I could afford to conduct my field research without extending unduly the whole process of writing a thesis. I believe I have gathered sufficient data to argue my case effectively.

3. In the Field

3.1. Interviewing Young Graduates and Participant Observation

The focus of my research is young Vietnamese in the context of social transformation during the transition towards a market economy. I have not provided a definition of youth. Instead I have used a set of specific, non-abstract, and operational criteria, and I chose to interview unmarried university graduates who were under thirty years of age.

In my view, the selection of single people under thirty years of age helps to overcome one of the acknowledged sociological complications in the conceptualisation and definition of youth, in that the category of age cannot serve as the sole defining criterion. In other words, whilst there are people in the 'youth' age category who have gone directly from childhood to adulthood, it can be argued that most university graduates do experience 'youth' as a longer transitional period from childhood to adulthood, because they do not take on such adult roles as parenting directly upon reaching puberty (for a discussion on the 'problems' of conceptualising youth, see chapter 2, section 1).

Furthermore, in both daily life and in sociological research within Vietnam, *thanh nien* (usually translated as 'youth') is widely perceived as comprising people of 15 to 30 years of age (see, for example, Nguyen Van Trung, 1996: 8; Thai Duy Tuyen, 1995). Whilst Vietnamese social scientists and policy-makers frequently acknowledge that young people belong to the social category primarily exposed to

socio-economic transformations resulting from the *doi moi* reforms (for example, Nguyen Van Trung, 1996; Ho Duc Viet, 1996: 10-16), young university graduates make particularly interesting interviewees because they are representative products of the higher education system (and hence tomorrow's national élite), and they tend to be among those who are most exposed and most responsive to these transformations. Higher education and an urban environment⁴ have enabled young people not only to experience, realise, and understand the effects of various socio-economic, political and cultural factors on different aspects of their life, but also form their own view on the process of renovation.

In doing fieldwork in an urban society, as for most other researchers, I was also confronted with the most basic and conventional methodological dilemma of how to reconcile the two methods of participant observation and holism. Generally, the size and diversity of a city clearly deprive it of the characteristics of a small-scale 'community' or a '*Gemeinschaft*', and so it makes ethnographic work more challenging and complex. Basham and DeGroot (1977: 428) suggest three specific ways to overcome this problem: 1) to sacrifice holism for a micro-level ethnography of a segmented population; 2) to trace and analyse urban interactional networks; and 3) to engage in macro-level ethnographies of entire cities based on ethnographic, historical and social survey methods.

In the context of Vietnam under the *doi moi* reformation, and particularly, in the urban environment of Hanoi where rapid transformations have been taking place, the complexity of these changes are obvious. However, my doctoral research was limited in time and resources, and I conducted it without assistance. It should be

acknowledged that these circumstances are normally unfavourable for a holistic approach. Burgess (1984: 15) points out that 'the scale and diversity of urban life means that it is only possible either to study people superficially or to study a small number of informants in depth'. Since ethnography of a whole city and its entire youth population is not possible, I chose to focus on university graduates in Hanoi. As a matter of fact, moving from holistic studies towards the detailed ethnographic treatment of particular topics and issues has been a way for anthropologists to overcome this methodological problem (Burgess, 1984: 15). In focusing on Hanoi university graduates, I am not suggesting that my findings can be generalised to all other segments of the youth population (for example, peasant youths). In my research, generalisations are only made where they can be sustained by sufficient data from more comprehensive surveys. As my research is essentially on value orientations and social change, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the case of young Hanoi graduates – their viewpoints, experiences, and personal life stories – helps to unveil, illustrate, and conceptualise one such process of change in value orientations amid the socio-economic and cultural transformations currently taking place in Vietnam.

Given the topic of my research and the criteria of selection for my interviewees, there was a possible and easier option which was for me to interview only people within my circle of ex-students and classmates in Hanoi. Although I regularly met with a small number of close friends, who helped me to gain insight into aspects of the society and lives of young graduates, I avoided calling up friends in order to interview them, because it carried the risk of gathering too personal information. My intention was to carry out participant observation by living a normal life as a native

and a university graduate, sharing the needs and interests of other graduates (for example, finding a job, earning money, socialising and entertaining). This provided a rich range of social interactions. While it is impossible to be free from subjectivity in social research, I gathered information from a sample of young people through essentially living the daily life of a Hanoi graduate. As a result, the contexts in which I encountered other graduates and met my prospective interviewees are diverse; to name a few they include: attending language classes on a regular basis, going to evening courses on a less regular basis, visiting job centres, working or being involved in a job (during different periods of time, at three different offices, one of which was a government office), joining young people's activities, and travelling and socialising with them.

The combination of in-depth loosely structured interviews, casual conversations and participant observation were essentially the main mode of investigation and data collection. Questionnaires were not used, because, in my view, this method is really only suitable for soliciting condensed and uniform answers, and not for gathering personal and detailed information, despite the fact that it would have enabled me to cover a far greater number of respondents. I wanted to gather in-depth material on values, and this demanded close and sustained interaction over time.

During in-depth interviews, I sat down with the interviewee and prompted discussion with open-ended questions. As my research set out to investigate the attitudes and viewpoints of the youth in their own terms, it was crucial for me to be able to collect as accurate information as possible provided by young people themselves on a wide range of issues, including their private life, family and relationships, work and

employment. The solicited information is personal, and so it was important to create a comfortable atmosphere. Therefore, I chose not to apply the more formal interview technique of recording the conversation, as in my experience most people tended to be inhibited and shied away as soon as I produced a tape-recorder. During interviews I took only short notes, and straight afterwards transcribed the interview in order to ensure its accuracy. Interviews were usually spread over more than one meeting; each meeting could run for up to two hours. Counting only the longer and more successful interviews, I interviewed a total of seventy-five unmarried under-thirty-year-old university graduates; there were thirty-eight men and thirty-seven women. In order to protect anonymity, I do not use the real names of informants, except for the case of Ngoc Anh. In his case, his real name was used with his consent, both because he said he enjoyed being quoted and because his real name was already cited in an article featuring his advertising firm in an issue of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* (I quote this article later in my thesis).

I also had countless casual conversations with people, young and old, whom I encountered in various contexts either in Hanoi or during my trips to different parts of the country, including nearby provinces in the North, and Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta in the South. It was difficult to quantify these informal conversations, because their duration varied: some lasted for only twenty minutes, but others were lengthy and repetitive. Furthermore, these people do not necessarily meet the criteria for my research interviews (under thirty, unmarried university graduates). However, the informal conversations were valuable and they helped to provide me with background and insights into various social realities, spark ideas, or confirm my findings on certain aspects of social life.

In principle, being a native youth, I was an insider in the process of participant observation. This enabled me to participate in, and become part of local life, to learn first-hand and understand the ways in which young Vietnamese people themselves experience and interpret their lives. Constructively, I intermittently switched (and negotiated) between the roles of an insider and an outsider. At times, the (re)negotiation of the participatory role was necessary, because I was confronted with unfamiliar situations and circumstances, or particular informants, which rendered me an outsider. At other times, it was my own choice as I stepped out of the fieldwork process in order to avoid the dangers of bias and over-simplification.

Given the increasingly conducive atmosphere for undertaking social research in Vietnam and the need to approach officials and scholars from various institutes and organisations, the principle underlining the conduct of my field research was that it was 'overt'. My status as a research student from an overseas university as well as my research topic were made known to every local official, scholar, and researcher I consulted. All key informants and the majority of interviewees were also aware of my research purposes. In addition, the conduct of in-depth interviews helped me to develop a degree of rapport with interviewees. In my view, the overt approach and living in the community under study with intermittent breaks away from the field do qualify me as a *participant-as-observer*.

Participant-as-observer is a term coined by Gold (1958) in distinguishing four field roles of the researcher. By definition, the *participant-as-observer* role involves situations where the investigator participates as well as observes by developing

relationships with informants and by making no secret of the investigation. The *participant-as-observer* also has a major advantage, which is the freedom to go wherever there is action relevant to the investigation (Burgess, 1984: 81-82). The three other field roles which Gold describes are the *complete participant*, the *observer-as-participant* and the *complete observer*; these have considerable disadvantages because of their unbalanced levels of engagement within the group under study, ranging from too deep to too shallow involvements. The *complete participant* conceals the observer dimension and undertakes covert observation; this role can either cause the researcher to alter the behaviour of the group he or she has entered, or hinder effective data gathering and recording observations because of too great an involvement in the life of the group. On the other hand, in the cases of the *observer-as-participant* (with too little involvement) and the *complete observer* (with no participation), there are problems arising from the brevity or the complete lack of the researcher's contact and relationships (Burgess, 1984: 80-83).

3.2. Interviews with Local Officials and Researchers

All local researchers and officials, whom I consulted, were informed of my research. I conducted in-depth interviews in Hanoi with ten officials and researchers, including two university professors in the social sciences. These interviews, during which notes were normally taken, aimed to investigate their views on the present socio-economic situation, and their portrayal of today's Vietnamese youth.

3.3. The Use of Social Survey Data

Some of the statistical data that I have used come from the Project No. KX07-10 on 'Studying the Vietnamese People: Perspectives and Approaches', which constituted part of *Chuong trinh Khoa hoc Cong nghe cap Nha nuoc KX-07, 1995* (The 1995 State's Science and Technology Programme KX-07). The project surveyed a total of 1,542 people under thirty years of age from five major cities and provinces of Vietnam (the cities of Hanoi and Hai Phong, and the province of Nam Ha in the North, Nghe An Province in central Vietnam and Ho Chi Minh City). This national youth survey, its significance and its relevance to my research have been discussed earlier in section 3 of chapter 2.

Data produced by Vietnamese researchers provided an invaluable source of information for cross-reference and comparative analyses. Although my work is qualitative research primarily based on in-depth interviews, the use of data from the statistical investigation assisted me in achieving some balance between qualitative and quantitative material as well as enabled some generalisations. Leach (1967) argues that qualitative and quantitative investigations are interdependent research methods and usefully complement each other. On the one hand, the researcher using a quantitative approach with sampling techniques and the use of questionnaires (and consequently the length of the enquiry may be short) appears to be 'presupposing uniformities which perhaps do not really exist' (Leach, 1967: 78). As Leach rightly points out, the quantitative researcher is forced to assume that 'already, before ever he starts his questionnaire enquiries, he knows, by intuition, just what are significant variables concerning which it is worthwhile making enquiries' (1967: 78). On the

other hand, the qualitative researcher is well aware of the difficulty of fitting items of human behaviour and experience into numerical categories, but at the same time, qualitative investigations may be of too particular a nature to have a general value (Leach, 1967: 82). Therefore, the use of the qualitative approach is to investigate social phenomena which are inaccessible to statistical investigations, yet the researcher has to be extremely cautious about attempting to generalise from the findings. It is in this sense that data from the 1995 national survey are highly relevant, as they have enabled me to provide some observations on youth in general in present-day Vietnam.

3.4. Media Analysis

My research is essentially on young people and their value orientations as seen from their own perspectives. However, closely following the media for relevant stories and coverage was a very important supplementary means of data gathering. The media helped me to gain an up-to-date understanding of Vietnamese society and economy in general, and various aspects of the lives and experiences of young Vietnamese in particular. In addition, the news stories also assisted in shedding light on government viewpoints and policies towards youth, and other social issues concerning young people. After all they report current developments and changes in official policy. I monitored newspaper and magazine articles from both the Vietnamese and foreign media during the four years from 1999 to 2002, but I also read available press cuttings and the archives of Vietnamese newspapers which were kept at the libraries of the *Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) and the *Vien Xa hoi hoc* (Institute of Sociology) in Hanoi. On my return from the field, I regularly used the Internet and email to keep myself up-to-date with media coverage on

Vietnam. To read news reports and articles from a Vietnamese perspective, I accessed the *Nhan Dan* (The People), Vnexpress and Vietnam News Agency on line. For alternative (and free from the official policy guidelines) viewpoints and opinions, I read the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *Asiaweek* and *The Economist*. I am also a member of the Internet-based discussion group *Vnforum* (at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/vnforum>) through which I continue to receive daily postings of news and discussions on Vietnam. Secondary data and other printed materials have provided me with the general background of recent socio-economic and political change in Vietnam to which I now turn in chapter 4.

Notes to Chapter 3:

1. Personal communication with Professor Hoang Trong Phien of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Vietnam National University). Hanoi, July 2000.
2. Personal communication with Dr. Oscar Salemink of the Ford Foundation in Hanoi, March 2000.
3. This was the case during my fieldwork in 2000: the Social Science Library and the library of the Institute of Sociology were categorised with card indexes. The National Library has had a computerised catalogue system, however, I found it impractical and difficult to use.
4. Whilst the impact of the *doi moi* reform has been seen throughout the country, almost all economic, social and cultural changes tend to take place in the major urban centres well before, and on a more substantial scale than the rural areas. This is because the larger cities in Vietnam are not only centres for the country's economic activities and cultural exchanges with the outside world, but they are also the place where the latest political and administrative policies are implemented as part of the *doi moi* reform programme. Hence, it is in an urban environment that one is able to experience and study all the encompassing impacts of the reform in Vietnam.

Chapter 4

‘OPENING DOORS’ AND ‘RENOVATION’

In the first two sections of this chapter, I will briefly review the political, social and economic contexts that led to the introduction of *doi moi* as an official policy, and examine the successes and failures of the renovation programme. In the third section, I will present a real-life picture of the present socio-economic situation through a selection of narratives relating to youth, market transition and the opening up of the country. The stories and scenes presented here are those which I have observed and recorded in the field, and which I consider the most representative and relevant in order to begin to understand the main social changes and circumstances which young Vietnamese, and in particular Hanoi’s young graduates experience. Not only do these ethnographic explorations help to contextualise this research, but they also provide a broader sense of some of the significant elements of what might be loosely termed as a ‘local youth culture’.

1. Background of Renovation

In 1975 Vietnam emerged from three decades of war as a reunified country but with a large number of human casualties and a severely damaged infrastructure (Kolko, 1997: 2; Irvin, 1995: 727). Subsequently, in 1977, it was subject to a US-led trade embargo that remained in place for nearly two decades. As a result, Vietnam was not only cut off from most trade and assistance from other Western nations, but also denied access to loans from international credit institutions, including the World Bank (WB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Its main political and economic allies then were the former USSR and

East European countries, particularly the Democratic Republic of Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary (Irvin, 1995: 727).

In the following years, in an attempt to unify the country politically and economically, the VCP under the leadership of the then General Secretary, Le Duan, introduced to the South a socialist model of central planning, a Soviet Stalinist model that had originally been adopted by North Vietnam (the then DRV) in the 1950s. The main feature of such a socialist development strategy was central economic planning and management by the state, with state ownership of industry and the means of production, agriculture organised into state farms and collectives that served both as production and social units, and economic development based on large-scale heavy industry (Ronnås and Sjöberg, 1991: 4).

The focus on heavy industry involved a very small number of projects such as Thai Nguyen Iron and Steel Corporation and Hoa Binh hydropower dam, which usually depended on large amounts of assistance from the former USSR. At the same time, the VCP's attempt to impose collectivisation on the South encountered strong opposition from Southerners, notably traders who resisted the closing of the petty trade sector¹. This economic plan soon ran into numerous problems, leading to 'very serious macroeconomic imbalances', a sharp fall in agricultural output, falling per capita income and rising inflation (Irvin, 1995: 726-29). As a number of authors later remarked, the overall approach to economic development was unsuitable for a capital- and resource-scarce economy of a predominantly rural country like Vietnam (Ronnås and Sjöberg, 1991: 4-5; Vu Tuan Anh, 1995: 17).

The economic failure was aggravated by geopolitical factors. In 1978, an escalating border conflict with the Khmer Rouge prompted Vietnam to send its troops to Cambodia; the Vietnamese army stayed on to prevent a return to power of the Khmer Rouge. Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia resulted in diplomatic isolation and a drying up of foreign aid from Western countries. Also in 1978 China cut off its assistance to Vietnam, and in February of the following year it carried out a brief but massive attack across Vietnam's northern frontier. The 1979 border conflict, in tandem with the crackdown on the petty trade sector, and specifically ethnic Chinese traders, spurred their massive emigration and gave rise to the problem of the 'boatpeople' (Irvin, 1995: 729). The international Sino-Vietnamese conflict caused huge economic and human losses and resulted in the need for large expenditure in Vietnam's poor economy. Yet the fact that China threatened to carry out another attack and kept up its military pressure on its border with Vietnam until around 1986-87 compelled Hanoi to continue pouring its scarce resources into defence during subsequent years (Kolko, 1997: 23).

By the mid-1980s Vietnam was literally on the verge of bankruptcy. On the economic front, there was stagnation, macro-economic instability, hyperinflation, budget deficits, balance of payment imbalances together with chronic food shortages, consumer goods scarcities, and widespread poverty. Throughout most of the 1980s exceedingly high rates of inflation persisted, reaching a record 774.7 per cent in 1986. As admitted by the VCP in the draft Political Report of the Central Committee of the Communist Party released in April 1996, Vietnam in the late 1980s faced 'seemingly unsurmountable difficulties' (Ryan and Wandel, 1996: 3). People were cut off from any exchange with and exposure to the outside world, due to the

imposition of a strict closed door policy and official repression of freedom of speech. What is more, the country suffered international isolation while domestically there was growing division within the VCP together with the party's losing central control over the regions. Political, economic and social problems had all interacted and compounded each other to produce a grave crisis. The situation had undermined confidence in the party and the government to an unprecedented level in 1985-1986 when people of all walks of life complained about 'old men at the top who did not know how to cope with the challenges of the post war era' (Duiker, 1989: 244). Apparently, such popular disenchantment and growing criticism played an important role in urging and accelerating the country's leadership to set out on the path of reform.

The late Vietnamese historian Nguyen Khac Vien remarked afterwards on the Party's initial recognition of its fading credibility and of the seriousness of the situation:

[At the National Assembly session in December 1985] influential members of the government were relieved of their duties, the first time a measure of this kind had been taken, testifying to the serious nature of the economic and social crisis and to the fact that disenchantment was increasingly spreading throughout different social strata (1993: 400-401).

Also around 1985 the Politburo began to split over the future direction of the country. Debates became more acrimonious than at any other time in the VCP's

history and inside the party two main factions were forming: hard-line conservatives and radical reformers (Duiker, 1989: 244; Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993: 401).

However, economic reform in Vietnam has been an evolutionary process which started as early as the end of the 1970s (Beresford and McFarlane, 1995: 57; Economic Intelligence Unit, 1995: 79; Irvin, 1995; Le Dang Doanh, 1997). Irvin points out that the reforms started slowly 'from below', in that the spread of the informal economy at the base eroded power at the centre, making the old central-planning system unworkable (1995: 729). The process was dubbed *phong trao xe rao* or 'fence-breaking movement' in Vietnamese slang (de Vylder, 1993: 4-5; Le Dang Doanh, 1997: 69). But the year 1986 is noted as a crucial turning point. Le Duan died in July of that year, an event that decisively shifted the balance of power within the Party towards the reformers (Irvin, 1995: 729; Morley, 1997: 17). The southern reformer, Nguyen Van Linh, became the Party's Secretary-General and he was determined to set out on the path of renovation, or *doi moi*. At the Sixth National Congress of the VCP at the end of 1986, for the first time there was a comprehensive and honest review and assessment of the existing socio-economic situation, as well as admissions of 'errors and illusions' by the VCP. The Sixth Congress also set out key issues for renovation, with the most important being 'structural adjustment', i.e. the adjustment of the production structure to emphasise food and foodstuffs, consumer goods and goods for export. The overall policy line was to begin a process of moving away from central control and towards a market economy. However, this is not to say that the reform was effective and efficient at that stage. The notable achievement of the Sixth Congress was in developing new thinking (*doi moi tu duy*)

– a fundamental change in the thinking of the leadership and in their attitude towards openness and the market economy. Le Dang Doanh remarks:

Doi moi was born from the pressing requirements of the economy, and is the result of a combination of the initiatives of the public and the new thinking (*doi moi tu duy*) of the party and state leadership (1997: 71).

The *doi moi* reform did not gain full momentum until further internal and external conditions permitted. In 1987 a new Law on Foreign Investment was promulgated. Described by some observers as among the most liberal in Southeast Asia and as relatively comprehensive (Duiker, 1989: 250), it offered foreign investors wide areas for investment with preferential terms. In 1989 when the collapse of the Eastern European bloc resulted in substantial cutbacks and eventual termination of aid and trade flows within the socialist world, touching Vietnam directly, the Vietnamese leadership was left with no option but to reform (*doi moi*) and ‘open doors’ (*mo cua*) and try to establish ‘friendly’ relations with the rest of the world. At the end of 1989 Vietnamese troops pulled out of Cambodia and the Peace Accord with Cambodia was concluded in 1991, removing one of the main obstacles to Vietnam’s entry into the world community. In April 1992, a new Constitution was adopted by the National Assembly, which as Ryan and Wandel remark, reflects the commitment on the part of the state to *doi moi*. It also permits private ownership and offers protection by the state for such ownership (Ryan and Wandel, 1996: 7). In 1994 the United States lifted its trade embargo, and in the next year it resumed diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Also in 1995 Vietnam gained membership of the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), enabling it to integrate into one of the world's fastest growing economic regions.² As Kolko put it, Vietnam had then become 'fully geared to peace' (1997: 23).



Picture 4.1

Propaganda poster: 'Đổi mới in order to go forward'.

2. *Doi moi* and *Mo cua*

The terms *mo cua* (open door) and *doi moi* (renovation, reform) can be used interchangeably in Vietnam to refer to the period starting from the late 1980s when the Party and the state embarked upon the path of reform. They also connote the politics of economic, social and cultural liberalisation in Vietnam since then. However, in my own observations, in daily conversation people are more likely to use the metaphor of *mo cua* to describe socio-economic changes since the implementation of *doi moi*. In other words, *doi moi* is usually used to refer to the official policy line and the new era renovation, especially economic reform (*doi moi kinh te*), starting since the late 1980s and early 1990s, while *mo cua* brings together diverse changes in the economy, society and culture.

The different shades of meaning of these terms are reflected in the writings and speeches of Vietnamese officials and researchers alike. For example, when emphasising the importance of *doi moi* for 'the nation's life and the country's development', Tran Trong Tan writes:

In order to overcome the socio-economic crisis, it is not possible to be simplistic, but rather it is necessary to carry out comprehensive renovation, starting from new thinking (*doi moi tu duy*), particularly economic thinking (*tu duy kinh te*), in order to achieve a new model for the building of socialism in Vietnam in the new era.

[...]

Comprehensive renovation is to bring into play the significant achievements of the Revolution, to correct the errors and mistakes made earlier, to realise and address newly arisen issues, to bring into play national strength and the strength of the era, to maintain independence and sovereignty and to march firmly to socialism (1997: 58-59).

This is an example of the rhetoric of *doi moi* in state discourse. The wording is such that it clearly demonstrates the positive value of state policy, the goal of which is for '*dan giao, nuoc manh, xa hoi cong bang, van minh*' (wealthy people, strong country, equal and civilised society). *Mo cua*, on the other hand, is perceived not so much as an official policy, but rather as an act, which is neither initiated by nor is within the total control of the Party and the state, and which can bring about both negative and positive outcomes. The same author writes:

Mo cua and international integration naturally carry many complexities, and often entail a price to pay. [...] It is necessary to predict the negative matters that could happen during *mo cua* (Tran Trong Tan, 1997: 64).

Another example, more relevant to this research, is the following quotation by Professor Ton That Bach, one of the prominent contemporary intellectuals. In his article on 'Vietnamese Youth on the Doorstep of the Twenty-first Century', Professor Bach criticised those youths who 'adopted the debilitating lifestyles from the West', or those who were 'impressed with the posh and glittering lifestyles of the

outside world while forgetting the hardship that previous generations went through to build the country and dismissing the negative, bitter aspects of Western societies' (Ton That Bach, 2000).

Observing the use of the terms *doi moi* and *mo cua* both in daily life and in official writing, it is possible to conclude that *doi moi* is regarded as the revolution of peace time, as crucial and as significant as the two national salvation revolutions against *thuc dan Phap* (French colonialists) and *de quoc My* (American imperialists). It is a national salvation revolution in its own right, as *doi moi* has brought the country out of crisis and bankruptcy and saved its people from starvation. The metaphor of *mo cua*, on the other hand, is not a metaphor of revolution, but subsumes a set of contradictory tendencies and trends, and lends them the coherence of a general process of social change. However, as an independent researcher, who is free from the impulse and influence of official policy, I will provide an assessment of *doi moi* that not only acknowledges its achievements but also looks critically at its failures. This will be followed by a description of a selection of the scenes of *mo cua* which will give us a graphic picture of the social changes currently taking place in Hanoi.

3. An Assessment of *Doi moi*

In general, *doi moi* has been successful, as it has brought the country out of severe crisis, and furthermore brought about major improvements to the overall economy and society of Vietnam. The World Bank reported that from 1992 to 1998 the average annual GDP growth rate in Vietnam was 'a spectacular' 8.4 per cent which compared favourably with any nation in Southeast Asia. All sectors, including agriculture, industry and services, showed large gains (World Bank, 1999: 44). The

increase in agricultural output was particularly noticeable. From being a country of chronic food shortages with annual imports of 1 million tonnes of rice, Vietnam stopped importing rice in 1989 and a year later became the world's third largest exporter of rice, after the US and Thailand, with annual exports of 2 to 3 million tonnes (Dang Duc Dam, 1997: 10). Inflation has been brought under control. The macroeconomic situation has been stabilised (Le Dang Doanh, 2000: 8). Also thanks to *doi moi tu duy* and the 'open door' policy, Vietnam has secured significant improvements in its foreign relations. Since the Seventh National Congress of the VCP in mid-1991, the country has moved to normalise relations with China, Japan, the United States, the ASEAN states, and other countries. Most recently in 2001, it entered a bilateral trade agreement with the United States, and has also been actively preparing to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Through *doi moi*, Vietnam has links with and integrates into the capitalist world economy and culture.

Virtually every aspect of social life is opening up. *Doi moi* led to a gradual easing of the political controls on citizens. Access to information is easier, and cultural, religious and recreational activities are now under much less control. Whereas any unofficial contact with foreigners was banned pre-*doi moi*, increased contact with them is now tolerated. Ordinary people can now talk to foreign visitors in the street, invite them home for a meal, and can even register with the local authority to rent out extra rooms in their house to foreigners. It is now common for students of foreign languages to learn through native speakers who come from the West, and there are also overseas 'study-tours' for government officials. In a similar manner, there are now fewer institutional sanctions on relationships and sexual behaviour. My older informants told me that under socialism prior to *mo cua*, couples had to report to the

personnel of their work unit (*to chuc*) to seek its official approval before they could start dating each other. The approval from *to chuc* – normally in the form of a letter from the workplace – was also required in order for a marriage to be registered and take place. In addition to granting approval, *to chuc* dealt with most issues in a couple's relationship, including monitoring their behaviour and mediating familial disputes. Nowadays, the work unit no longer imposes control upon the private life of the individual. As the state withdrew its intense involvement in the process of spouse selection, people are now free to choose their partner, and would normally seek parental approval only. They expect their seniors and bosses not to question their private lives. The catchphrase *bao cao to chuc* (reporting to the work unit) – referring to the *pre-doi moi* fact that people had to report their private lives to their work unit – exists only as a joke among young friends asking about the private lives of one another. Robert Templer, who was a correspondent in Hanoi for the French news agency Agence France Presse, remarks 'the wheels of life began to spin faster and they meshed less often with the controlling gears of the state. A vast bureaucracy that once aspired to monitor the lives of millions of people no longer cared as much what they did as long as they stayed out of politics' (1998: 4).

The socio-economic improvements which have been attained are remarkable. However, one should not lose sight of the fact that such substantial progress does not necessarily mean a sustained period of development, and that Vietnam has really had to start from a very low base. Economic indicators do not always truly reflect overall social development. In fact, *doi moi* has brought about disturbing social changes and trends such as increasing inequality, rising unemployment, and declining education and health care services.

Although GDP per capita significantly increased from USD 130 in 1991 to USD 416 in 2001 (data from the UNDP Internet site), the income gap between the rich and the poor widened rapidly during *doi moi*. A recent study, jointly conducted by the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities (NCSSH) and UNDP, reported that between 1995 and 1999, thirty-one of Vietnam's sixty-two provinces saw income inequality increase by 10 per cent. In 1999 alone, the richest 20 per cent of the population earned 7.3 times as much as the poorest 20 per cent. The reform has led not only to rising household income inequalities, but also an increasingly noticeable wealth gap between urban and rural areas, as well as between major cities and remote towns (Tran Dinh Thanh Lam, 2002; Beresford and McFarlane, 1995: 58).

The wealth gap manifests itself in the education system, particularly in higher education. Whereas before *doi moi* education was free and accessible to young people from all economic backgrounds, since the reforms and with the introduction of tuition fees in 1989 and the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the range of university students has to a certain extent excluded people from poorer backgrounds or from the countryside. From the early 1990s, government spending on education increased significantly in terms of both the proportion of the state budget and real values. However, the 1996 World Bank report on financing education expresses its concerns that 'government's spending on education in Vietnam reflects a potential trend of favouring the rich, because such spending only provides for a relatively small part of the expenditures of lower education levels, which are the levels participated in by many children from poor families, and provides for a larger

part of the expenditures of higher education levels, where there are few students from low income groups' (1996: 5). The World Bank's figures show that in 1993 none of the children from the poorest quintile of the population managed to attend tertiary institutions (WB, 1995: 84). Studies by Vietnamese researchers also confirm that 'tuition fees and other living expenses are beyond the reach of farmers and poor families' (Chu Xuan Viet, 1996: 47).

Entrance into universities, especially larger public universities, is further made difficult by admission examinations. The preparation for such examinations involves the student's entire family. On the side of the student, it requires much hard work, particularly long hours attending preparatory courses after school. As for the parents, a considerable amount of money has to be found to pay for such courses. The percentage of candidates who pass these exams is as low as 15-20 per cent (Marr, 1996: 22), making them highly competitive, and even more difficult for poorer students to pass. Official data suggest that participation rates in higher education stand at about 2 per cent of the eligible age group (Economist Intelligence Unit, 1995: 46; Nguyen Van Trung, 1996: 67), far lower in comparison to regional neighbours such as Thailand and the Philippines (Chu Xuan Viet, 1996: 46-47).

In sum, the combination of tuition fees, high cost of living in the cities (where most universities are located) and competitive admission examinations has had effects on the composition of the university student body. University graduates tend to come from families that not only appreciate higher education as an investment for their children's future, but are also able to afford it. As for the minority of young people from the countryside who make it to university, the high cost of living in the cities

during university years and the lack of employment opportunities for graduates in rural areas have resulted in a trend for graduates to abandon their rural homes and seek employment in the cities after graduation (Vietnam News, 2001).

Compared to the pre-*doi moi* period, it is now far more common for young men and women to leave their villages for the cities in search of higher paid jobs. This is the case not only for youths who go to the cities for higher education and stay on searching for jobs after graduation, but also for peasant youths who leave the countryside to look for work as unskilled labourers such as builders, porters, bread-bakers and vendors, and domestic help. For example, a twenty-two-year-old girl from Nam Ha Province (about two hours drive from Hanoi) told me that she lodges at a bread bakery, where some other twenty girls from suburban villages shared a floor. Like the other girls, she earns her basic lodging, food and a small income by selling a basket of bread everyday. She normally leaves the bakery and hits the street early in the morning and finishes selling the bread at around two o'clock in the afternoon. After that she goes on to work for families who hire her for around five thousand dongs per hour to clean their house and do other household tasks. Each month in the city, she makes two to three hundred thousand dongs, an amount far higher than what she could have earned working the fields in her home village.

Since the government abandoned its utopian pledge of providing jobs for everyone in the 1980s, the unemployment rate has increased year by year. According to official data reported in the state-owned *Vietnam Investment Review (VIR)*, unemployment rates for 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999 were 5.9 per cent, 6 per cent, 6.9 per cent, and 7.4 per cent respectively (Chi Mai, 2000: 5). The rise in unemployment since the

mid-1990s has been caused by the massive layoffs in order to restructure the state sector whilst the private sector is still too small to absorb these laid-off workers and the additional number of 1.7 million young men and women seeking jobs for the first time each year (*Youth In Vietnam*, 2000: 17). Subsequently, the economic crisis that hit the rest of East Asia in the second half of 1997 also led to a rise in unemployment in Vietnam. This is partly because Asian investors withdrew their funds, put a halt on investment projects and fired their employees, and partly because these neighbouring countries, from being investors in Vietnam, have now become its competitors in providing cheap labour. Consequently, Vietnam has experienced a decline in foreign direct investment (FDI), a fall in exports, and a drop in economic growth, and it came close to a mini-banking crisis in 1997 and 1998 (Quan Xuan Dinh, 2000).

Figures for unemployment in the main cities are 'always considerably higher' (World Bank, 1999:50). According to the same report of the *VIR*, Hanoi's urban unemployment rate stood at 10.3 per cent in 1999, compared to 9.1 per cent in 1998, and 8.6 per cent in 1997. Rising urban unemployment is due to the fact that 'many people are still trying to migrate from unemployment blackspots in the countryside hoping for better fortunes in major population centres' (Chi Mai, 2000: 5). Young people today compete not only among themselves, but also with people who have left the state sector. Therefore, finding employment and subsequently staying competitive in order to secure a job and then promotion, have become major concerns not only for youth in general, but also for young people with higher education qualifications. It is in this context that the issues of employment will be explored in the following chapter.

When the government introduced the reform policies in the late 1980s, it abolished the subsidy system (*bao cap*) which used to provide for everything from housing, education and employment to food, health care and holidays. The result is the demise of egalitarianism – a culturally homogeneous and egalitarian working class of government and state-enterprise workers with fairly similar expectations and lifestyles. In contrast, the market economy creates new winners and losers and new popular conceptions of class divisions. Whilst the rich have the opportunity to get richer, the poor are left without the safety net of government housing and job allocations, something that defined the old socialist working-class culture. This is precisely what we shall see as reflected in the various aspects of the life of young graduates in Hanoi.

4. Scenes of *Mo Cua*

While the above section is a broad technical assessment of the successes and failures of *doi moi* with some statistical data, this section is a description of the realities of *mo cua* through which the impacts of *doi moi* are to be expressed. The real-life picture comprising a selection of stories and scenes demonstrates that the impacts of *mo cua* are equivocal. The selective stories and scenes which I observed and recorded in the field and describe in this section, will help to give us a flavour of the social changes resulting from *doi moi* and *mo cua*. They are also directly relevant to the life of young people in Hanoi, as they provide a sense of some of the significant elements of society and youth culture under reforms, as well as illustrate the nature of the current socio-economic environment in which young graduates live and work. After presenting the stories and scenes of *mo cua*, in the last section of the chapter, I

will discuss their meanings in relation to young people's experience and with regard to how they help to contextualise my research.

4.1. The Millennium Celebrations

I found myself fortunate to be in my hometown of Hanoi in late December 1999, in time to join and observe the capital city's celebrations of the new millennium. On the evening of 31 December, I followed the live television coverage of the celebrations in major cities worldwide. VTV1, a channel of the state-controlled television network, linked up its reporters at *Van Mieu* and *Nha hat lon* (Opera House) in Hanoi and in other cities and provinces nationwide as well as its correspondent in Sydney. Because of the time differences and the fact that Vietnam was among countries in the Eastern hemisphere which celebrated the millennium ahead of other continents, video link-up and live coverage of the big event in capital cities of the West were not conducted. During the link-up there were a number of technical problems, and on the whole the coverage was pretty simple and straightforward. However, given the fact that Vietnamese people normally celebrate the traditional Vietnamese New Year (*Tet*) instead of the Western New Year, this coverage was very special. In my opinion it was clearly an effort by the state media to 'link up with the world' as part of the overall official policy of 'opening up'.

At around 10 p.m., I went out with Nam, a friend and one of my key informants. We headed to the Opera House Square (*Quang truong Nha hat lon*) in the centre of Hanoi, one of the two major venues where the celebrations took place. Flooding all the streets leading up to the Square were huge crowds of young people, who were clearly excited. They were trying to make their way to the Square, although at this

hour of the night it was already so packed that in the streets nearby such as Trang Tien, Hai Ba Trung, Phan Chu Trinh, Le Thai To and Le Thanh Tong it was impossible to move any nearer to the Square where a huge stage had been erected. Nam pulled me into the Métropole Hotel through its main entrance on Le Thai To Street only to exit through the hotel's back entrance, since this would enable us to avoid the crowds and get nearer to the Square. Naturally, in order to prevent non-patrons using the hotel as a shortcut, the guard stopped us. However, Nam and I got away easily thanks to Nam being able to mention the name of some staff whom he said we were going to see.

On this floodlit square in front of the ingeniously illuminated Opera House, I could immediately identify myself with the crowds; hardly anyone was more than 30 years of age. The young men and women were not only from Hanoi but also from various Northern provinces and nearby villages, as I heard different accents and saw a line of large buses with registration plates of neighbouring provinces parked in nearby streets. Excitement and enthusiasm were high and contagious. It was this public excitement and enthusiasm that sent a chill down my spine, as I had never experienced anything remotely close to this in my own hometown. Popular singers such as Hong Nhung, My Linh, Bang Kieu, Ba-A Group, Tik Tik Tak among many others sang modern Vietnamese pop songs – clearly a departure from the usual heavy political songs and politically-oriented performances that one used to expect for such a major public event. The tens of thousands of people energetically sang along. On the one hand, I could identify myself with this young crowd, but I felt a bit out of touch with them on the other. It was only three years that I had been away from Hanoi, but I could not sing along to these new songs, and the genuine enthusiasm of

the crowd caught me by surprise. During my school and university years in Hanoi, I only sang when our school or university requested us to do so to 'celebrate' occasions of political significance such as National Independence Day, Liberation Day or the Anniversary of the Youth League. These young people on this square belonged to my generation and a generation younger, but in the span of three years, I had missed out on these changing cultural activities.



Picture 4.2

Millennium celebration on the square of the Opera House.



Picture 4.3

Traditional dance and drum performance in the courtyard of *Van Mieu* as part of the millennium celebrations.

After the songs there was an impressive drum performance. According to my friend Nam, who is also a photojournalist, the biggest drum ever made in Vietnam was being beaten in this performance to usher in the New Millennium. This is also the new way to welcome *Tet* and now the Millennium, as firecrackers have been banned for several years for safety reasons. Some people told me that the sounds of the drums create an excitement in the same way as traditional firecrackers, yet it is far more economical and safe, and it is still very 'typically Vietnamese'. When the drummer was beating the biggest drum, the crowds were chanting and cheering to encourage him to beat even louder. Then came the countdown for the New Year, to be followed by a broadcasted speech by the President, though in such a massive gathering it was difficult to follow the presidential message televised on the giant screen. During the whole event, I was trying to take pictures, and on each occasion when I tiptoed to photograph, people volunteered to offer me their plastic stools which they had brought along with them, so I could stand higher and capture a wider view. I was most impressed with this friendliness and helpfulness.

After three years away from Vietnam, the millennium celebrations at the Opera House Square were my first interaction and experience with young Vietnamese. Earlier that evening when I left my parents' house, leaving them at home to follow the Millennium celebrations on television, I did not know what to expect of the celebrations, nor anticipate such a young crowd, nor have much of an idea of today's Vietnamese youth. It turned out that on this Square I came into contact with a youthful mass which was energetic and enthusiastic and which displayed a sense of unity and openness. When I left the event, joining the flow of youths trickling away

from the Opera House Square, I started my field research on the most positive of notes.

4.2. From Korean Movies to Korean Fashion

Everything started with a wave of South Korean movies. In 1997, VTV1 aired the first Korean movie *Cam xuc* (Feelings) (Le Hue, 2002). Around a year later in 1998, the wave of Korean movies really started, when Korean-Vietnamese joint venture LG Vina Cosmetics supplied local television stations with eight 'emotion-filled, glitzy' Korean drama series, together with commercials for the firm's beauty products, which ran continuously for two years (Cohen, 2000a: 84). Subsequently Korean movies have been shown at all major cinemas in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Carrying on with the theme of love and emotion, such titles as *Moi tinh dau* (The First Love), *Thanh that voi tinh yeu* (Sincere with Love), *Tinh co* (By Chance), *Trai tim mua thu* (Autumn's Heart), *Su tra thu ngot ngao* (Sweet Revenge), *Neu nhu yeu* (If Love), *Tiem banh tinh yeu* (The Love Patisserie) and the like continue to attract a large number of young cinema-goers. Each movie was usually shown in cinemas for some six to ten months, recording box office successes, and beating local films struggling to attract viewers, let alone make profits.

Korean movies and TV series underline conventional morality in which good triumphs over evil and love conquers all. They also dramatise Asian sensibilities, including family values and codes of conduct in interpersonal relationships. For example, *Yu Mi*, one of the most popular television shows ever aired in Vietnam, emphasises the dutiful subservience of the daughter-in-law to her husband's family (Cohen, 2000a: 85; Le Hue, 2002). In my own enquiries, viewers of Korean movies

told me that they find it easy to understand, relate to, and share with the mentality and culture of an Asian people. They feel that Korean people have similar values and principles with regard to interpersonal relationships within the family and society at large. Getting to the bottom line of the explanation, however, Korean movies are warmly embraced by young fans in Vietnam, because the country has not undergone 'full-fledged' modernisation and is still not ready fully to accept American youth culture, which is commonly perceived as emphasising violence and sex.

Along with this wave of Korean movies and TV series was 'fashion invasion'. Over recent years, the most eye-catching feature of Hanoi is the invariably bright and lively colours of the numerous boutiques and shops and of people's clothes. It was obvious to any observer that the three letters of *Mot Han Quoc* (South Korean fashion) were written on many shops signs in *cac pho quan ao* (clothes streets) such as Hang Bong, Hang Dao, Tho Nhuom, and Tran Nhan Tong in central Hanoi. Korean fashion, more than any other fashion trend, is an important element in the lives of young urbanites, including my interviewees and informants. Even the Vietnamese media had to acknowledge that Korean movies have attracted a 'majority of viewers', and in particular, 'the impact of these movies on Vietnamese youth is highly visible: from Korean hairstyles and Korean cosmetics to Korean clothes' (Le Hue, 2002). Indeed, as Cohen remarks, Korean style has taken the country 'by storm' with its 'affordable glad rags, trendy hair accessories and striking make-up' (Cohen, 2000a: 84).

Young men and women adorned by imported Korean fashion accessories in bright and cheerful colours cruise the busy shopping streets on their motorbikes. Their

purpose and destination might not necessarily be important, rather they are out in the streets to *di chôi* (go play, go out), to 'see and be seen' (Marr, 1996: 4). A friend of mine, coming over from England for a short visit during my fieldwork, said to me that one of the things that impressed her was the fact that 'young people in Vietnam seem to dress very fashionably'. Indeed, the range of colours one can see on the streets of Hanoi today is a far cry from the dull and monotonous colours people wore before *doi moi*. I remember that before the 1990s, almost every woman uniformly wore white shirt and black trousers whilst men used to be in green, the colour of the army outfits. Traffic was peaceful and slow as everybody's means of transport was the bicycle. Fashion shops were non-existent back then when even essential goods were scarce and strictly distributed under the *bao cấp* (subsidy) system.

There is no precise definition for *Mot Han Quoc*. A popular look is long baggy trousers with many pockets to go with tight tops in very bright colours, among which green, blue, yellow and red seem to be trendy. Another common look is skin-tight polyester T-shirts, miniskirts, and trousers. On average, for around half a million dong (35 US dollars) one could become the proud owner of a fashionable top or a pair of trousers. A cotton hat costs from as little as 50,000 dong (around 4 dollars) to 200,000 dong (14 dollars). Then for another half a million dong, one could dye one's hair brown in *kieu dau Han Quoc* (Korean hairstyle). Such style directly targets young urbanites, as Cohen (2000a: 85) puts it, 'unmerciful to the post-childbearing woman, the clothes are most suitable for Vietnam's under-25, single, urban set, who are no longer afraid to look sexy. Very sexy.'

In fact, the Korean fashion invasion is rather controversial. On the one hand, I spoke to people, who are pleased to see that young Vietnamese do not go Western, but turn to other Asian countries such as Korea which, in their view, exemplify economic success while still preserving their own cultural identity. On the other hand, the somewhat more conservative (*bao thu*) articulate their concerns about this current fashion trend as overt evidence of too much foreign influence on young people. To them, the clothes are too revealing and hence not compatible with *truyen thong dan toc* (national traditions). Interestingly enough, not all people who hold the more conservative view are older people. For example, Kim, a graduate interviewee, told me:

I find that young people in Hanoi are more ‘an choi’ [indulging in leisure] than youths in Ho Chi Minh City. Despite the fact that in Ho Chi Minh City there are more places for young people to hang out, more nightclubs and other places for entertainment, plus the average income per capita is higher than in Hanoi, but you wouldn’t find people in Ho Chi Minh City who dress too ‘weird’. Perhaps this has resulted from the many years [of Hanoi people] being restrained and oppressed [during the pre-*doi moi* period].³

Despite her rather ‘conservative’ viewpoint on the fashion displayed by youth in Hanoi, as we will see later (in chapter 6), Kim has travelled abroad, is currently working for a foreign firm, rather open in her mindset, and has even had a French boyfriend for several years.

To be fair, not every Korean fashion item is too revealing and 'very sexy', and my interviewees helped me to explain the Korean fashion invasion. First, as some of my informants argued, such clothes are neither cheap nor expensive in relation to the city standard of living. They are affordable and acceptable to those young people who do not '*an choi*' (eat and play, indulge in leisure), '*dua doi*' (ape one another) and so are not prepared to lavish large sums of money on branded, top-of-the-range clothing. Secondly, I noticed that Vietnamese fashion designers have not succeeded in setting local trends of casual fashion and in attracting young consumers, particularly those in the market of Hanoi, to local labels. So far, home designers have only been successful in designing various styles of *ao dai* (the traditional high-necked, tight-fitting tunic that flares over flowing trousers), which is too constricting for everyday wear. And finally, there is a psychology of preferring foreign made products (*tam ly thich dung hang ngoai*) among the Vietnamese in general and younger generations in particular, which I have observed over the years.⁴

The Korean fashion invasion is, first of all, a story of undeniable media impact upon youth in the context of the market economy in Vietnam. It shows that more than any other groups in the population, young people are receptive to new (or imagined to be new) ideas and lifestyles, and are not afraid to experiment with these. To further extend this line of reasoning, we can surmise that young people with higher education in large urban areas are even more open and receptive, since they have greater access to various means of communications, from radio and television to the Internet, English-language movies, magazines and newspapers, interaction with foreigners and travel. At the same time, the Korean fashion invasion is also a story of young people, including educated youths, who use fashion to create their own

'modern', 'à la mode' image and state their stance in the context of 'open door'. Korean vogue suggests that young people are 'open' (*thoang*) and do 'integrate with the world' (*hoa nhap voi the gioi*), but at the same time they maintain an 'Asian identity' which is perceived as having something in common with their 'Vietnamese identity'.

4.3. Recreation and Commercial Leisure Establishments

In the summer of 1999, a friend of mine from Hanoi came to London for about a month on a study tour. Since I was also in London then, I showed him around, normally during the weekends. One day when we were in Leicester Square, there was the premiere of a movie and so the area in front of the Warner Village cinema was packed with people waiting for a glimpse of movie stars. Without knowing which movie premiere it was, we joined the back of the crowd, more to enjoy the air of excitement than to catch a glimpse of the stars. Looking at the crowd, my friend said to me: 'There are so many things young people can do here. Back home so few things to do when we want to go out to entertain and have some fun'. His comment stuck in my mind and it caused me to find out more about the leisure and entertainment activities of young Hanoians during my fieldwork. I wanted to see what social environment young people live in, and what recreational activities are available to them.

I did often *di chôi* (go play, go out) with various groups of informants as well as on a one-to-one basis with a number of informants, both male and female. This was usually with my university graduate informants in the evening after they had finished work and during the weekends. As part of a group, we went bowling, karaoke or

clubbing, or went to a cinema or restaurant, or sat in cafés and chatted away. Once we also went rowing on the West Lake. If it was only me with another informant (either male or female), the two of us normally went out for a meal or a movie, sat in cafés to chat and gossip, or just aimlessly cruised around on a moped. During the whole duration of my fieldwork, this was pretty much the scope of my *di chôi* activities.

In contemporary Vietnam, the social realities of 'open door' are highly visible, particularly in larger cities like Hanoi. In the capital city, where the traditional trades and crafts were once concentrated into specialised streets named after a particular activity, numerous establishments such as bars, karaoke, discos, snuggling-up cafés (*café om*), nightclubs, and mini-hotels are today organised into streets in the same manner, making it easy for patrons to find them. On the other hand, there are only a handful of cinemas in the capital city, and they all show more or less the same movies at the same time. Hollywood blockbusters are shown far behind their launch elsewhere in Asia. Furthermore, each movie tends to be shown for a period of several months, making the total number of films shown during a certain period of time relatively small. As a result, during the one year I stayed in Hanoi to carry out fieldwork in 2000, I went to the movies with various informants only four times in total. Once an informant went with us as a group to see *The Mummy* at the August Cinema (*Rap Thang Tam*) in central Hanoi, but afterwards he told me that he had already seen the movie on DVD. Overall, we tended to go to karaoke bars or simply hang around in cafés more often than going to the movies.

Nonetheless, the general feeling among my graduate interviewees is that there is nothing much for young people to do in Hanoi. The majority of the time when I hung out with my informants and interviewees, we tended to sit around in cafés and teashops. However, Liem once questioned me about what young people in Britain do in their spare time apart from hanging out and getting drunk at the pubs or going clubbing into the night. He said, ‘apparently there are a lot more pubs and clubs for young people to hang out in, but what if someone is not the type of person who likes hanging out and drinking all the time?’ Before I came up with a convincing reply, he had already acknowledged the fact that ‘admittedly there are more movies to see abroad, and also there are more games, sports and outdoor activities to enjoy’.

The landscape of Hanoi’s ‘hangout’ places is dominated by countless Dilmah cafés. Dilmah is not a chain of cafés, rather a brand of tea which had recently become popular among the city’s young urbanites, though probably not because of its wide range of herbal and fruit teas available, but because of the company’s marketing strategy. Dilmah, or the supplier of it, provided shop-owners not only with the teas but also with furniture and posters to decorate the shops. As a result, Dilmah cafés in Hanoi not only have Dilmah teas in common, they also share a certain decor, and attract a similar clientele. They do not have to look fancy, and they are usually open and spacious with light wooden furniture – a wholesome atmosphere in contrast to the type of cafés that have colourful lights outside but are dim inside and are busy only during the evening, though they might stay open all day. From the outside, Dilmah cafés always have broad green awnings advertising the brand, with the wording *Dilmah – Tra cua The he Moi* (Dilmah – Tea of the New Generation). The cafés also share a common style of interior with posters of foreign movies or pop

stars, and commercial posters for foreign products such as Carlsberg beer and the BAT cigarettes brand '555'. Usually there is a newspaper rack on which there are the latest issues of fashion magazines such as *Dep* (Beauty) and *Thoi Trang Tre* (Young Fashion), the English-language Vietnam News, and *Tuoi tre* (Young Age) and *Thanh nien* (Youth) newspapers. I also observed that these cafés are busy day and night, although the daytime patronage tend to be younger than the night-time one. A cup of tea normally costs around 5,000–7,000 dong, making Dilmah cafés affordable places for young people to hang around in to show off their Korean fashion, motorcycles, and mobile phones. The phenomenon of Dilmah cafés has not gone unnoticed by market research firms or the media, as seen in a report by the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. It records that the first café was launched in Hanoi in May 1999, and 'thanks to young people looking for a hangout, Dilmah swiftly became a hit'. There are now a hundred-and-fifty such cafés, mostly in Hanoi (Cohen, 2000b: 64). In my own fieldwork experience, these cafés were a favourite venue for many of my interviews and discussions.

Apart from hanging out in such cafés, I also went out as a pair with another informant. When it was with a male informant, I was normally taken on the back of his motorbike and so we joined the 'procession each evening of thousands of Honda Dream II and other motorbikes, on which are seated young pairs, whether a boy and a girl, two girls or two boys, all cruising in circles in order to see and be seen' (Marr, 1996: 4). On such aimless cruises, I would invariably end up on *duong Thanh nien* (Youth Road). *Duong Thanh nien* is the official name of this stretch of road that runs around the West Lake, the largest lake in Hanoi. The area is an ideal spot for courtship, as it lends itself to amorous couples who can look out over the romantic

lake rather than risk being spotted by acquaintances and embarrassed. For those who do not want to entertain passers-by with scenes of public kissing and petting, there are plenty of *café vuon* (garden cafés) which look like normal cafés at the front and at the back there is a plot of land or garden on the waterfront. In such a garden, the proprietor provides maximum privacy for couples. I had been to one such café with a (male) informant and friend of mine, and where the 'garden' was on the lakeside, young couples sat side-by-side on double benches, staring across the waters and sipping their drinks. There was no form of lighting, except for the dim illumination of the moonlight and its reflections on the water. I could hardly see other couples, but I could hear them (!). I was told and had also seen that there are some *café vuon* where there are rows of small 'rooms' with beds segregated by bamboo curtains (though I had not actually been inside one such 'room' or cubicle).

There was no apparent evidence as to whether the authorities have control of the sexual uses of public spaces or such establishments as *café vuon*. The general feeling shared by young graduate interviewees was that the local state authorities do not police such acts of public kissing and petting or such establishments as *café vuon*. Indeed, *duong Thanh nien* truly lives up to its name, though I sometimes wonder if the authorities had envisaged this image when they gave the name to the road.



Picture 4.4

Two Dilmah cafes in Dien Bien Phu Street. The pavement outside is packed with motorcycles of young patrons. On the green awnings are the words 'Dilmah - Tea of the New Generation'.



Picture 4.5

A broad overview of *Thanh nien* road from the water of the West Lake. On the lake side, one can see young couples hugging each other.

5. Making Sense of the Scenes

The selective stories and scenes described above are the illustrative narratives of Vietnam's transition to a society based on liberal market principles rather than on central planning and socialist equality, and of how such a transition relates to urban youths. They suggest the existence of a new socio-economic environment in urban Hanoi. This is above all an environment which is more competitive as compared to the pre-*doi moi* era. Its competitiveness manifests itself not only in the fact that it has become tougher to get a job in the urban job market, but also when young people experience peer pressure as they put on Korean clothes for a modern image and to be on a par with their other friends. At the same time, this is also an environment which is more open and tolerant for young people to represent and express themselves, as well as to experiment with ideas, practices and lifestyles that are new (or are imagined to be new) and borrowed from abroad (or imagined to be borrowed from abroad).

The stories and scenes testify to the reality of Vietnam's process of integration into the capitalist world economy and global culture, a process which has been enabled by *doi moi* and *mo cua*. The above sections are illustrations of the existence of capitalist markets (in which labour, consumer goods, and culture are bought and sold). In this market-based society, local people (myself included), especially in large urban areas such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, experience a greater emphasis on money, fiercer competition, wider social inequality, and a growing consumer culture. On the other hand, there are social actors such as the family and the state that sometimes act to counter these market forces. My study situates young graduates,

their perceptions and practices in the larger context of capitalist markets, the society, the family and the state authorities, and the tensions between these.

Although these narratives illustrate a new socio-economic environment as the product of Vietnam's 'open door' policy, I stress the need to look beyond the context of recent socio-economic transformations to consider historical legacies as well. Here I draw upon a comparison with James Farrer's study of changes in Shanghai's sexual culture, in which he sees these as the product not purely of recent transformations in China, but of a layering of multiple historical 'modernities' (2002: 10). In my study I also see the layering of pre-socialist colonial modernity, utopian socialist modernity and a consumer modernity in interaction with pre-colonial tradition (cf. Farrer, 2002). As such, these narratives indicate the new socio-economic environment of the market economy under a socialist regime combined with pre-socialist 'traditional' value orientations. This complex scenario puts contradictory pressures on young people. For instance, the market economy has allowed the commercialisation of leisure and entertainment, and so has greatly increased the number of commercial leisure establishments, especially in larger urban areas. These create spaces and opportunities for urban youth to escape parental control and experiment with practices at odds with adult expectations and 'traditional' values. Young urban people are also increasingly exposed to a consumer culture, with a plethora of ideas and models which previous generations found alien. At the same time, state authorities are increasingly uncomfortable with ideas and practices said or perceived to be imported from the West. As a result, while pursuing economic liberalisation (which gives rise to the commercialisation of leisure and entertainment), the authorities are contradictorily and simultaneously monitoring and

stepping up institutional sanctions on these commercial leisure activities. All these are the potential sources of conflict which urban university graduates are caught up in. This chapter has introduced the overall background and process of *doi moi* reforms, and more relevantly, an overview of Hanoi under reform as young people currently experience it. They provide the context for reading the following chapters where I will look beneath the surface of these scenes and stories in order to uncover a more detailed portrait of youth, and of young graduates in particular, and their values, perspectives and experiences.

Notes to Chapter 4:

1. On South Vietnam's economy before 1975 and developments that led to the opposition to the VCP's economic plan in the South, see Nguyen Khac Vien, 1993: 388, 394-395; William Duiker, 1989: 58-69.
2. For a chronology of key events since the country's independence in 1945 up to 1995, see *Vietnam to 2005*. Economist Intelligence Unit, 1995: 6-9.
3. It has been a common belief that even during the pre-*doi moi* period, Ho Chi Minh City was still more socially and economically open than Hanoi due to its longer history of free trade and its location which is farther away from the central authority in Hanoi.
4. Recently, many local products have increasingly used such phrases as '*Nguoi Viet Nam dung hang Viet Nam*' (Vietnamese people use Vietnamese goods) and '*Chat luong ngoai gia noi*' (Foreign quality, local price) in their marketing campaigns as an appeal to local consumers.

Chapter 5

EMPLOYMENT

Every year in Vietnam there are around 1.7 million young men and women competitively seeking employment for the first time (*Youth in Vietnam*, 2000: 17). Many fail to gain employment or are compelled to take up short-term job opportunities. Consequently, employment has become the foremost concern of young people in present-day Vietnam. In the 1995 nationwide survey of 1,542 young men and women under 30 years of age, 73.2 per cent of the respondents stated that occupation and work are their utmost concern ahead of everything else, such as study and developing their talents (49.2 per cent), love and marriage (37 per cent), and getting rich (24.4 per cent). The survey also indicated that the proportion of youths who are most concerned with employment increased pro rata with the level of education. Whilst 61.1 per cent of youths with primary education and 75.2 per cent with secondary education consider work and occupation their utmost concern, this percentage is 81.9 per cent for young people who have had college and university education (Thai Duy Tuyen, 1995: 122).

The results of that larger nationwide research are similar to the findings in this research, where almost all of the seventy-five interviewees spoke a great deal about employment and careers, and expressed their concerns about these issues. The greater emphasis on employment by young people in this study as compared to the overall nationwide survey is partly explained by the fact that in larger urban areas, particularly Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, there are an increasing number of youths coming to search for jobs, and unemployment is high (see chapter 4, section 3, for more on urban unemployment). On the other hand, concerns by these urban educated

youths about employment are more acute, because the notion of employment for them implies something more than just having a job, as we shall see.

1. The Changing Perception of Employment

Generally speaking, the term 'employment' refers to 'occupation' especially 'regular paid work'. As defined in the Labour Code of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam promulgated on 15 July 1994, 'all income-generating activities which are not banned by law are recognised as employment' (Chapter II, Article 13, *Labour Code of the S.R. Vietnam*, 1994). Such a general all-encompassing definition of employment fails to convey the varieties of employment in Vietnam today and a dynamic situation where old attitudes to employment are undergoing significant changes.

1.1. Before *Doi moi*

Before *doi moi*, employment in socialist Vietnam was widely assimilated to the concept of *bien che*. To start with a definition, *bien che* is 'the number of people who officially work in an organisation, or a state-owned enterprise, in accordance with the state's regulations' (Dictionary of Vietnamese Language, 1994: 59, 60). In reality, the term refers to 'employment by the state'. Only when one was a member of a collective or staff in government offices or state-owned enterprises (SOEs), i.e. in *bien che*, was one really regarded as being in employment. Besides, a position in a state office was understood as permanent, since all cases of dismissal had to undergo a prolonged and complicated procedure prescribed by the state in order to protect the worker.¹

The mechanism of *bao cap* (full subsidy by the state) enabled state institutions and the collectives to provide jobs for all people of working age. Since state subsidy covered any losses, these state employers did not have to worry about workers being incompetent or unproductive. Therefore, the worker, upon entering *bien che*, did not have to worry about the threat of dismissal.

Furthermore, among the various types of jobs in the state sector, it was more desirable to work as a civil servant and undertake administrative work in government bureaux. The majority of the people worked, or tried to get a job, as civil servants, and as a result, the state administrative system was oversubscribed and operated inefficiently. There was an ever-growing number of *lao dong gian tiep*, or 'indirect labourers', whilst people shied away from jobs as *lao dong truc tiep*, 'direct labourers'. 'Indirect labourers' were those who worked in government or state offices and who essentially were not involved in the process of production and the manufacturing of tangible goods. 'Direct labourers', on the contrary, were those who worked in the production and manufacturing sector. Given the low productivity and 'red tape' in the administrative system, the 'indirect labourer' was generally seen as doing more comfortable and yet more rewarding work. Gradually there developed a disregard towards, or even contempt of, employment in factories, or in manufacturing.

Together with young people's moves into the state sector and government offices, many traditional and family craft industries diminished or even disappeared, as craft workers left to seek employment in government and state organisations. The ideal job for most youths was to be a civil servant in the administration of a city or a town.

Being in *bien che* was then a matter of great concern, which influenced young people's major life decisions, particularly decisions on marriage, in exactly the same way that 'getting or having a stable job' affects various matters in the lives of today's youth. A man would not get married until he had secured a position in *bien che*, and at the same time, one of the criteria for the ideal husband or wife was for the partner to be stable in *bien che*. Working in *bien che* meant a guarantee of economic viability since the workplace provided housing, food, healthcare and other benefits.²

In sum, employment was essentially perceived as an assigned lifetime position in *bien che*, which gave the worker little freedom of choice, but which required little professional competence. At the same time, young people generally stayed away, and looked down upon, manual labour. Such a perception had been deeply engraved in the minds of several generations of workers in the centralised economy, and could not be easily erased during the early years of the *doi moi* reforms.

1.2. After *Doi moi*

The transition to a market-led economy brought about the formation of a labour market. Labour in Vietnam has become a commodity to be transacted (Norlund, 1993: 173-181). If in the command economy, employment was a matter to be dealt with only by the state, it now concerns both the state and the individual labourer. As Peter Boothroyd and Pham Xuan Nam have shown, instead of subsidising the creation of jobs, the state has now focused on gradually adopting institutional reforms designed to ensure freedom for individuals to engage in production and businesses in all economic sectors. At the same time, young people are encouraged, and supported, so that they may create jobs for themselves and for others (2000: 22).

From the perspective of the working people, instead of considering employment a right of the citizen, young people have come to realise the need to strive and be competent in order to find work in the competitive job market, especially in the larger cities.

Data from my in-depth interviews combined with information from the 1995 national survey demonstrate that young people nowadays have a more flexible approach toward employment, its nature and its longevity, rather than relying on centralised, lifetime opportunities in the *bien che* of the state. Furthermore, as seen from accounts of my interviewees, today's notion of employment has also come to comprise a whole range of new elements, such as the suitability of work for one's ability and skills, higher income, and the challenges provided in the workplace. These elements may vary in importance from case to case.

For some interviewees, employment meant above all an interesting job on which they were able to build a career. Take, for example, the case of the young woman who left a teaching position at a public university – therefore within *bien che* – for a job that paid less at a Vietnamese private enterprise. For her, it was not the lifetime security or the higher income that mattered most, but job satisfaction. Therefore, she was willing to give up the higher income in return for her ideal job:

Currently I am working as a secretary to the director of a private IT firm, and earn a monthly salary of 150 [US] dollars. Other ex-colleagues of mine teaching at the university have opportunities to earn good money by doing long hours of *day them* (extra-tutoring

jobs). They could earn 10 millions dongs [approximately 660 US dollars] per month, and still could have earned more if they wanted. However, I found it tiring to do extra tutoring and felt tired of earning money that way. I now work full-time with the firm, and do no other part-time work like before when I worked at the university. I like my present job and am quite happy.

(Huong, female interviewee)

At the opposite end of the spectrum to other graduates, greater earning capacity is the main motive behind their urge to turn to other available employment opportunities. Income plays a larger part in their priorities. As in the case of the man who employed twenty people, he had tried work both in and outside the state sector before he settled on self-employment:

Upon graduation [from university], I got a job as a marketing officer in the *bien che* of a state-owned newspaper. I was working there for some three years, but had quit the job due to office politics... reshuffles and disputes among staff in the department. I then went to work as a project manager for a foreign trading firm for about two years, but the payment there is not great. I was on some 500 [US] dollars per month. I was looking around for other opportunities, until my sister decided to shift part of her business from abroad to Vietnam, and asked me to take care of the Vietnam operations for her. You see, it's like family business and I was the

Vietnam director. Business is doing very well, it's great and it keeps me very busy.

(Thanh, male interviewee)

In the case of this young woman, her perception of employment was above all a challenge that encouraged her to strive for both financial and professional advancement:

When I first looked for a job, I applied to a number of foreign companies and received several job offers. It was 1995, when the economy was doing well and a lot of foreign firms came to invest in the country. However, I decided to accept a job with an American law firm. So I have been working with them for five years, since 1995. Starting salary was 200 dollars per month, and the initial position was to work as an interpreter and secretary. The reason I chose the firm was not because of money, but because I was hoping for a chance to gain knowledge in a specialised profession, and that I liked law. During the years I worked as a secretary, I had done another degree in law and I have now taken up the position of a lawyer. My current salary is a thousand dollars per month, and more importantly I like this job. [...] I didn't bother to look for employment in the state sector, for I think it wasn't challenging enough and it didn't pay well. [...] I wouldn't want to go and work in *bien che*, unless I've saved up enough money to

maintain my present standard of living for many years without having to earn an income.

(Le, female interviewee)

The above quotes from my interviewees highlight a range of new ideas, such as job satisfaction, high income, and professional challenge, in their perception of employment. Results from the 1995 national youth survey substantiate similar transformations in the overall perception of employment, as 45.7 per cent of all respondents said employment needed to be suited to their abilities and skills, and 13.6 per cent said employment needed to bring high income. Smaller percentages of respondents mentioned other factors in their perception of employment, including 'suitability to one's health', 'profession respected by society', and 'profession that makes one famous' (Thai Duy Tuyen. 1995: 124).

The quotes from my interviewees further illustrate the fact that young graduates shared a perception of flexibility in job selection, and regarded employment as a matter of their own choice free from the state's imposition. Essentially it was not identified with the concepts of *bien che* and employment for life. In May 2000 the national *Lao Dong* (Labour) Newspaper posed the question 'Do you want to work in *bien che*?' to workers who had just graduated from universities, and reported a rather 'surprising result' that two-thirds of the interviewees said they did not see *bien che* as an issue in their decision about employment (Minh Quang 2000). Such a change in perception of employment is not unique to university graduates, but can also be seen among youth in general. In analysing the 1995 national survey, Nguyen Van Trung observed that

By now, the proportion of young people who want to enter *bien che* only accounts for a modest percentage of 21.9 per cent. This figure is higher among elder youths standing at 29.7 per cent [i.e. youths in the age group of 26-30], but reduces to 24.7 per cent for youths in the age group of 21-23. For under-twenty-year-olds, the percentage of youths wanting to work in the state sector is at only 18.3 per cent (1996: 62).

As the perception of employment has been transformed, I have detected a range of new related concepts which has gradually been developed among the youth. Concepts such as *viec lam day du*, *viec lam hop ly*, *viec lam tu do*, and *that nghiep*, which were unheard of during the time of the command economy, have now come into existence to shed light on the diverse aspects of employment. In my own observation, they are in fact not officially recognised concepts, but rather terms in the everyday discourse of young people from all walks of life and of all levels of education about their work situations; sometimes they even appear in youth newspapers.

The concept of *viec lam day du*, or 'full employment', has two nuances. First, from the perspective of the larger society, full employment is achieved when the demand on employment by all labourers in the society is fully met. In other words, it refers to the situation in which everyone capable of work and desiring employment is given a job. Secondly, from the perspective of the individual worker and as used in daily conversation among young Vietnamese, this concept is understood as the antonym of

'underemployment'. Full employment is achieved when the worker is fully employed, or given enough work to do for a full-time job. It refers to the actual hours of work of the worker in relation to the number of work hours required for full-time employment. In reality, there is a large number of workers, who have not made, or are unable to make, full use of the amount of hours available for them to work. Rural youths face underemployment because of the seasonal pattern of agricultural work, whilst in urban areas many young employees working in the state *bien che* do not fully utilise their office hours as a result of inefficiencies in the state administrative system. In any case, the concept of full employment only touches on the quantitative, and not the qualitative, aspect of employment, because it does not tell us whether the job suits the worker's ability and preferences.

Viec lam hop ly, or reasonable/suitable employment, refers to the type of employment suitable to the employee in terms of both quantity and quality of the work. A worker is said to have obtained *viec lam hop ly* when (s)he has a job that is full-time and that is suitable to his/her ability and skills. Such a concept did not exist prior to the *doi moi* reforms. At that time, employment was provided, and allocated, by the state and so there was very little opportunity for the employee to choose a profession or a job, or change employment. Nowadays, finding suitable employment has become an increasingly important issue, particularly for the urban youth, whose demand for employment not only involves earning a living, but also having a job that pays a reasonable salary and is suitable to their abilities and preferences.

Viec lam tu do, which is sometimes also termed *nghe tu do*, refers to someone who is an 'independent worker', even though the word-by-word translation of the term is

'liberal profession'³. The main feature of *viec lam tu do* is high employment instability. A person is said to be practising *viec lam tu do* or *nghe tu do* when (s)he does not have a stable full-time job, yet (s)he is able to earn a living by doing various jobs. This concept is applied with various flexible nuances, referring to a person, who is neither in employment, nor self-employed, nor unemployed. Sometimes it refers to a free worker, while at other times, it also implies those who do have a stable job, but one which does not have a specific pattern and pays only enough to make ends meet. For example, a *xe om* driver – motorcycle taxi driver – would normally be said to be doing *viec lam tu do*, because he does not belong to a company or organisation, no employer has given him that job, the job does not have an established pattern, and he earns just enough for a living. Nevertheless, the *xe om* driver is not unemployed.

Finally, there is the concept of *that nghiep*, or unemployment. This is no new concept by itself, but it has only become officially acknowledged and widely recognised in Vietnam in the wake of the new market economy. Both concepts of *viec lam tu do* and *that nghiep* did not 'officially' exist during the time of a centrally planned economy, because on the one hand, the state was supposed to provide everyone with work, and on the other hand, people belonged to an association or an organisation in order to be permitted to practise any trade or profession. Since the second half of the 1990s, unemployment has been on the rise among young people, particularly in the main cities where unemployment rates are 'always considerably higher' (World Bank, 1999:50). According to the report of the *VIR*, Hanoi's unemployment rate stood at 10.3 per cent in 1999, compared to 9.1 per cent in 1998, and 8.6 per cent in 1997 (Chi Mai, 2000). However, as there exists no criterion to

define clearly the concept of *việc làm tự do* and it is essentially a notion developed in daily conversation, it is difficult to differentiate *thất nghiệp* and *việc làm tự do*. We can surmise that depending on how we draw the line between these two concepts, the unemployment rate might even be higher in reality, making these two concepts of increasing concern to young people.

By looking at the above-mentioned changes in the perceptions of employment and the initiation of a range of new concepts concerning employment, we can conclude that there has been a transformation in the youth's conceptualisation of job security. Although more and more people have left the state sector as a result of 'managerial apparatus streamlining' and 'production chain overhauling', the growing number of youths working in the non-state sector actually underlines the fact that they no longer attach too much importance to life-time security and employment in *bien chế*. Indeed, 'stable or not stable doesn't have anything to do with the kind of job security that *bien chế* offers,' said Kien, aged thirty. He graduated in economics from a university in Moscow, and recently finished a Master's degree from a prestigious university in the United States:

It all depends on your own knowledge and capability. If you are truly capable, you will find your own position in the job market. Then even if the employer sacks you for whatever reason, you'll still be able to get another job straight away. With your very capability and professional standard, you'd secure yourself a stable position in the job market, which actually is job security.

Given the recent growth of the Vietnamese economy combined with the expansion of the market, there are increasing opportunities for skilled workers. Young people know they will not starve, provided they are hardworking and honest, and can demonstrate marketable skills.

It is also worth noting that though there have been profound changes in young people's perceptions of employment, many of their parents retain the pre-*doi moi* perception that confines employment to a position in *bien che*. On the one hand, the parents' unchanged perception has its roots in their own mind-frame, determined by their long experience of a strict state-controlled labour market. On the other hand, as they have witnessed how the fierce competition in the market economy has transformed people, and young people in particular, into becoming tougher, more money-minded, and at times even 'unethical' in their view, many parents are even more convinced of the rightness of their perceptions. A well-known Vietnamese scholar, when asked to give his opinion on today's youth, said that companies and businesses are not the ideal work place for the youths. He then put forward the following appeal:

Don't go after money! Don't work for firms and companies! Better settle down in a government office or embark on a teaching career, for it is more stable and more respectable. If you want to make money by doing business, you would have to be tough and twisted, and you can easily be turned into a bad type of person. In the current business environment in Vietnam, young people are especially easily affected, influenced, and changed.

The message is clear. The older generations can be of the view that not only the pressure of market competition is driving young people away from moral values, but also employment outside of the state sector is less respectable. Although the parents and older people recognise the existence of various sectors of the economy since renovation, they remain of the conventional viewpoint that *bien che* is the more proper form of employment. As we will see later, such unchanged perceptions of many parents and older people has exerted influence on young people's decisions on job selection.

2. Change in Jobs: An Analysis of Employment Sectors

Along with the fact that the concept of employment has been transformed and is no longer identified solely with *bien che*, and that *doi moi* reforms have brought about the present multi-sector economic structure, employment possibilities for youths have been broadened to comprise occupations in both the state and non-state sectors. The state sector generally includes work within *bien che*, either as civil servants and officials in government offices, or employees in various state-run businesses. Jobs in the non-state sector are referred to as *lam ngoai*, which literally translates as 'work outside'. The non-state sector includes various ownership forms – collective, co-operative, private and joint-venture economic enterprises. To young graduates, *lam ngoai* mainly implies either work for companies with domestic and foreign investment, or self-employment.

Among the seventy-five interviewees of this research, 26 people worked in the *bien che* of the government and SOEs, 28 for foreign firms or joint ventures, 10 for Vietnamese non-state enterprises, and 4 ran their own business; 7 of them had no job, either because they were unemployed, in between jobs or were in full-time postgraduate studies. The diversity of employment types requires us to examine these sectors separately.

2.1. Employment with the State

The majority of young graduate interviewees seek employment in the non-state sector, either to work for local or foreign firms or to start up their own private businesses, yet over one-third of the interviewees secured employment in the state sector. Therefore, the state sector was the second largest employer for the young graduates behind the foreign-invested business sector. However, it should be noted that in recent years some 700,000 people have been laid off as a result of 'production chain overhauling' and 'managerial apparatus streamlining' (Boothroyd and Pham Xuan Nam, 2000: 23). The number of people receiving a salary from the state budget was constant at about 1.3 million in 2000, but given the government's plan to reduce the *bien che* by a further 15 per cent, there should be another 170,000 to 180,000 people compelled to leave the state sector in the next few years (Minh Quang, 2000).

During the late 1980s to the early 1990s, immediately after the *doi moi* reforms were first introduced, there was an exodus of employees from the state sector. This exodus partly resulted from the late 1980s 'managerial apparatus streamlining', and partly because many wanted to leave the inefficient bureaucracy in search of new entrepreneurial opportunities permitted by the reforms. Once out of government

offices, people generally enjoyed a higher income and a better standard of living; they also suggested that they utilised their time at work more effectively and efficiently. In 1990 the total workforce in the state sector saw a decrease of 10 per cent, the biggest reduction of all time. Although the rate of employees leaving the sector decreased during the following years, the trend of a diminishing state sector continued to the mid-1990s (Fforde, 1996: 40-41).

From 1995 onwards, employment in the state sector gradually recovered. From a macro-economic viewpoint, this recovery was made possible by foreign direct investment (FDI), and state sponsorship and subsidies as well as the government's efforts to restructure the state sector (Fforde, 1996: 40). Given all these initiatives, the state sector is still presently the dominant player in the economy and the capital of the SOEs is ten times greater than that of the non-state enterprises. Despite the fact that the private sector is gradually expanding, the state sector continues to play a dominant role in the economy and contributes some 75 per cent of the budget of Hanoi. As a consequence, it still provides a greater number of jobs than any other single sector in the city. The interviewees, however, provided explanations for the gradual recovery in their own terms.

Why Choose the State Sector?

Underlying the gradual recovery of the popularity of *bien che* is a variety of individual perspectives on what graduates want from a job. This was exemplified by the case of Ha, who was originally from a village two hours' drive from Hanoi. He went to university in the city and stayed on to live and work there after graduating in 1994. Upon graduation he was working for a foreign company, where he did not

have the opportunity to put his study major into use. But he earned 'quite a bit of money', and after a few years saved enough to buy a plot of land and build a house. At this point, despite the prospect of continued high earnings, he chose to move into the state sector working as a government official. In his words, working in the foreign firm he saw 'no chance of being promoted and developing a real career and hence I had no position of power in the wider society'. When I interviewed him he worked for a research institute and enjoyed it. Not only did he have the opportunity to secure a 'position of power in the wider society' and achieve a higher social status, but he also had a 'feeling of ownership working for one's own country'. Even though he was the only interviewee who referred to this sense of nationality, Ha acknowledged that working at the institute presented him with opportunities to obtain a scholarship to study abroad for a higher degree. After several interviews, it became apparent that this was a very important element in his decision to enter state employment.

Sam was a graduate from Hanoi Pharmaceutical University (*Truong Dai hoc Duoc*). After his graduation in 1995, he secured employment with a foreign pharmaceutical firm. The post was relevant to his degree and it paid good money. But as in the case of Ha, after four years in the job, he decided to take the position of a researcher at an institute of the Ministry of Public Health:

PN: Why did you quit the job with the foreign firm?

Sam: The work there was interesting and the firm was doing serious business in Vietnam, but after a few years I found myself getting nowhere and doing the same job all the time. Payment was also very good and the firm had a lot of treats

and perks for its employees, like we were sent on holidays abroad or in-country once or even twice a year. They also organised many scientific workshops and seminars, and I could learn a lot from that. But, in spite of all those advantages, there was no hope of advancing to a higher position.

PN: So you decided to go and work for a government research institute now. Why?

Sam: Well, [...] the job here is interesting. It does not have a lot to do with boring administrative work, which you usually find working for the state. Besides, there are many opportunities to find a scholarship to study abroad. I hope to have a chance to go for further professional training overseas.

Another interviewee, Cuong put it even more strongly that opportunities for a scholarship to study abroad was the reason for him to *nam gai nem mat*, or suffer all the pains and bitterness meted out to him by his seniors and co-workers at the research institute where he was working.

Virtually all the young graduates I interviewed agreed that going overseas for higher education had always been a major aspiration, particularly as my interviewees had higher levels of education, lived and worked in an urban environment, and were more ambitious than the general population of young people. They stated unanimously that qualifications gained abroad were widely regarded as passports to active participation in the country's process of economic integration into the outside

capitalist world. However, high tuition fees and the general cost of living overseas had made this a dream hard to realise for the majority of Vietnamese youths. For them, one of the few options available was to secure employment in government offices, preferably in research institutes, ministries or large state institutions, and then apply for various scholarship schemes until one was granted. The open-door policy has enhanced and broadened cooperative relations between numerous Vietnamese governmental institutions and many other countries. In such a context, as part of foreign cooperative programmes and aid agreements, an ever-increasing number of scholarships has been given to students from Vietnam to attend training courses overseas. During the 1990s some 14,000 people were granted such scholarships to study abroad. In addition, the Vietnamese government is using its own budget to send 350 'young scientists' annually to study overseas in the period 1999-2005 (*Vietnam News*, 1 September 1999). All these scholarships are, however, restricted to employees on the state payroll (*Vietnam Economic Times*, 10 May 2001). Hence, to many young graduates, employment in the state sector with a possible scholarship opportunity has become a viable path towards realising their dream of further education abroad.

Another important reason for some of my interviewees entering employment in the state sector was the traditional attraction of stability, lifetime security and the social benefits normally associated with public sector employment. In general youths are different from their parent's generation in that they do not think of employment in *bien che* at any price. Yet, for some among those I interviewed, job security and stability were still important matters. Hop, for example, worked for a state-owned conglomerate specialising in telecommunication technology:

Working for the state you don't have to worry about losing your job or the possibility of the organisation being dissolved. Over the last [Asian] economic crisis a lot of my friends working for foreign companies lost their jobs as the companies withdrew from the country, so at the end of the day they'd find themselves starting all over again from scratch. End of the day, it is better to work for the state... not to mention the many chances to be promoted to important and higher positions in the government.

(Hop, male interviewee)

Hung (male interviewee) worked for a large state-run corporation and shared the view that generally the state was a far better employer:

Bien che is definitely a good thing, especially when you decide to follow the path of state management. *Bien che* brings you not only more social security and more benefits, but it also offers you a firm foothold in the government system for your future promotion and career development. Your career path would then be more 'perfect' and 'standardised' (*chuan hon*).

The concept of stability and job security was not only limited to the notion of not facing the threat of losing one's job, but also seemed to encompass career expectations as well. Another nuance of 'security' here has something to do with the predictability and certainty of one's career path. However, this is not a new aspect of

'stability' in the state sector, because state employees have always been able to predict their next step up on the career ladder.

Over a decade after the launch of *doi moi*, having both enjoyed record high growth rates and suffered the impact of the regional economic crisis in the late 1990s, people have begun to overcome the excitement of high wages from the foreign employer, and started to assess the advantages and disadvantages of employment in the state sector. They have come to realise that there are certain 'luxuries' foreign companies will not be able to offer. The state, on the other hand, has proved to be an attractive employer by offering various advantages to its employees, which include positions of status and power, opportunities for overseas education, and lifetime security.

Apart from the above-mentioned (re)-discovered advantages, interviewees cited the expectations of their senior relatives, and most directly those of their parents, as another important reason for their choice of employment in the state sector. For many parents, the notion of employment has remained constant conforming to the pre-*doi moi* socialist ideal of work for the state. 'If you work outside of the state, no matter how many years you've been working, your years of experience are insignificant,' explained a 72-year-old father whose son worked for a government ministry. 'At the end of the day, you will find yourself in a position of no status, having no power, and being guaranteed no social security at all. That is why I got my son into *bien che*.'

Kieu, 28, was an energetic character. She enjoyed her years of earning good money and being competitive in the job market in the non-state sector. She had tried various

employment opportunities in both her hometown Hanoi and later in Ho Chi Minh City, until her parents decided that it was 'about time for her to settle down' with what they saw as a stable, and more respectable, career as a state official:

At the time I was in Ho Chi Minh City working for a foreign company. It was quite good, but my parents had wanted me to work for the government and be more stable. So I had to move back to Hanoi, and I took a job at the Department of International Relations of a [state] university. I was an overseas officer in charge of international cooperation matters for the whole university. The title of the job sounded interesting and authoritative, but in reality my daily work involved little more than sending and receiving faxes, and translating correspondence. My [monthly] salary was 250,000 dongs [equivalent to some 18 US dollars]. Obeying parents as much as I do, I carried on the job for nearly nine months, but then had to quit it. My parents just had to accept the tough fact: I can't carry on going miles to work everyday, doing next to nothing and get some 7,000 dongs per day. I'd starve!

Although this last quote is not the best example, obeying, respecting and honouring one's parents and making them happy had been, and continues to be, an imbued traditional value among Vietnamese youths, which, according to Confucian teaching, contributes towards the fulfilment of filial piety. Therefore, conforming to the social virtue of filial piety was indeed a significant element in young people's employment decision-making. In this study, out of the 26 interviewees working for the state

sector, as many as 15 of them confirmed that they were in their present jobs for reasons directly related to their parents' advice, wishes, influence or pressure. This is by far the highest proportion of parent-related decisions compared to sample results from all other employment sectors,⁴ suggesting that parental influence was indeed a significant element leading to young people's decisions to work for the state. When the parent's idea of employment identified with *bien che*, and especially when all they wanted for their children were lifetime security, a stable and respectable career and opportunities to study abroad, young people had little to say for themselves but to listen to their parents.

Secondary or Multiple Jobs?

Among the 26 interviewees working in the state sector, there were eight confirming that they had additional jobs other than their 'official' employment. This represented one-third of the total number of interviewees in the state sector. Doing an extra job was indeed a special feature of youth employment in the state sector. Data from my interviews indicate that in no other sectors were there cases of young graduates doing two or more jobs at the same time as their primary full-time job.

Extra-work was a means to earn extra income. It is often referred to as *lam them* (supplementary work). However, in this section I refer to *lam them* as a *secondary job* to distinguish it from the primary job that young people hold in the state sector. In general, although young people were reluctant to discuss in detail their incomes, it was common knowledge that salaries for young state employees were insufficient and that secondary jobs were sometimes necessary. Recent statistics show that wage levels for skilled experts in the foreign-funded sector are officially 5.2 times higher

than for manual workers, whilst this figure is 2.6 for private enterprises and only 1.8 for the state sector (Ngoc Mai, 2000). As a result, ninety per cent of young employees at SOEs nationwide wanted to see their enterprises expanding business in order for them to secure a higher and more stable income (Nguyen Van Trung, 1996: 76).

Hung had earlier stated the advantages of security, social benefits, and status upon gaining 'a firm foothold in the government system for your future promotion and career development'. However, he had himself switched jobs from one SOE to another in search of a better remuneration package. He said other friends of his were in the same situation of 'cash shortage' that he used to be in before:

Sometimes I heard my friends, who are currently in the *bien che*, complaining about their income. For them, even when the job might be stable, it would not be really great, if their income, or their cash flow, is not stable.

It was a fact that in the state sector in 2000 salaries for new recruits with university degrees was at around 300,000 dongs per month, equivalent to some 20 US dollars. Appraisals and salary raises were based strictly on the employee's seniority or years of service in *bien che*, and not the capability of the employee. This means younger government officials and state employees were unable to live on their wages. 'When you graduate and first start working for the state, your parents still have to continue paying for your living expenses,' said a state official who was in his sixties and about to retire. For two years to 2000, he had been paying all expenses for his son, who

went to work for the state straight after graduation. Many parents told me that they would normally expect, and were prepared, to pay several years of the youth's living expenses from the date when (s)he started to work in the state sector.

For those whose parents could not afford to subsidise their nominal wages, or who wanted to enjoy more than basic necessities – such as fashionable clothes, trendy mobile phones, computers, sports and entertainment – without having to 'open your palm to ask for parents' money' (*ngua tay xin tien cha me*), taking on secondary jobs was obligatory. Secondary jobs were supposed to be done out of office hours. It was another common fact, however, that a large proportion of young workers in government offices did not fully utilise their hours. Therefore, at many workplaces low wages were seen as being made up for by spare time work during office hours available for 'personal use'. In other words, many people used their idle hours for secondary jobs.

Results from my interviews further indicate that the range of secondary jobs these young state employees undertook was diverse and extensive. Cuong, for example, took translation jobs from various foreign companies and organisations. He normally brought extra work home or sometimes when it was not too busy in the office he even did translations at work. Similarly, Sam took on such jobs as translation for senior researchers and worked as an assistant to them on various research projects. Kien also did translation and other professional work:

Besides my work [with a state organisation], I still have to do other jobs for extra income. Income from all the jobs makes around 500

[US] dollars per month. Typical extra work is to do translation – mainly for my brother, who is the deputy director of a research institute. He has a lot of research projects and I help him to do the translation. I also do some tutorials for postgraduate students of an economics course administered by a foreign university here in Hanoi.

Minh was a university lecturer, and similar to many other lecturers, he did tutoring after work. As for Vinh, 'extra money came from all sorts of freelance work. I am a photojournalist, and through work I have built up a network of contacts that enable me to do freelance jobs.' Nam was also a photojournalist, but he seemed to be aiming for a longer-term objective and a larger amount of 'extra income':

Whenever I have some spare time, I work on my own book. My first book was published two years ago, and it was a big success in terms of both money and reputation. [...] That was my debut, and I am currently working on my second book. [...] My second book will be published in Vietnam and hopefully distributed abroad.

Ha worked for a research institute, undertaking experiments and tests to produce medical products. At weekends, he worked with a local Vietnamese computer firm. Information technology was his hobby, and apart from the money, the job also kept him 'up-to-date with the computer technology.'

Every other evening after work, Hung went around the city searching for properties to buy. He capitalised well on the real estate fever in 2000-2001. At first, he was only looking for a house for his family to move into, but after moving into the first house, his parents decided they did not like it because it was too noisy. He sold the house and made a lot of money from the sale, so he went on buying and selling properties for profit.

Based on data from my interviews and personal observations, I suggest that neither the terms 'supplementary work' nor 'secondary job' are entirely accurate or appropriate, at least as seen from the level of income it brought and the amount of time required to do the job. In fact, when income from the official full-time job was insufficient, some of my young graduate interviewees devoted a lot of time and effort to their 'secondary jobs', and so these turned into the primary source of income. Generally speaking, earnings from various types of secondary job could be as much as twenty times higher than the wage level of the average young state employee. In some cases, extra income could be up to fifty times more than the starting salaries in state employment.

The terms 'supplementary work' or 'secondary job' are inappropriate because in some cases young people choose to do certain jobs for reasons beyond the purpose of supplementing income. It could be for 'training and retraining oneself' as in the case of Kien, who said doing the tutorials forced him to keep 'polishing' his knowledge. For Ha, the 'secondary job' was to learn and practice a new job and new skills, as it was in a completely unrelated field to his profession. In the case of Nam, when engaging in extra work, he was obviously aiming for long-term objectives to perfect

his profession and make his name. He claimed proudly that he was one of the few experienced people in Hanoi who had obtained a comprehensive command of the whole publishing business, including editing, designing, printing quality supervision, and distribution. He worked towards publishing books of his own, not only because he was 'not good at trade and commerce', but, more importantly, it was something he was truly interested in, and, in his words, when 'I get old, I would still be able to earn money by giving lectures and speeches on what I am writing now'.

Apparently, upon deciding to take certain jobs for supplementary income, these youths seriously considered the gains beyond material reward. These considerations sometimes led to the young person embarking on a whole new profession. People often paid attention to the income aspect of a 'secondary job' and failed to notice that in most cases, as shown in this research, a 'secondary job' indeed involved a new profession and demanded a whole set of different skills. Therefore, the young person did not only engage in a secondary job, but more accurately, did multiple jobs which were both demanding and rewarding. With regard to 'multiple jobs' we can then see the portrait of very ambitious and energetic youths in present-day Vietnam.

2.2. Employment in the Non-State Sector

The Ongoing Debate on *Bien che* or *Lam ngoai*

As part of an attempt to reflect the perceptions of young people, I do not use headings according to the specific business sectors, but rather categorise employment in terms of the state and non-state sectors. This follows the practice, as shown through discussions with my informants, that when speaking about employment,

young people normally categorise themselves as working in *bien che*, or working outside the state sector – *lam ngoai*. To young graduates, the non-state sector today consists mainly of companies based on domestic and foreign investment, even though these entities are regarded as among the ‘new entrants in the labour market’ (Henaff and Martin, 1999: 57). As a matter of fact, the debate on whether to work inside or outside the state sector is a consuming and ongoing one among young people, especially among urban youths.

On the one hand, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, young people pointed to the fact that the state sector offered opportunities for overseas education and positions of status (i.e. the favourable conditions for ambitious youths to achieve professional, social and political advancement). On the other hand, many interviewees, including even some of those working in government offices, tended to believe that the state sector, with all of its administrative bureaucracy, wore the young person out and deprived him/her of all ambition.

It is not necessary that you have to be in *bien che*. *Bien che* is something that gives you the sort of lifetime job security like in Japan. However, it is also something that deprives you of incentives and motives to try your best and work hard. People tend to think that once they get into *bien che*, they will never lose their job and therefore there is no need to try to keep it. This is a very bad thing, and it’ll have to change over time.

(Hoai, male interviewee)

I work for a state company, but I think it is really a waste for capable people because they won't be utilised or respected for their capability. The whole day we just sit around doing nothing much. There is not much motive to improve oneself.

(Son, male interviewee)

Furthermore, the average wage in the state sector being considerably lower than other business sectors, it is not always possible to advance quickly to a higher position of status, as promotion is based on the employee's seniority and his/her relationship with the boss. Phuoc secured a post at a state-owned company after graduation, but after one year he moved out:

The job was not challenging, and I didn't like the mechanism of *song lau len lao lang* [live long to become the village's senior]. If you are young, they don't give you a chance of promotion. Those in higher positions in the company are all in their forties or fifties and they're going to stay there for another ten or twenty years before you're given a chance to 'climb' up, hence you're wasting your youth. Furthermore, you don't have connections or umbrellas, so you'd have no hope of promotion at all. [...] It's a waste of time! You have to show your face eight hours a day, while there is really nothing much to do. At the same time, the salary is very little. I am now working as my own boss and earning every month even more than the whole year's salary at the state-owned company.

In May 2000, the *Lao Dong* newspaper in its 'Weekend Discussion' column asked young readers the question 'Do you want to enter the state's *bien che*?' Two-thirds of the readers stated that the idea of getting into *bien che* was not appealing; they shared the view that in the state sector the work pattern was repetitive and unchallenging, whilst payment was low. Many of them said that even if they were offered a post in *bien che*, they would not take it, because the rigid and compulsive mechanism of the state sector would sooner or later turn them into an 'inflexible and narrow-minded official'. It was more important for them to be put to tests to train and prove themselves, rather than to lead the stable life of a 'pen-pusher' day after day. The disadvantages of the state sector are further compounded by the fact that it has become increasingly difficult to get into it. This does not necessarily mean that so many youths are competing to enter *bien che*, but the numbers of new posts created in the state sector are now very limited. At the employment office of the *Lao Dong* newspaper in Hanoi⁵, for example, amongst the 100 or so announcements of vacancies sent to the office everyday in 2000, there were only a handful of jobs advertised by employers in the state sector. The column writer concluded that 'the state sector is no longer attractive for many youths' (Minh Quang: 2000).

As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, there is a decreasing number of young people attracted to the state sector as compared to the pre-*doi moi* years. Results from the 1995 nationwide survey showed that the proportion of youths wishing to work in *bien che* was at an all-time low level of 22 per cent, and younger people were even less attracted to work in the state sector (Nguyen Van Trung, 1996: 62). This trend reflected the changing attitudes of young people towards employment in

the *doi moi* period. Given the continued reform programme by the government, in which the state sector has been restructured and the non-state business sectors given greater freedom to develop, employment in the non-state sector is expected to continue to expand considerably.

Working for Westerners

Young people refer to employment in the foreign-funded sector – which includes fully foreign-owned firms, joint ventures (j.v.), and international organisations – as *lam viec cho nuoc ngoai* meaning ‘work for foreigners’, or sometimes as *lam viec cho Tay* meaning ‘work for Westerners’. Such terms draw on the common feature of foreigners’ involvement in these businesses, regardless of the level of involvement, the types of business being conducted, or the fact that the foreign investor may come from other Asian countries rather than the West. Based on young people’s own categorisation, my research groups together under the category of ‘foreign/j.v. sector’ all types of ‘working for Westerners’, including employment in foreign firms, foreign organisations and joint ventures.

Results from my research demonstrate that the foreign/j.v. sector employed 28 out of 75 interviewees. This represented 38 per cent of interviewees – the highest percentage of all sectors, corresponding with a trend identified in a recent study by the World Bank that this sector was the most attractive employment destination for young graduates. The statistics gathered by the World Bank in 1996 demonstrate that the highest increase in employment of university graduates was in foreign companies/joint ventures when compared to all other business sectors (Sakellariou and Patrinos, 2000: 147-165). On the one hand, this overall picture was partly the

direct result of the painful restructuring of the state sector. On the other hand, what made the foreign/j.v. sector attractive to young graduates was that it provided a challenging work environment in which young workers could obtain material rewards and assume real responsibility as long as they were capable and committed.

Those who did not work in the sector tended to associate the concept of 'working for foreigners' with a large remuneration package. It was widely known that wages for employees in this sector were normally paid in hard foreign currency, making the value of the payment higher, more stable and unaffected by any possible depreciation of the local currency, the *dong*. Statistics showed that university graduates working in the foreign/j.v. sector had a mean wage or salary of VND1,809,000 per month (Sakellariou and Patrinos, 2000). In Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, wages of employees in foreign companies and joint ventures were normally higher than the average figure, and according to the estimates of my interviewees, an average graduate could expect a starting net salary of at least 150 US dollars or approximately VND2,250,000 per month upon taking a job with a foreign company in Hanoi. That was 'not very high, but it is stable', and yet it was officially almost ten times higher than the normal wage of a young state employee.

Although high pay did stand on its own as a sufficient reason for someone to decide to take one job and not another, especially when the wage differential could be ten times higher, some young university graduates considered that there were reasons other than just monetary reward, for deciding to 'work for foreigners'. Vu, for example, had always worked for foreign companies since he graduated in 1997. He liked working for foreign firms, because the job was not boring and one could learn a

lot in terms of 'accumulating work experiences and the Western way of doing business'. Le was an English-language graduate, who first started her career in 1995 as an interpreter and secretary at an American law firm in Hanoi. Back then her salary was 200 dollars per month. In 2000, although having not then been called to the bar, she assumed the responsibilities of a lawyer in the firm, and travelled frequently to the United States and between other countries in the region on business. She earned a net income of more than 1,000 dollars per month, and 'perhaps it is the highest salary compared to some sixteen friends' of hers who went to the same university and graduated at the same time with her five years before.

The reason for my choosing the firm was not because of money, but because I was hoping for a chance to learn a profession, and that I liked law. In the job, I always showed the boss that I was committed and that I was eager to learn. Soon after joining, I asked to be sent to an accounting course, funded by the firm and taught by the auditing firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers. It was a short course, and soon upon finishing it I was assigned to be in charge of the secretarial, translation work and the accounting work of the whole office.

[...] In 1996, I applied for a course to read for a law degree. Classes were everyday after work, and I did it for three years. When I finished the course and got my degree in law in 1998, a couple of things happened that resulted in my taking charge as a lawyer sooner than I had anticipated. The main lawyer at the office,

who is an American, quit his job, leaving the office without a main lawyer while a lot of business contracts with other companies were left unfinished. As someone who had just got a law degree, I was assigned to take care of some of the remaining contracts. Then a new boss arrived in the Ho Chi Minh City office. He had no idea about the structural organisation and personnel in the Hanoi office. As I had communicated work with him a couple of times, he took it for granted that I was to take full responsibilities in legal matters, and so he left it up to me to sort out all the business without close supervision. In other words, I was just thrown into the job, and I did it well all by myself. Another thing that showed my commitment to the firm and the job was that I was able to expand contacts for the firm and won them a number of contracts. It was at a difficult time for the firm, so my boss was very pleased with my performance and dedication.

In the foreign/j.v. sector, young employees could search for more challenging jobs, where they tested and improved their own skills and ability, and also where they could learn new skills. Generally speaking, the training received by young employees in foreign firms was different in nature from the type of training in the state sector. Foreign employers tended to provide their new recruits with in-country non-institutional training related to specific professions, except for rarer cases where the employee proved to be of exceptional aptitude and credentials, and so was sent overseas on long-term training towards a degree and internships or apprenticeships. The learning process for young people started as soon as they joined a foreign

enterprise, and often they could learn a new profession, and perfect their other skills like languages, use of the computer, communication, and management skills. Young officials in the state's *bien che*, on the other hand, had a chance to receive scholarships to go abroad for education leading towards higher degrees such as Masters and PhDs. However, almost all young graduates interviewed in this study were pleased with the pragmatic skills and knowledge that they learned through work and practice in their daily job. Furthermore, they could enjoy the training quite soon upon their start with the company, instead of having to wait for their applications for a scholarship to be successful. As Vietnam increasingly opens its doors and integrates economically with the outside capitalist world, these skills and knowledge have become indispensable and increasingly demanded by businesses, yet they have not been taught in university courses or most government offices (see section 3 of this chapter on how young graduates have addressed this problem by resorting to *hoc them* or supplementary learning).

The foreign/j.v. sector has also proved to be an attractive destination for young graduates due to its work culture and practices, which stress proficiency and efficiency. In the non-state sector particularly in foreign and joint-venture establishments, material reward and appraisal were based solely on the individual's competence, productivity and commitment. Interviewees often pointed out that Western work culture has always insisted on frank and straightforward communication between employer and employees, free from the pressure of personal influences and relationships. Therefore, young graduates believed that in the foreign/j.v. sector they could free their mind from worrying about networking and

establishing contacts (*quan he*), whilst there were more opportunities and incentives for them to focus on professional challenges and personal development.

Dong used to work as a civil servant for the People's Committee of a district in Hanoi. After three years, he left in 2000 to take on a job at a Belgium-based NGO providing assistance to primary schools in poorer villages. There were three reasons leading to his leaving the job. First, he felt that the path towards promotion was long, since promotion and pay rises would come slowly and steadily with age rather than competence: 'In my office there are people who are less competent than I am, but they have been in the office for a longer period of time, so they're my seniors and I have to report to them.' Secondly, the nature of the job at the People's Committee was repetitive, unchallenging, and unproductive, so he felt that he was 'wasting time doing next to nothing everyday'. What really caused him to make up his mind was when the boss showed his short-sighted attitude by denying him the chance to go for higher education:

My former boss at the Committee doesn't have a Master's degree, so he doesn't like to create conditions for anyone to obtain a higher degree. When I came to him and asked for his permission to let me join a part-time graduate course, he denied me the chance. After that I quit the job immediately. [...] I like my present job, not only because it is more interesting and I can learn a lot on the job, but also because I feel as if I am really working, doing good things, and contributing to the community and the larger society.

Manh provided a rather different example because he had a good boss, yet failed to overcome problems with his fellow workers. Graduating in 1995, he got a job as a junior official at a government office, where he had always dreamt of working. He proved to be so capable and efficient that within the first several months he won the confidence of the head of the office. The problem arose when the boss showed more confidence in him than in some more 'senior' people at the office. Envious, they did not accept the unusual fact that a junior official came to assume responsibilities exceeding theirs. The interviewee's senior colleagues started to make life so difficult for him that he could no longer put up with the pressure and had no other choice but to leave the office. He then got a job at a foreign law firm, received further law training overseas, and then became a successful lawyer.

In-depth interviews suggest that it is false to assume that all young people only look to 'working for foreigners' in search of bigger remuneration packages. Many, particularly those who could afford to turn down job offers due to their higher levels of education and professionalism, looked beyond mere immediate material rewards and appreciated an environment where they could achieve professional development. In other words, as Le has indicated, it was important for these youths to be encouraged and given opportunities to participate actively, contribute and assume real responsibilities in the business of the company/organisation, and be recognised for their ability and competence. Besides, when positions of power and status take too long to attain, and social benefits and lifetime employment seem to have ceased to be so meaningful in comparison to a higher income and immediate training, the young professional could opt for a more challenging career with more satisfactory rewards in the foreign/j.v. sector.

Despite all the above-mentioned benefits and advantages of employment in the sector, the downside of employment in the foreign/j.v. sector was the lack of what the state sector had to offer: job security and positions of power. The late 1990s marked more than a decade of implementing the comprehensive *doi moi* reforms and the open-door policy in Vietnam. However, it was also a difficult time for the country's economy, as the regional financial and economic crisis had caused many investors to pull out and investment projects were left unfinished due to a sudden lack of capital. At many foreign enterprises, especially those from countries in the region that were hit by the crisis, employees lost their job as their foreign bosses closed down local offices and left the country. At the time of the crisis, many people, particularly young employees, started to realise that the sort of stability and lifetime security offered in the state sector that people were once accustomed to, were not guaranteed in a cost-effective business environment. The downside of 'working for foreigners' could also be seen in other foreign enterprises which hired workers on a project basis; this arrangement did not give employees the guarantee of continued employment upon completion of a project. Dung, for one, worked for four years at a foreign construction company. He was capable enough to be in charge of a building project, yet he lost his job when the project finished, despite the fact that the company continued to do business in Vietnam. Although he was able to get a new job in a joint venture bank straight away, he lamented the fact that he found himself 'having to start all over again'. The decision to work for foreign enterprises usually involved a process of debating and weighing between security and power status on the one side and higher pay on the other side. For young graduates, however, the

uncertainty of the foreign sector with high pay might seem to be more appealing, as Hong explained:

You'd earn more than those working in *bien che*, but the trade-off is that there's no security. The employer is not obliged to carry on hiring you after the project you're involved in has finished. Since it is difficult to get a job in *bien che* at the moment and I am still young, I would try to work hard and earn as much money as possible to set aside some savings.

In the market economy, where labour is also a commodity to be traded on a competitive basis, job security can be obtained through one's own competitive skills and competence. In other words, one should not fear the prospect of unemployment, provided one is sufficiently competent and professional so that upon losing a job one should be able to get a new job straight away. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, this is indeed a new way of perceiving employment and job security by today's youth. Looking at the matter from such an angle, young people do not view the low security as too much of a disadvantage when considering work in foreign or joint-venture enterprises.

Other than the low security, most of my interviewees said that they saw very little chance for local employees to attain senior management levels at foreign enterprises. Despite the opportunities to assume responsibilities and challenging tasks, at the end of the day the employee still found him/herself in the position of a permanent *nguoilam thue* or a salaried worker. As a result, young people working in foreign

enterprises at times had an inferiority complex, as if their social status was lower in comparison to their other friends working as officials in the state sector. This was one reason why Ha and Sam decided to leave their jobs at foreign companies after several years working there. Even though payment was good, they felt they were not getting beyond an assistant to a foreign manager, so they quit to enter the state sector and enjoy a 'feeling of ownership when working for one's own country'.

It is true that currently at most foreign companies and organisations operating in the country, senior management is in the hands of foreign bosses, except for joint ventures where the Vietnamese do have a share of power in the top management. There is also still a relative lack of qualified Vietnamese who possess qualifications, professional skills and command of foreign languages to international standards. As a result, many foreign businesses, especially the larger ones, find it difficult when it comes to searching for qualified local professionals to fill the posts of country managers. Hence, they often have to take the more expensive option of hiring expatriates to take care of their Vietnam operations whilst the local employees rarely make it to senior levels. In the long run, however, this will change, as there are more and more Vietnamese youths receiving higher education and professional training in Western countries and an increasing number of large international firms committed to long-term business in Vietnam.

An interesting and significant point from the accounts of my interviewees was that there was no definite pattern to explain the preference and movement of young graduates between the foreign/j.v. sector and the state sector. As already demonstrated in the previous section, those interviewees who had moved from the

foreign/j.v. sector into *bien che* mentioned the fact that they saw their future obstructed in foreign companies, while in *bien che* they saw the opportunity to 'advance to a higher position' in addition to a chance of getting a scholarship for overseas study. At the same time, however, other graduates preferred the foreign/j.v. sector to *bien che* precisely because they saw the need to establish *quan he* and the rigid seniority-based hierarchy in the state sector as obstacles to personal and professional development.

Nonetheless, given all the advantages and disadvantages of 'working for foreigners', data from my research and the World Bank's recent research (Sakellariou and Patrinos, 2000) demonstrate that the foreign/j.v. sector is presently the biggest employment destination for young graduates. To the twenty-something youths, in spite of the low security, more exciting career opportunities with a high income are more appealing than the 'traditional' workplace in the state sector. As the country is exerting greater efforts to integrate into the world economy, the community of international businesses in Vietnam will expand, and at the same time, increasing numbers of Vietnamese are prepared to participate in this integration process. This, combined with the diminishing interest of youth in the state sector, suggests that young people will continue to look at the foreign and joint venture sector as the most attractive and desirable workplace.

Working for Local Private Businesses

Local private enterprises discussed in this research are registered, non-household businesses with 100 per cent domestic capital. This categorisation separates out small-scale and household enterprises, as none of the interviewees worked in these

latter establishments.⁶ Similar to foreign and joint-venture companies, local private businesses are new entrants in the labour market over the last fifteen years. Most of them have been established since the *doi moi* reforms initiated the formation and operation of a multi-sector economy. For this reason, local private businesses have shallower roots in the business world than foreign firms and companies in joint venture with a foreign partner. In addition, when compared to state-owned and foreign-financed enterprises, local private businesses tend to be smaller in business scale and capital.

In this research, amongst the ten interviewees working for local private businesses there happened to be four people working at the same company, three others working together at another local private firm, the rest working at three different places. Although this coincidence did not happen by choice, it is interesting, and enables some comparisons and analyses through primary cases of the two companies in order to shed light on the thinking and viewpoints of young graduates working in local private businesses.

The first company was a private computer and software firm based in Hanoi. It recruited employees through a competitive and strict selection process, which involved professional examinations and interviews. Successful applicants were awarded different kinds of work contracts, which were of three-month, one-year and three-year duration. Normally, a new recruit would initially be offered a three-month contract, and this work contract would then be renewed for another term of one year, and subsequently three years, upon the individual's satisfactory performance. 'In the firm, there is no lifetime security of the *bien che* sort and all employees work on

fixed-term contracts,' said Lam. 'But none of us complains, because contracts can be renewed depending upon the employee's efficiency and capability. Besides, the remuneration package is reasonable.'

Another graduate called Dan had been working for this firm since 1996 after he finished his graduate studies in physics:

When I graduated, I was offered a job as a lecturer at my university. At the time, the starting salary for a lecturer was 150,000 dongs [back in 1996 equivalent to about 15 US dollars], apparently not enough for anything. I thought that physics was a subject of basic science, which has equipped me with important foundations and rational methods so I could easily switch to other professional areas. Nowadays, in Vietnam, physicists are not earning money because of the country's lack of investments in science research. So I decided that I had to learn a new profession for my life, and that was what took me to apply to this firm. I passed the recruitment exam no problem, and have been working there ever since.

Dan first started as a trainee, and was given a lot of practical training on the job. For three years or so he had even been allowed to take time during office hours everyday to attend a full-time university course leading to a second degree in information technology, although he often had to do extra time in the evenings to make it up. However, had it been at a different workplace, he would not have been encouraged

and given a chance to re-train and re-skill. Four years ago he was a mere trainee, but subsequently became a manager in charge of technical support for the company's network. What is more, he was also chosen as a trainer who trained other staff on the latest computer technologies and software. As the company could not afford sending many people onto a course at the same time, it looked to cutting costs by sending one person onto training courses given by foreign experts and then having the person pass on what he had learned to other staff. At the time of the interview, Dan appeared to be, and clearly considered himself, a professional, who was full of self-confidence:

I am quick to learn and also have the ability to explain things clearly to other people. That's why I've always been chosen to teach other staff. [...] An IT engineer of my expertise would be easily able to earn a starting salary of up to 20,000 US dollars per month. I am confident that I could handle any type of work, in any work environment, and under any circumstance.

↳ ?

In 2000, his net earning was close to 500 dollars per month, and that was enough for him to be both self-sufficient and fully support his younger brother who was still at university. He was happy with the company and boasted the fact that 'if you pass our office late in the evenings, very often you'd see lights are still on, and it means there're still people staying back in the office to work.'

The other three, Huong, Kham and Lam, worked in different specialised areas, but they also shared the same sense of satisfaction with the company and their jobs. Huong was a secretary in the office of the director. She said she could fully

concentrate on the job and did not need to do any other secondary work to supplement her income like she used to do when working as a lecturer at a state university. Kham (male interviewee) worked as a technician providing installation and after sales support to customers in Hanoi. Lam (male interviewee) worked in a sales and marketing department selling computer and software to Vietnamese firms and individual consumers, importing computer products and then marketing them locally. Both Kham and Lam saw themselves staying in the business for a long while, for not only did they find their jobs interesting, but also 'the computer and software business is the leading industry in the new century' and 'the company is doing well and expanding'.

The second company was a Hanoi-based private public relations (PR) and advertising firm, where interviewees Thang, Dang, and Trung worked. Thang graduated in 1999 from a private university with a degree in Information Technology for Management (*Tin hoc Quan ly*). In addition, he could communicate easily in English, and also 'interpret and translate fluently from and into French, because at university French is the medium of instruction.'

I joined the firm in May 2000 and currently work in customer relations. The job here is interesting and challenging for me, because it is in a new area and, at the same time, it also has a lot to do with computers. I like to do this job because of the very reason that it is a new area for me and I like to try and learn new things. [...] I took on this job by chance, as I was introduced to this company, then I thought I was young and eager to learn and since

this is a new area, so I decided to apply for the job and take it. [...]
I wouldn't say I'm satisfied with the pay here. Well, it is hard for people to get satisfied with anything they have, really. So I'd say as long as I'm still working here, that means the salary is still acceptable to me.

Dang was a 'creative designer' working mainly on computers. 'I've never thought of moving into employment in the state sector or elsewhere,' he said, 'and in fact, I don't have any future career plan other than to grow together with this company.' Trung also worked in graphic design, as it had a lot to do with his major in computers at university, and this line of business was the profession he wanted to follow 'for the rest of his life'. Similar to Thang, both Dang and Trung did not appear to be entirely happy with their earnings at the company, but said that as new graduates, they were satisfied with their salaries for the time being. However, all three were hard-working and dedicated to the company.

Amongst the three remaining interviewees working in local companies, Bao had always been a full-time lecturer at a private university since she graduated in 1996. Kieu represented a Ho Chi Minh City-based public relations firm in Hanoi. She used to work for a couple of foreign companies in both Hanoi and down south, and before taking up employment with this Vietnamese public relations firm, she tried, but failed, to 'settle down' in *bien che* upon her parents' wishes. Di had been working for a Hanoi-based consulting firm for two years and was the firm's vice-director in 2000. Previously he had worked at several other Vietnamese firms, and at some point he also worked for a foreign company for a 'brief period' of half a year.

At the first two companies, I observed that there existed after-work communal activities which took place on a regular basis. The activities, including sports and chess competitions, song contests, playing in a band, and going camping together, were organised at the initiative of, and with the willing participation of, young colleagues. Indeed, it was what the young employees did together after work rather than during office hours that formed what they termed a 'company culture'. 'It was this very type of culture that binds people together,' said Dan. 'It makes us really love the company, and the people with whom we work. This is something that has given the company the strength it has today, and that makes the difference between a Vietnamese and a foreign company.' As a matter of fact, employees working in the state and the foreign-funded sectors did enjoy social gatherings and group activities. However, most activities were carried out occasionally, either with sponsorship of the foreign employer in the case of the foreign sector or driven by state policies and under the auspices of the Youth League in the state sector. As in the case of the two private companies studied here, the after-work activities took place regularly and entirely at young people's own initiatives. Perhaps the presence of a foreign employer or a Youth League representative might have caused a psychological effect that could inhibit, or even restrict, young people in collective activities. This was where a 'company culture' came in freeing the young person from the psychology of either 'working for foreigners' or 'being lectured to' by the Party and the Youth League. So far I have been unable to conduct research into a larger number of companies and so unable to conclude that the existence of 'company culture' is a typical feature pertaining only to local private businesses (such an attempt would amount to a separate research project). However, it is evident that the existence of

such a 'company culture' has kept young unmarried employees free to be themselves amongst their peers, and at the same time bonded with the company.

In Vietnam, local private businesses tend to be much smaller in business scale and capital as compared to state-owned and foreign-financed enterprises. Appearing to be smaller and less attractive employers in the job market, however, they are not less efficient. On the contrary, private businesses are known to be cost-effective, a lot more active and efficient than many large SOEs, since the state sector is generally assessed as being weak due to low productivity, over-employment and red tape (Kokko, 1998: 3). Boothroyd and Pham Xuan Nam (2000: 57) noted that according to data from the Hanoi Statistical Office, the state sector contributed 75 per cent of the budget of Hanoi in 1995 with the balance coming from the private sector. However, the capital of the SOEs was ten times greater than that of the non-state enterprises. Like foreign or joint-venture enterprises, local private businesses achieve high efficiency through their management policies, including management of staff. All employees, especially young workers, are particularly encouraged when they are assessed through their own competence and skills, and assigned responsible tasks. Besides the high productivity and efficiency, young workers, such as those graduates in the two company cases, are also attracted to the sector by job opportunities, in which energetic individuals can both prove and develop themselves. With regard to material reward, wages in local private businesses are generally not as high as in many foreign-financed enterprises; they are higher than pay in *bien che* and enough for young graduates to be self-sufficient without resorting to secondary jobs or parental financial support. However, as we have seen in the cases of young graduates working in the foreign/j.v. sector, money was not always the main concern affecting

their selection of jobs. This was even more so when the youths had a number of employment options thanks to their higher level of education and more professional skills in comparison to the other young workers. Therefore, they did not always make a straight comparison amongst workplaces in the employment sectors by simply looking at the salary factor. Even though the pay may have been lower than in foreign companies or joint-ventures, other matters carried more weight and led a young person to choose employment with a local private enterprise. According to data from my interviews, these other matters included opportunities to challenge and improve oneself, confidence and trust by the employer, and a good work culture and atmosphere. Furthermore, there have been signals of a growing private sector as seen in the number of new firms that have come onstream since the rules for small- and medium-sized enterprises were amended in early 2000. There is also a rising trend of Vietnamese enterprises buying out foreign partners in various joint-ventures (Glofcheski, 2001: 3; *Financial Review*, 30 April 2001). With the private sector expanding rapidly, greater employment opportunities with higher salaries await young workers in local private businesses.

Self-Employment

Quoc and Phuoc were both twenty-six years of age, and came from suburban villages around Hanoi where they went for their university education. Quoc was from a poor family of four children. He was the only son. His father died when he was still a small child and his mother had to work hard to support the family. Upon graduation he stayed in the capital city and worked for a foreign company for three years. It was at this company that he made friends with Phuoc, who also came from a poor family where the father was a schoolteacher and the mother was a farmer. Together they

decided to quit the firm, borrowed money from friends and family relatives, and set up a company of their own to manufacture bamboo and lacquerware products. They worked so hard that they 'have no idea what Saturdays and Sundays are like'. After over a year in business, they employed forty workers in 2000, and had a modern production workshop in a high-tech industrial park adjacent to Hanoi. Their products were exported to Europe and the United States, and they also planned to market their products on the Internet so as to reach more clients directly; they intended to expand their production further. Despite their success with the growing business, they both considered themselves 'peasants from the countryside'.

In an issue of the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, September 2000, a report on Vietnam's advertising industry cited a new, small local advertising firm in Hanoi as a prime example of the nascent but expanding industry in the country under *doi moi*. The eight-person agency was described in the article as 'resourceful, young and energetic', still undertaking smaller jobs for the time being, but aspiring to take on more prestigious and creative projects from big clients and enter into a partnership with a big foreign agency (Flagg 2000). Its founder and managing director was Ngoc Anh, aged twenty-eight, hailed from Hai Phong. He studied Russian language from the former Hanoi Foreign Language Teachers Training University which is now part of the Vietnam National University. He started the firm by borrowing money from cousins in early 2000, and during the first year of his business he billed clients a total of 200,000 US dollars and broke even. I met him one evening in a café on Ly Thuong Kiet Street, a busy and trendy street café in the French quarter of Hanoi frequented by 'yuppies'. Casually dressed in baggy trousers and a checked shirt, he had just got out from work. But even in the café he was busy on the phone

talking with clients. In-between two telephone conversations, he said: 'My clients are mainly foreigners, since only foreign firms could afford to pay for the kind and quality of service I offer. At the moment, I am preparing to open an office in Ho Chi Minh City as well.' For Ngoc Anh, creative advertising had long been his passion. Several years back whilst he was on his previous jobs, working for a number of different foreign firms in Hanoi, he had already focused on learning the skills and expertise of public relations and advertising, and establishing contacts with a view to setting up his own firm one day. And in late 2001 his eight-person agency was expanding to the country's business hub in the South.

Although my three interviewees were highly successful in their businesses, they belong to a rare breed among the young in Vietnam. First of all, in Vietnam self-employment is still a new concept and practice, which has only been made possible since *doi moi* with the implementation of *mo cua* and the multi-sector market economy. Therefore, although there are opportunities for individuals to get rich by setting up their own businesses, and despite the government's encouraging policy to 'place young entrepreneurs in the forefront of socio-economic development', by 2002 the number of *cac nha doanh nghiep tre* (young entrepreneurs) in Hanoi has only reached a modest number of one hundred (*Vietnam Economic Times*, 23 January 2002).

Secondly, young people rarely possess, or have access to, sufficient material support, including capital, to set up their own ventures and seize business opportunities. In addition, there are other prerequisites for success in self-employment, including knowledge, skills, experience, and social connections. Trinh Duy Luan (2000: 42)

noted that in today's society, only the advantaged groups and individuals possess these prerequisites to be able to become affluent. Therefore, the advantaged groups, which are already well off, will become even richer. Many young people also seem to share this belief that the power of wealth is the key to success in the market economy. In response to the question of 'factors that determine failure or success of business', 62.1 per cent of all youths in the national survey of 1995 considered capital as the decisive factor. 'Capital' received by far the highest rating, ahead of other factors such as experience (35.1 per cent), occupational skills (33.7 per cent), education (30.5 per cent), and opportunity (24.3 per cent) (Thai Duy Tuyen, 1995: 121).

For these reasons, young people are still hesitant towards self-employment, and so young entrepreneurs still make up a small part of the Vietnamese youth population. Nonetheless, *cac doanh nghiep tre* and their success stories are not only challenging the widespread, conventional belief of money power and spreading the spirit of *doi moi*, but they have also become role models for many other youths to admire, follow and assimilate.

3. The *Hoc them* Phenomenon

The Vietnamese term *hoc them*⁷ has various nuances, but when used amongst my young graduate interviewees it refers to further training, or the participation of a graduate in either full-time or part-time education further to their attaining a university degree and entering employment. In this context, further training does not underline the academic aspect of education, but rather it stresses the pragmatic relation between training and employment or the fact that young people go for

further training with the aim of achieving career goals. Further training can range from simply learning a foreign language and computer skills, or even re-skilling for a whole new profession, to attending higher education at postgraduate level. It has indeed become a very remarkable feature amongst youths, particularly young university graduates, in the *doi moi* era. In this research of young graduates, as many as forty-three interviewees stated the need of *hoc them* in order to improve their employment and career prospects. The nation-wide survey of 1995 also showed that youths tended to take up further training, not for academic purposes but primarily because of pragmatic career considerations. When asked about the motives of *hoc them* for youths in 1995, 59 per cent of all respondents said they undertook further training in order to make it easier to find a job, 37 per cent said it was to achieve career success, and 15 per cent said they did further training in order to change their occupation. For university graduates all over the country, these percentages were as high as 84, 58 and 16 per cent respectively, and it implied that such concerns about employment and career were even more important as motives for university graduates to take up further training (Thai Duy Tuyen, 1995: 124). During the last few years, there has been an emerging trend of young graduates having to *hoc them* soon after, and in many cases straight upon finishing university education.

Long gone is the day when a university certificate was a guarantee of finding a good job. In fact, far too many well-qualified graduates have had to lower sharply their expectations upon arrival in the job market. Ninh graduated with a degree in oil refinery technology from the Hanoi Polytechnic in 1999. In theory, there were many employment opportunities awaiting someone with a degree like his, as the country's oil and gas industry was expanding rapidly. In reality, however, the new graduate

found it difficult to secure a suitable job due to his lack of knowledge in computers and English language and, for a year Ninh had been focusing fully on learning English, computer and information technology skills:

At the beginning I had hoped that as long as I didn't put money as a priority, there would be a chance for me to get a job. I would have been happy if I could find even an unpaid job, as long as it gives me an opportunity to practice English and work with computers. However, even that's impossible, because nowadays employers need cost effective people. They don't want to waste desks and workspace, let alone money, on people who cannot do the job straight away.

Computer skills and English are among the four most popular subjects that youths *hoc them*, the other two being economics and law. As seen from the my interviewees' perspective, the *hoc them* phenomenon emanated from young people's impression that in the market economy those with a good command of English and/or with qualifications in the areas of information technology, trading, and law would be in high demand. Many graduates, therefore, prepare themselves for the job market by taking a course, often one leading to a second degree, in one of these subject areas. The large number of people doing *hoc them* has, in turn, put pressure on others. The result is more and more people follow suit to register for courses at *Dai hoc Kinh te Quoc dan* (National University of Economics), *Dai hoc Ngoai thuong* (University of Foreign Trade), *Truong Luat* (Law School), and *Dai hoc Ngoai ngu* (University of Foreign Languages). At an employment agency at Dong

Da District in Hanoi, most of the twenty applications received in June 2000 looked more or less similar to this one: 'University graduate; first choice of employment: joint ventures, representative offices of Japanese, American or European companies; second choice: Vietnamese telecommunications or power companies; third choice: other jobs that require a command of English or Japanese'. This applicant said that his marks at university were only average with a couple of resits, but he had spent a lot of time and effort on learning foreign languages. He thought that with a good command of foreign languages, it would be easy for him to find a job in Hanoi. According to the officer in charge of the employment office of the *Lao Dong* Newspaper, however, no more than 20 to 25 per cent of graduates of foreign languages could gain employment in Hanoi (Chu Hong Van, 2000). Therefore, it would be wrong for young people to assume that qualifications in any of the above-mentioned subjects would automatically guarantee them a job. The *hoc them* phenomenon resulting from this widespread false assumption reflects the reality that most Vietnamese youths have not been fully informed about the job market and its supply and demand.

On the macro-level, the widespread phenomenon of young graduates' *hoc them* is attributed to the failure of colleges and universities. If we assume that the ability to find suitable and satisfactory employment marks the success of a student upon graduation, it can be said that the failure of the education system is reflected in the high proportion of graduates unable to secure a job. In other words, colleges and universities have been unable to turn out qualified graduates to meet the demands of the job market. Whilst the nation develops and modernises and the demands of

employers are growing, college and university training remains rigid and unrealistic, and the quality of education is proving unsatisfactory.

All universities are subject to the government's prescribed curriculum and so no universities have been able to provide tailor-made degree courses. In February 2000, I interviewed Professor Vu Duong Ninh, who was then Head of the Department of International Relations at Hanoi National University. He told me that Ministry of Education regulations require all students do compulsory subjects such as physical education, national defence education, political economy, the philosophical thought of Marxism-Leninism, the science of socialism, the history of the Party, and Ho Chi Minh's thoughts. The teaching of these compulsory subjects takes up to 49 per cent of the 210-credit curriculum, leaving the specialised subjects in International Relations accounting for 25 per cent, subjects directed to professional skills (research methods, English, and computer) accounting for 21 per cent, and the final dissertation accounting for only 5 per cent. He said that his students did not receive enough relevant training to prepare themselves for the increasingly demanding job market, and the teaching staff of the department shared the view on the need to reduce the number and extent of compulsory subjects in the curriculum. But, according to Professor Vu Duong Ninh, at that time it was clearly impossible. Hence, graduates had to resort to *tu cuu* (rescue/save oneself) by taking up supplementary training.

The rigidity of the system is increased by the low quality of education at universities and colleges. Quoc recalled how he sat for a final exam for a friend, who was attending an evening course towards a second degree at a large public university:

The day before the exam, my friend rang me up and asked me to take the exam for him, because work sent him on a duty trip. He gave me his date of birth and examinee's number, and told me where to find the exam room. I turned up, got into the exam room without problems, sat down next to two other guys, who had their textbooks with them. However, they didn't have a clue where to look up in the book. So they gave me the books for me to use. After studying the table of contents for a while, I was able to turn to the relevant pages and three of us copied down the pages. In the room, no one was being serious at all, and the proctor didn't seem to care either. In the exam room of about 30 examinees, there were about 20 mobile phones and a few phones ringing constantly.... Nothing was serious at all! End of the day, however, my friend passed that exam okay.

Incidences like this seem to happen only at evening courses, where students are working people who have already got a university degree and now wish to read towards a second degree in a different major. However, they illustrate the quality of *hoc them* and the resulting scepticism of youths about the amount of knowledge that they can really accumulate on these courses.

I am doing a second degree in economics at the National University of Economics. The course takes two-and-a-half years and I'm now in my second year. However, I'd have to admit that I still have no

idea what the whole thing is about. If you now ask me to say something about supply and demand curves, I'd say sorry I haven't got a clue. I'm not learning anything, but I still have to do the course because it is important to have the degree. In the society today, people are still graded by the degrees they've got.

(Nguyet, female interviewee)

The poor state of affairs in higher education and training means profound reforms are required. But before the national education system receives a real shake-up, *hoc them* by young graduates remains a micro-level solution to a macro-level problem, and this solution is normally ineffective. My interviewees shared the view that if one wanted real and profound knowledge – something more than superficial degree certificates – one had no other choice but 'to go west'. As a matter of fact, whilst many young graduates did not mind doing a second university degree at home, they would normally try to attend foreign universities, when it came to a higher level of postgraduate studies.

I want to do an MBA in the States. I need further training for skills and knowledge of business management, so an MBA is necessary. But not an MBA from a home university. What I need is real knowledge and that can only be attained at a university overseas. The only problem is that my business is still new, so I am sort of stuck here. I don't have the heart to leave it to go to university abroad. I'd have to wait for a while until everything is up and

running smoothly, then I can leave business to someone else to take care of it for me, and go for a year or so to study.

(Ngoc Anh, male interviewee)

Another interviewee shared his aspirations, and explained to me why doing a postgraduate degree in Vietnam was his last option:

Khoa: The thing is that I have to try my best to learn while I'm still young. I want to do post-grad, so it's important to speak good languages, either English or French, in order to be able to earn a scholarship and go abroad. It is a long way, but I'd have to try.

PN: Why not do a degree in Vietnam?

Khoa: Well... if I don't have a chance to go, I'd probably end up doing that. But it's a painstakingly long process and costs a lot of money, while you'd not be learning a great deal. I know someone who's a medical doctor and who's doing a PhD here in Hanoi. Every year when it comes to Tet and other national holidays, he would spend money on a whole box of Johnie Walker's whisky. Never mind Black Label or Red Label – I don't know which one is cheaper – but the whole box of it would surely cost a lot. Besides the whiskies, he'd also have to give out envelopes of money as gifts to his supervisors. So year after year it's a lot of money he's spent on his studies. He often makes this joke

that he still has to try because he wants his children to be able to be proud of him, and in his funeral ceremony, it sounds better to bid farewell to *Tien si bac si* (physician, PhD) rather than just *bac si* (physician).

(Khoa, male interviewee)

In my research all the seventeen people that had read or were reading for a second degree did so at a local university, whilst as many as seventeen out of twenty-two people, who had done or were doing postgraduate studies, followed these studies at a foreign university. Also, sixteen graduates, including some that had already done a second degree at home, expressed their desire to go abroad for postgraduate studies. It appears that the young intellectuals carefully weighed the value of degree certificates and that of real knowledge. When doing a degree at undergraduate level, many graduate interviewees did not seem to worry too much about the quality of education, both because they saw a second degree as merely a tool to achieve further career goals and because of the high expenses for a foreign degree. However, when it came to doing postgraduate studies or the acquisition of more profound and specialised knowledge, most of them tried to attend a foreign university, which was more highly appreciated for both the quality of education and the degrees conferred.

Nowadays, young people subscribe to the view that a person's level of education manifested in the degree(s) that (s)he obtained determines his/her social status. The élite groups like university graduates in this research, were particularly concerned with attaining a degree certificate in order to secure and enhance their social position, and also improve their employment prospects. As Quoc told me, he was 'deeply

concerned about the quality of education in Vietnam', but had 'no way but to follow the path of other people and go get a degree, because the degree is the parameter by which the society classifies people'. Besides such a pragmatic attitude, however, young graduates are anxious to learn and enrich their knowledge, when they strive to go abroad in order to achieve more profound training at higher levels. Although access to overseas study is not equally available to everybody, their efforts and aspirations to gain this opportunity reflect the fact that young Vietnamese are conscious about learning, and thus are keeping the nation's long tradition of valuing education and developing knowledge and skills.

4. Chapter summary: Leading Towards the Future

After leading a series of seminars including the state sector, foreign companies and joint ventures, local private companies, and self-employment through the process of going through the curriculum and its completion with the



Picture 5.1

Graduated but will still need *hoc them* to secure a job.

4. Chapter Summary: Looking Towards the Future

After looking at various sectors of employment (including the state sector, foreign companies and joint ventures, local private businesses, and self-employment), through the accounts of young graduate interviewees and in conjunction with the results from the 1995 national survey of youth, I can now draw a number of conclusions about young graduates and, more generally, Vietnamese youth.

First of all, *doi moi* reforms have brought about a transformation in young people's perceptions of employment. In contrast to their parents' generations, who lived and worked within the framework of a fully subsidised (*bao cap*) and centrally planned system, young Vietnamese today no longer associate employment with the notion of *bien che*. Not only do they adopt a more flexible perception of employment to include any job that brings in an income, but they also subscribe to a wide range of new ideas of employment, such as matching abilities and skills to jobs, better income, and work that is challenging.

Secondly, data from my research indicate a shift away from employment in the state sector, and into foreign companies, joint ventures, and local private businesses. When the state sector no longer holds the monopoly in providing employment, and the attractiveness of lifetime job security and stability has lost its shine, young graduates who continue to enter *bien che* do so mainly because of parental wishes or the perceived better opportunities of getting an overseas scholarship through the official connections of a state institution. Today, an increasing number of graduates are staying away from the state sector in search of more challenging, exciting and rewarding opportunities. Not only do they enjoy higher wages in the open market,

but they also receive practical, skill-based training, and are rewarded according to abilities rather than length of service, and given real responsibilities and a chance to prove themselves.

Furthermore, there has been a trend for young graduates to undertake *hoc them* or supplementary training so as to (re-)skill, be prepared for further opportunities, and enrich their knowledge. On the one hand, this trend reflects the nation's tradition of valuing education. On the other hand, it has been inflicted by increasing demands of the labour market for qualified employees while local universities have been unable to equip young graduates with the relevant skills and knowledge. Thus, *hoc them* has been a micro-level solution (undertaken by young graduates responsive to market demands) to a macro-level problem of the overall education system.

Although today's youth aged twenty-plus were born in a centrally planned system, their attitudinal change regarding employment and their responses towards the demands and changes of the labour market are indicative of the fact that they have grown up under *doi moi* and consequently out of the straitjacket mentality of the pre-*doi moi* period to be generally open-minded, flexible, and responsive to the country's ongoing transformation. Consequently, in the following chapter, I shall look further away from the professional life of young graduates to examine aspects of their personal life, so as to explore how this process of socio-economic transformation has influenced their perceptions of values, attitudes and behaviour towards interpersonal relationships and family issues.

Notes to Chapter 5:

1. The Vietnamese State regards recruitment and dismissal of the employees as an ethical issue. Dismissal of a state employee has to be well justified, so it is necessary for all cases of dismissal to go through a prescribed process that involves different levels of management. First, there must be unanimous agreement among all staff members of the department or the specific office where the employee in question works, and agreement between the unit-level management and labour union. Upon such agreement, the management of the unit shall submit a dismissal proposal to the personnel, the party committee, the labour union and the highest leader of the ministry/organisation. Then there will be a process of discussion among representatives from the personnel department, the party committee and the trade union, which should also include consultation with various staff members and opinion surveys within the organisation. At the end of the day, it turns out to be a very lengthy, complicated, and often literally impossible, process to come up with a decision to fire an employee (personal communication with a retired government official in Hanoi, August 2000).
2. Fieldwork interviews with various state officials (both serving and retired) in Hanoi, 2000.
3. This is indeed a complex notion difficult to translate, because it has various shades of meanings including 'free', 'flexible', 'casual' and 'irregular' work. Here I do not attempt to translate it directly, but rather discuss the diversity of perceptions and practices of employment that has emerged since *doi moi*.
4. In answering the same question 'Did you decide to do your current job to please your parents?' no one confirmed 'yes', except for one person among the seven

who was then 'not in employment', saying he was pursuing postgraduate studies because of his parents' wishes.

5. *Van phong viec lam bao Lao Dong* (the employment office of the *Lao Dong* Newspaper) is known as a reliable address for both university graduates and employers nationwide.
6. In the Vietnamese business and legal context, small-scale enterprises are classified as having a starting capital of less than 20 million dongs and employing more hired labour than family members, whilst in a household enterprise the members of the family outnumber hired labour.
7. The literal translation of the term is 'supplementary learning'.

Chapter 6

FAMILY AND LOVE RELATIONSHIPS

This chapter begins by presenting the relationship between young people and their parents, since there exists a general view amongst the interviewees that this is a key relationship, which can have significant effects on their other social relations, especially love relationships. Therefore, the parent-child relationship should not be ignored, and a thorough examination of it might well provide necessary background for us to gain an insight into young people's perspectives on matters of partnership and marriage.

1. Youth's Relationships with Parents

1.1. Greater Freedom in Personal Life Choices, except for Marriage-Related Matters

Vietnamese youths remain under a great deal of influence from their parents, even when they are well into their twenties. Although parental influence can be exerted on almost every aspect of a young person's life, the majority of the interviewees stated that following their parent's opinions was obligatory with regard to certain issues, and optional with regard to other matters. Data from my interviews suggest that young urban graduates saw themselves as enjoying a comfortable level of freedom with regard to a wide range of matters such as choosing their study majors at university and career paths, selecting their friends, and deciding how to use their spare time.

Between my parents and me there are always disagreements in lifestyle and work manner. My parents had wanted to force me to live in a disciplined way. For example, get up on time, go out on time in the morning, get home early in the evening, be focused on what I do, and so on. But I am keen on trying out new things, I like to get involved in a few things at the same time, I don't want to stick to a routine, and I stay up very late to work at night. All that contradicts what my parents want. However, at the end of the day, my parents would let me do things my own way.

Another example was when I decided to enrol with the University of Thang Long, which is a private university. I did pass entrance exams to a number of other public universities, and my parents had wanted me to attend a public university and study another discipline. But I decided to register at this university because I'd be doing what I wanted to learn. So that was against my parents' wishes, but they respected my decision and didn't force me.

(Thang, male interviewee)

Although parental influence was an important reason leading a number of interviewees to choose employment in the state sector (as seen in chapter 5), most interviewees were of the view that studies, work, and certain choices of personal lifestyle were the areas where young urban Vietnamese were generally given considerable freedom. At the same time, however, interviewees still reported immense pressure from parents and relatives to get married and to enter a 'suitable

marriage'. Data from my interviews categorise two broad types of parental influence on young persons' personal and love relationships and marriage: one that specifically relates to an existing relationship and the other that relates to more general viewpoints and attitudes. Both men and women felt parental pressure and influence on their personal relationships to varying degrees; these ranged from jokes, remarks, and advice to resolute opposition.

The first type of parental pressure is quite specific in the sense that it revolves around an existing relationship or partnership of the young person, and usually the parents' efforts to get the child to end the relationship. Parental opposition to the youth's choice of partner tended to be quite strong and resolute, and it was often enough to break the child's relationship with a partner whom the parents deemed as incompatible or inappropriate. Nam, who lived together with his parents, sister and brother, went through the typical experience of a child who sought to fulfil filial piety and who eventually broke up a relationship. He used to see a girl who was living in Hue, and so flew into Hue 'almost every week' and they got along well. However, he met strong objection from his mother, who resolutely said 'no' to the idea of him getting married to a girl who was not from Hanoi:

Nam: My mother even flew into Hue to tell the girl off.

PN: How did that happen?

Nam: One time she knew I was about to fly into Hue, so she told me that she also wanted to go there to have a word with the girl. She told me her intention of speaking to the girl and wanted to see what I'd think. I know if I had told her not to

go, she would respect my opinion and not have gone. However, I then said to her: 'If you want to do so, of course you can. You had given birth to me, so you have the right to do that.' And then I flew off and she flew one day later. She went straight to see the girl and told her: 'Don't bother to try and get married to him. I wouldn't approve that marriage anyway!'

PN: So what did the girl say?

Nam: She didn't say a word. She just cried, cried like a child who was scolded. Later when we talked, she said she would be waiting for me, if I could promise her that I would not get married in the next five years. I said I would appreciate that, but during that time, should she meet someone else who is better than me, she shouldn't wait for me. She said, 'yes, I understand'. She was very sad but she got the message that we should let it go.

In similar situations, where there was strong parental opposition on a young person's love relationships, the socially acceptable course of action was usually to give in without launching any resentful opposition. On his reactions when his parents opposed his relationship with a girl, Kien said:

For several months I was like a mad person. I hardly spoke a word to my parents, even though I live with them in the same house. It wasn't because I was trying to show that I oppose them, but my

brain was constantly very stressed. So stressed that each day when I came home after work I couldn't stand talking to anyone else. Plus every time I spoke to my parents or saw anyone else in the family, they always talked about my relationship and gave me advice, and I couldn't bear it.

The second type of parental pressure did not relate specifically to the young person's choice of partner, and tended to be less harsh and forceful in comparison to the first. It tended to relate to the more general viewpoints and attitudes about relationships, and arose from differences in view between the parents and the young person.

As reported by my graduate interviewees, a most common difference is that whilst the youth was not yet prepared for a married life, his/her parents insisted that it was time to settle down, after their child had obtained university qualifications and been in stable full-time employment. Hong felt such pressure from her family's constant jokes, which compared her situation with *quoc nan* or a 'national disaster'. These implied that she had reached the age for marriage and so if she continued to stay single, she would become too old to marry and her continuous co-residence with the family would be deemed to be the equivalent of a 'disaster' for the family. As for Giang, the seemingly light-hearted remarks of parents and family relatives did indeed put pressure on her so that eventually she found a partner just to please her parents:

Often I feel uncomfortable that people in my family often ask such questions as to whether I am seeing somebody and when I am getting married. It even made me feel unconfident sometimes. In

other [Western] societies women are not under such pressure. Before I went out with this guy, my parents were very worried about the fact that I didn't have a boyfriend. They talked about this a lot with their friends and tried to match me with their friends' sons. However, it is unnatural and I kept telling them off each time they wanted me to meet someone, who'd turn out to be a son of their friends. At present, my parents have calmed down a little bit because I am actually seeing someone. But for me, seeing someone doesn't yet mean that I am getting married to him. I am going out with this guy and I don't really feel that we are getting along very well, we argue a lot, but we still go out together and that keeps my parents happy.

Phuong planned to get married later in the year. As a matter of fact, she and her boyfriend were not doing so because they wanted to, but rather because of pressure from both families. The two families kept urging the young couple to settle down for the sole reason that they 'have been together for over five years'. She said they were marrying out of family pressure, but even if they were married, they would not be having any children immediately, especially when they both planned to pursue further studies.

Although women tended to be under greater pressure to marry, men were not excluded. Ngoc Anh said his parents were quite worried about his lack of a stable partnership:

I never return home before nine or ten in the evening, because of work, and my mother doesn't like that at all. My parents, especially my mother, are putting a lot of pressure on me to get married. She thinks that I'd be able to settle down, or 'calm down' and be more stable if I'm married. I am getting on her nerves. So if you know anybody among your girlfriends who is still single, please let me know!

Similarly, Hung was actively looking for a stable girl to marry, because he was under a lot of pressure from his parents. He remarked:

Parents and elderly people often put a lot of pressure on young people about marriage and relationships. If it was as free and open a society as in the West, I wouldn't be bothered about getting married. I'd stay single like this for the rest of my life, because no one would care whom I go out with or live with.

1.2. Explanations of Parental Influence

Among the main reasons for continuing parental influence is firstly the long established practice for young people to co-reside in the parental house (Le Thi, 1997: 45). The structure of the traditional Vietnamese family that has been more or less sustained emphasises the ideal of members of different generations living under the same roof. The young man carries on living with his parents even after he marries, and the young woman only moves out of her parents' house to live with her husband's family upon getting married. Although in larger cities nowadays there is

an increasing number of newly-wed couples who do not remain with the husband's parents, it is still very popular for unmarried youths to reside with their parents. In this research, as many as sixty-five out of the seventy-five interviewees had lived with their parents throughout their childhood and university years, and then after they finished their university education. Nine out of the remaining ten interviewees who did not live with their parents, did so not by choice, but due to the fact that their parents lived in the countryside whilst university education and employment after graduation required them to reside in the city. This continuous and prolonged co-residence gave the parents the opportunity to continue influencing almost every aspect of the young persons' life in the same intensive and authoritative way as during their childhood.

Co-residence with the parents is further reinforced by Confucian principles which serve to strengthen the authority of the parents, and render the parent-child relationship even more meaningful and influential. As I have mentioned in chapter 2, Confucian teachings stress filial piety, which is still the foremost virtue that shapes a young person's attitudes in life, as well as judgements on the morality of young people. Filial piety emphasises a child's duty to obey, respect and honour his/her parents, in return for their role in giving life to, nurturing and caring for their offspring. As Jamieson puts it:

You were, simply by being alive, in debt to your family – no matter how much you might have accomplished, no matter how wretched you might be. You still have to thank them for the food you ate, the house you lived in, your spouse, your land, your membership in the

village, most of all for life itself. You benefited from the merit accumulated by other family members over time, and from the family reputation. Success only increased the debt; it could never serve to repay it fully (1993: 23).

This firmly established attitude continues to define the nature of the parent-child relationship. When asked to explain why they obeyed parental orders and bowed to their influence, interviewees pointed to the moral principle of filial piety as central in determining their behaviour and their lack of inclination to oppose and/or confront the parents:

My parents gave birth to me, so they have the right to exert any influence upon me and I should always please them, even though I might not always agree with their viewpoints.

(Nam, male interviewee)

Amongst various filial duties that a young Vietnamese has to perform, he/she is expected to respect and listen to the parents, and realise their expectations. Of the most important expectations, which usually include obtaining degree certificates and gainful employment, and entering a suitable marriage, interviewees stated that they felt under particular pressure when it came to marriage-related matters. A suitable marriage is one of the most important ways to fulfil filial piety, because in Confucian ethics, marriage guaranteed the continuity of the patrilineage and support for parents in their old age (Tran Dinh Huou, 1991). Besides, the traditional thinking of '*cha me dat dau con ngoi do*' – the youth will stay where the parents put him/her (which

indeed is a Confucian legacy) continues to hold its value to a significant extent. In traditional pre-socialist society, marriage was not seen as a matter that concerned a young couple, but rather it was the parents' business. Today, although the freedom to choose a partner has been made a legal right in Vietnamese society and individuals now have more say about whom and when to marry, marriage remains largely a family decision and parental approval is still a prerequisite to marriage (Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong, 1996; Bélanger, 1997; Nguyen Huu Minh, 1998). The most important factor taken into account by parents when approving or disapproving of a spouse for their child is the traditional pre-socialist concept of family compatibility (*mon dang ho doi*), and the need to ensure that both families have similar socio-economic backgrounds. Political compatibility has lost its relevance, as the state no longer plays a role in the process of selecting a partner (Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong, 2001; also see chapter 2 for more on the role of the state in marriage under socialism).

In cases of disagreement between the parents and their child with regard to choice of partner, filial piety requires absolute submissiveness and obedience to parental authority. Consequently, the normal and socially accepted course of action is for the youth to stop seeing his/her partner, as the example of Nam presented above clearly illustrates. Young people today continue to be respectful and to hold to the view that they should never blame their parents nor oppose their orders, no matter if those orders should later prove to be wrong. Confucian ideology combined with the condition of continuous co-residence of children and parents have enabled and encouraged Vietnamese parents to continue to exercise their influence upon the children well after they have reached their twenties.

The fact that today's youths feel acute pressure and influence from their parents can be explained further by the generation gap, and the great differences in the experiences of children and their parents. Nguyen Khac Vien (1983) coined the terms 'still society' and 'moving society' to illustrate the differences. For the parental generation, the traditional society was a 'still society', in which there was no or very little difference in the lives, experiences and attitudes of consecutive generations. Young people got married during their teenage years, and engaged in the same crafts and professions as their parents and grandparents. They accepted unconditionally the moral teachings, the values, the ideas, and the lifestyles of a society that appeared to 'never change' (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1983: 10). Through various literary works of the pre-1945 period¹ and discussions with elderly people, we see that in traditional society family-arranged marriages were the norm and everybody accepted parental authority as a matter of course.

In contrast, for Nguyen Khac Vien, modern society is a 'moving society', in which rapid socio-economic changes have generated many differences in the experiences of young people as against their parents' generation. Young people are more exposed to the outside world, and to liberal ideals and lifestyles. Through their schooling and work, they establish many social contacts, including contacts with members of the opposite sex outside the family or the village. In such contexts, young people have, to a certain extent, grown beyond familial influences, and their attitude towards matrimony has also changed to an emphasis on marriages for love and not family-arranged partnerships. However, young people still feel that they are under a great deal of parental pressure, because the freer and more liberal they have become, the

more uncomfortable they feel about any interference in their personal lives. Parental influence has, therefore, become a vital and contentious issue in the eyes of young people.

This then is what seems to be a paradox. On the one hand, young urban educated Vietnamese are becoming more and more used to the freedom and liberty associated with an 'open-door' society. They are becoming 'modern' and outward-looking. On the other hand, as seen from the accounts of my interviewees, they continue to show concern and care about pleasing their parents and fulfilling the requirement of filial piety. In other words, they also try to abide by the 'traditional' moral instructions into which they were socialised by their parents.

1.3. Implications of the Parent-Child Relationship in Wider Social Contexts

Jamieson (1993) has remarked that traditionally family relationships were a model for social organisation; at the same time, the parent-child relationship was at the very core of Vietnamese culture. Albeit less forceful than in pre-socialist society, parental influence upon a young person's life remains very strong today, and it renders the parent-child relationship as predominantly a one-way process in which the child is supposed to listen and obey without question. The parent-child relationship, based on Confucian principles, has profound effects upon the formation of the mentality of young Vietnamese:

Unlike most Western children, children growing up in traditional Vietnamese families learned dependence and nurturance, not independence. They learned the importance of hierarchy, not

equality. They learned the rewards of submission to those of senior status, not assertiveness.

(Jamieson, 1993: 17)

As this mentality towards family relationships has been extended into the larger society, where moral values are essentially based on a hierarchical structure, the minds of young people are oriented towards their social obligations, and to unconditional respect and submission to those above them. It can be seen in young people's behaviour in various social contexts, be it at home, at work, or in the wider society. At home, not only should young people listen to their parents, but they are also supposed to be meek and compliant towards elder brothers and sisters. At work, they are expected to be respectful and submissive not only to their boss, but also to their senior colleagues. A number of my interviewees have resigned and left their jobs due to disagreement either with their boss or older colleagues. Respectful behaviour in the workplace required them not to express overt disagreement and opposition nor directly confront their seniors, but to yield in a submissive manner. In society, it is considered appropriate behaviour for the young always to show respect to the old.

Although submissiveness to one's seniors is the code of conduct normally expected of young people, interviewees said that whilst they subscribed to it in the larger society, it was not always the most constructive way of behaving in the workplace. This was particularly the case in government offices. As I discussed in chapter 5, communications and relationships amongst co-workers in the state sector are strictly hierarchical, whilst assessment and promotion are not based on capability and

professionalism, but rather on the duration of service. This has forced the young worker to be careful in his/her behaviour towards senior co-workers, as Hoai (male interviewee) explained:

It often feels frustrating and effortless at work. When you work for the government you're not supposed to argue with your boss or senior colleagues. There does not exist any mechanism for the junior to give feedback to the senior, and sometimes I feel as if I was working in vain.

In short, the meaningful relationship between parents and child, and the submissiveness of the child towards the parents not only influence various aspects of the child's personal life, but also have impacts on the wider social hierarchy and the behaviour of youths in various social and professional contexts.

2. Diversity of Relationships and Marriage

2.1. Criteria for an Ideal Partner

Results from the nationwide survey of 1,542 Vietnamese youths showed that young people assessed their ideal partner according to a range of criteria as shown in the following table. The table gives the percentage of men and women respondents who stated that they wanted their partner to have such and such an attribute.

Criteria	Men	Women	General
	(per cent)	(per cent)	(per cent)
Being gentle and subtle	69.5	44.0	53.4
Having good health	42.6	56.2	50.1
Having education and communication skills	43.4	52.5	48.4
Being in stable employment	36.0	42.7	39.7
Being faithful and tolerant	26.3	32.3	29.7
Having good appearance	37.7	18.8	27.3
Having stable and assured income	16.3	28.2	22.9
Having wide social contacts	23.6	21.2	22.2

(Thai Duy Tuyen, 1995: 125)

In Vietnam in recent decades there has been an increasing movement from arranged to free-choice marriages, thanks to the introduction of Western culture into Vietnamese society from the second half of the nineteenth century and increasing educational attainment (Nguyen Huu Minh, 1998). Despite the need for parental approval, young people know that they now have more say about whom and when to marry, and they have a stronger belief in the ideal of marriage based on love. The fact that today's young people are more than ever comfortable in expressing their views on the ideal partner substantiates this transition.

Broadly speaking, in Thai Duy Tuyen's survey, though it is unsatisfactory in many respects, young people appreciated the values of humanity and personality more than other matters such as material wealth, stable income, and appearance, though they also emphasised the importance of education and communication skills. Stressing such qualities for an ideal partner, young people generally see the purpose of partnership as establishing a long-term relationship and attaining familial happiness, rather than just as a 'spontaneous' love relationship. The traditional viewpoint of the Vietnamese has it that finding the right partner in marriage is *chuyen tram nam* or 'a matter of a lifetime', which requires due attention and seriousness. Such a viewpoint is retained by many young people today:

Finding the right partner and getting married is for a lifetime. Should one be able to achieve a lot in his/her profession, one still lacks an important part of life if he/she has nobody to share the joy with. On the other hand, someone can be less successful in a career, but if he/she has a caring, listening and understanding spouse, then he/she is still happier and more fulfilled than others.

(Dan, male interviewee)

Whilst the results from the 1995 nationwide survey of a broad cross-section of Vietnamese society shed light on the more general attitudes and viewpoints on the criteria for an ideal partner, in-depth discussions and interviews in this research have revealed a variety of current themes with regard to romantic relationships, partnerships, and marriage in the lives of young educated and mainly urban people.

2.2. Career versus Marriage

My dream used to be very simple, but I had nurtured it for a long time. Now when I am capable of making that dream come true, I don't want to realise it any longer. Guess what dream it was! It was to be happily married with a child. Then I would ride on a Simpson bike,² with my wife on the back and my child sitting on the gas tank at the front.

These are the words of Vuong, who worked as an official in a government ministry, and who had recently passed competitive examinations and gained a scholarship to go to the United States for postgraduate studies. For many years he had focused on building his career, aiming one day to realise his dream, but his success had meant that he became very involved in his work.

In general, my interviewees expressed a common view that career and employment were of greater importance than relationships or marriage. When asked to compare the importance of relationships and marriage as against employment, most of them agreed that for them career and employment were more important than going out with a girl/boyfriend or getting married.

I have quite a few potential suitors at the moment. However, I am asking myself whether I should start thinking of getting married just yet. My career is coming to a turning point now that I am starting to travel abroad frequently for work. This means that if I

get married, I will not have much time to take care of the family, and the husband wouldn't understand.

(Le, female interviewee)

Dong, aged twenty-seven, was single and not seeing anyone at the time. This worried his entire family – parents, relatives, and particularly his old grandparents. Yet he placed his on-going postgraduate studies and career above all else: 'My grandfather is just too worried about me and he wanted to see me get married and settled down. But he is old and he's getting a bit confused: I am not as old as he thinks. I am still young and I have my future ahead of me. I have other things on my mind for the moment.'

Giang also had a hectic life in full-time employment with supplementary training towards a law degree to enhance her career prospects. Indeed her life was already too hectic to be able to fit anything else in:

I haven't thought about it [i.e. getting married] just yet. I don't feel I'm 'qualified' for a married life. Think about what I am doing everyday: I work full-time and when I finish work at around 5.30 p.m., I go straight to university to attend evening classes. So my daily life is just work and study, and everyday when I get home my parents have already prepared dinner for me. You see, I don't have enough time to take care of myself, let alone taking care of someone else or a whole family.

Socio-political and economic changes in Vietnam in recent times, particularly since the late 1980s, have expanded opportunities for education and work for young people, especially for women. Data from the 1989 Census indicated that the percentage of the population who had at some point attended school had increased over time, especially for women. Whilst only about 27 per cent of women aged 65 or above had ever attended school, the figure for women in the age group of 25-29 was 93 per cent. Almost the entire urban population had attended school (Vietnam GSO 1991: 53), and this in turn had widened their life choices, including the choice between a career and getting married.

It is not simply that in the modernising society young urban Vietnamese are too busy with work or study to waste time on romantic relationships, but that many young men and women delay marriage and children in order to fulfil their personal objectives, which typically include earning money and building a career. As for women, since childcare and other domestic duties entail heavy responsibilities following marriage, they do not rush into it. Hence many young women in my research felt that they had two options before them: career or marriage.

Most people are still very much of the view that women should take care of the family, do most of the household work, raise the children, etc. So once you've got married, you're denied a chance to focus and develop your career.

(Le, female interviewee)

Some men also understood and emphasised the need for young women to make the most of their young years to attain degree qualifications and further their careers:

Women should take advantage of their youth to study because after getting married and taking on family responsibilities you won't have a chance to further your knowledge. It is very different for men because they can still focus on work, on study, on career even after they've got married or when they're over 30 years old.

(Lam, male interviewee)

As for men, there is another reason for them to put work as a priority ahead of marriage. Whilst married men can still focus on their work and career without having to take up domestic responsibilities, they are expected to be the main earner of the family. In the post-*doi moi* period, young men entering the market economy are expected to provide their wives and families with housing, economic security, holidays and other comforts, all of which were once provided by the socialist state under the *bao cap* (subsidy) system. As a result, men feel the need to be well prepared before getting married. Hoang had been going out with her boyfriend Con for eight years from her second year at university. However, they did not plan to get married within the next couple of years, unless 'something blissful happened'. 'Con said that he is still poor, so he would like to build a career and get a bit richer first. And we are in agreement about that', said Hoang.

Until a man can be sure that he's capable of supporting a family, he shouldn't get married. He should first focus on earning money and

achieving professional success, to ensure he'll be able to support his family later.

(Vu, male interviewee)

Both male and female interviewees shared an agenda that put work and career as the first priority, ahead of marriage and familial responsibilities. Such views expressed by the interviewees reflected significant transformations in young people's thinking. In Vietnam, although gender equality is institutionalised and legislated for, and the socialist state has always emphasised egalitarian gender relations (see, for example, Le Thi Nham Tuyet, 1975), and despite some significant achievements of Vietnamese women in the public domain, they are still far from achieving equal opportunities. A number of scholars (for example, Quinn-Judge, 1983; Goodkind, 1995; Le Thi, 1996; Fahey, 1998; Soucy, 2001) even assert that inequality has increased, and women's disadvantages have worsened in the post-reunification era. Goodkind (1995: 358) writes:

... since national reunification in 1975 and the subsequent transformation away from socialism, the major story is not simply that gender inequality remains entrenched, but rather that it has increased measurably along several dimensions [...]. The body of evidence documented here suggests that women's well-being has been affected at every phase of the life course, with inequalities reflected in child survival, marital opportunities, childbearing preferences, employment and leadership prospects, and female representation among the elderly and impoverished.

He identified a range of reasons for this increasing inequality, including post-war demographic imbalances in the gender composition of the population, the transition to a market economy and re-emerging Confucian patterns in household production (Goodkind, 1995: 344). Specifically, with regard to the re-emerging Confucian patterns, Soucy elaborates that Confucian prescriptions such as the three submissions and four virtues about women's place and duties in society and the family have lost power (see chapter 2, section 4.2), as the socialist state condemned them as 'feudal' and 'backward'. However, unequal relationships continue to occur, because of the strong ideal of a happy family, in which the woman is primarily held responsible for creating it. The media in particular has played a significant role in disseminating this ideal, which in turn has helped to reinforce the old Confucian structures that subordinate women to men (Soucy, 2001: 39-41).

Therefore, the present views of young people that women should prioritise career before marriage reflects a transition in their thinking and the mentality with regard to gender roles. On the side of men, there is a reduction in discrimination against women to enter paid employment and develop their own careers, as they understand the need for young women to marry at a later age after having established themselves in a career. On the women's side, despite the fact that they still confront many societal constraints, they now take the advantage of this reduction of discrimination to seize the opportunity to attain economic independence, and play a more important role in economic and social life. Furthermore, most young graduates interviewed said they did not wish themselves or their spouses to be full-time housewives, and expected to have a dual-income family after marriage. This, to a certain extent,

indicates a transition towards greater gender equality both in the family and in the larger society.

2.3. Pragmatism and Flirtation

Before discussing the meaning of the terms 'pragmatism' and 'flirtation', I would like to recount my experiences of interacting with interviewees whilst in the field. Amongst my interviewees, there were two, Hop and Ha, who showed a keen interest in starting a relationship with me. Although these two young men were clear about their backgrounds and workplaces, they hardly spoke in great length about their personal circumstances or love relationships nor were they willing to introduce me into their circle of friends. Later, when I came into contact with some other young people who knew the two men, I happened to discover the fact that they were already in relationships with other girls. When I told them about my knowledge of their 'girlfriends', neither denied the fact. After that we carried on with our social outings, and in those subsequent meetings, I was rather surprised to see that they both dropped the romantic elements and behaved normally, friendly and naturally as if they had never had the intention of dating me. Although I continued to regard them as interesting and clever youths who could communicate their ideas and opinions on a wide variety of issues, I was able to see that had I not been aware of their existing relationships and showed some sort of an interest in them, they would have likely embarked on 'playing a game', in which they would go out with more than one girl.

Discussions with both young and older people helped to provide two possible explanations for the above episode – pragmatism and flirtation in love relationships, which is another, albeit rather negative, cause of the trend to delay marriage. An

older woman said it was pragmatism that is nowadays so common amongst the youth:

My son, for example, might easily take it for granted that he was already given a place to live in the city and a motorcycle to get around. So while you don't really appreciate those things, those who haven't got what you already have, might be interested in you only for what you have. Nowadays it is very difficult to find the right partner, as there are many youths, who are so materialistic. I keep reminding my son that many people want to go out with him because they see that his parents have a nice house, or because they see that his family is well off. You have to be very careful when it comes to relationships.

(Interview with a woman in her fifties)

Although this quotation might at first seem to be somewhat exaggerated, it was not difficult to find other people sharing the same viewpoint. In a disappointed voice, a retired government official observed that for many young people 'there is a great discrepancy between what they think, what they say, and what they do'. He found today's youths to be 'superficial and materialistic':

A lot of them get married by contract, which means they marry each other, but they already foresee the possibility of divorce and wealth disputes. They also marry for a lot of reasons other than true love. For example, reasons such as the partner had a big house,

because her parents held a certain position that could help his career, and so on. I also see an increasing phenomenon of extra-marital relationships among young people.

(Interview with a man in his sixties)

For older people, young Vietnamese are becoming too pragmatic, and this is not an isolated viewpoint, as it was shared by my interviewees. In March 2000, Trong broke up with his girlfriend, whom he said was his first girlfriend and with whom he had been together for four years. He said it came as a shock, considering the fact that earlier in the year they even spoke of getting married:

She was not faithful to me. She went out with someone else without me knowing about it, and that's even after we spoke about getting married. People saw her going out with a guy and they told me. When I questioned her, she didn't deny it. We used to be in love with each other, and she used to be faithful. Her flirtatious behaviour and unfaithfulness only started after she came to work for a joint venture, where she came into contact with foreigners at the workplace.

He was convinced that regular contacts with foreigners at his girlfriend's workplace had made her more pragmatic in her attitudes. He explained to me that working at the joint venture, not only did she get used to having more money and a more expensive lifestyle, but she also came into contact with foreigners, enjoyed a lot of attention from them and felt comfortable with their flirtations and attention. Consequently, she

started a relationship with another man who could please her by providing her with material comforts. Trong went on to conclude that 'young people today rarely get married out of love. Therefore, it is very difficult to find someone who is good and who really loves you and cares for you'.

Stories like that of Trong are no longer rare, particularly amongst urban youth. Interviewees agreed that pragmatism had become increasingly a common attitude among both men and women, which had become problematic in many relationships.

It is true that nowadays youths are more pragmatic and more materialistic even in a love relationship. They would not love just for love, but they'd have to look at the status, the family background, and the finance of the partner. This is not only true with men, as you'd hear girls say, but it applies to girls as well. It is not difficult to find girls whose criteria for an ideal boyfriend are to do with his money, his [social] position and jobs besides his other things. At the end of the day, girls would find men too materialistic while men also find girls very pragmatic. Both sides would look at each other, and they'd see 'bacteria' [*vi trung*, here she meant bad people] everywhere they look really.

(Giang, female interviewee)

My interviewees used the term 'pragmatism' in a negative sense. A person is viewed as being pragmatic in a relationship when (s)he chooses a partner out of practical and usually materialistic calculations. Pragmatism could delay young people's marriage

because until they can find a 'suitable' partner they will not get married. This is increasingly acknowledged by the media. For example, in an issue of *Gia dinh ngay nay* (Today's Family) magazine, there was an article discussing the trend for women to opt for 'late but sure marriages'. It cited various 'objective' and 'subjective' reasons leading to this trend, amongst which there was the 'subjective reason' of 'young girls waiting for the potential husband to become rich'. The article was critical of the fact that with the fast pace of life in the market economy, many young girls realised that 'they actually possess certain values' whilst love is only 'something vague and unrealistic'. Then they decided that they would only get married to a 'golden husband' who can provide them with material comforts. The article said it is understandable that girls have high expectations of a husband, yet in search of a 'golden husband' they forgot that their 'springs' (that is, their youthful years) were passing by ('Ket hon muon: cham ma chac' [Getting married late: slowly but surely], *Gia dinh ngay nay*, issue number 57, April 2000, page 8).

Besides pragmatism, flirtation was another attitude acknowledged by my interviewees as becoming more common amongst young Vietnamese, as many had adopted a less serious approach to relationships. A person was seen as being flirtatious when (s)he was quick to change partners, or when (s)he went out with more than one partner at a time.

You also find a lot of young people are very flirtatious and do not have a serious attitude towards a relationships. Even among my friends, it is not so uncommon for them to keep changing girlfriend/boyfriend in a short time, or to go out with different

people at a time. Or I also found my boyfriend's friends quite flirtatious, too flirtatious to believe what they say, and sometimes I thought to myself if I hadn't had a boyfriend I wouldn't be able to tell if they were being serious or were simply flirting with me, and so wouldn't really know how to take them.

(Giang, female interviewee)

At a friend's wedding in Hanoi in 2000, I had a chance to meet up with several former schoolmates. In our conversations, an ex-classmate, aged twenty-five, recalled his encounter with a young man called Luong, also aged twenty-five, who used to go to the same school with us and who 'has now changed a lot':

One morning I was having breakfast in a café and somebody tapped on my shoulder. I looked up and it was Luong. We had breakfast together. Then Luong proposed that we go somewhere else for coffee, and so we sat and chatted with each other until noon. At noon we went for lunch and in the afternoon we went out for karaoke. I wasn't working on that day and he was flexible, because apparently he is a boss at work. At around four o'clock in the afternoon we said good-bye and exchanged our mobile phone numbers.

In the evening my mobile rang and it was Luong again. He told me that a common friend of ours had just arrived [in Hanoi] from Saigon. So we met up that same evening. The first thing Luong

said when we met up was that ‘this afternoon we had “vegetarian” karaoke [*karaoke chay* – i.e. singing karaoke without having sex]. The singing was good, but it was “vegetarian” karaoke and you’d soon become a monk just singing like that’. Three of us had dinner together, and went dancing. I was really surprised to see Luong on the dance floor. He was like a real playboy – you know, the way he dressed, the way he danced and the way he talked to the girls... It wasn’t the same Luong, who was quite shy, and gentle we all used to know. I was truly shocked...

I was intrigued and decided to carry out a small ‘investigation’ into Luong’s work and private life. As a result, I found a puzzling contradiction between Luong as a serious young professional on the one hand and, on the other hand, as a ‘playboy’ outside of the office. Luong worked as a senior manager for an international beverage company. He earned good money and had a company chauffeur to drive him to work everyday. His co-workers told me that he was well respected at work, and indeed quite liked by his women colleagues. No women at work had ever complained about his manners and attitudes, as they all agreed that he had proper behaviour and attitude towards women, and that he was a good manager. He had also been going out with a girl in a stable relationship for several years.

Although understandably not everybody was ready to talk about whether they were flirtatious or not, Di told me that it was not difficult to find young men having several affairs at a time. He said two of his friends even had stable girlfriends, yet they still ‘sleep around’:

They do sleep with prostitutes or flirting with other girls for fun when they go out with other men without their girlfriends' knowledge. At work, they're professionals and are respected by co-workers. They both earn good money, but they also spend a lot of money.

In some cases, flirtation can be a result of pragmatic attitudes towards relationships. Being involved in several relationships at a time gives the youth a chance to make comparisons and decide to whom amongst his or her partners it would be best to commit. In such cases, flirtation delays marriage in the same way as pragmatism does: unless the youth finds the 'ideal partner' (s)he will remain single. In cases like Luong and the two friends of Khac, flirtation was a manifestation of a new lifestyle and liberal attitude towards love relationships that many young urban Vietnamese have adopted. It means that the youth is not serious towards relationships and does not consider marriage and commitment to be of much significance, and hence (s)he is not too concerned about entering a long-term commitment.

Pragmatism and flirtation are amongst the attitudes and behaviours deemed to be against traditional Vietnamese virtues. In the opinion of older people with whom I spoke, these attitudes were regarded as manifestations of individualism and materialism, which have come to dominate young people's ways of thinking. If it is possible to identify a reason for these changes in young people's attitudes, it is the contradictions of the 'open-door' policy that people often speak of. Although 'open door' is regularly extolled for bringing about foreign investment and economic

development, it is simultaneously blamed for having imported the decadence of Western culture. The Vietnamese government as well as older people speak of 'the wave of material culture with the domination of individualistic ideas' which prevails in developed countries and is now permeating developing countries like Vietnam (Dang Canh Khanh, 1996b: 5). They regularly express their concern over changes, which have been occurring in the society since *doi moi* and which are affecting young people:

Since the day when the country embarked upon the *doi moi* era, there is a heart warming fact that the general standards of living of the people has been markedly improved, but at the same time there are negative phenomena taking place amongst a portion of the youth that worry us. The social environment is being contaminated by a number of objective factors such as poisonous videotapes and cultural products that permeate through various channels into the young generation. The pragmatic way of thinking and lifestyle that value materials and money highly, are like a type of infectious virus spreading amongst the youth (Van Hung, 1997).

Since the early 1990s, the government has spared no effort to crack down on what it calls 'social evils' and those efforts have been directly aimed at youth. This is exemplified by the fact that a series of decrees and circulars have been issued over the years (Van Hung, 1997), and most recently in June 2001, authorities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City imposed a midnight curfew on discos and dance halls, and further proposed a ban on alcohol at these entertainment venues (Reuters, 2001).

Pragmatism and flirtation are matters not to be measured in quantitative terms, but as seen through the opinions of my interviewees, both young and old, as well as government actions and media criticism, they have become increasingly popular attitudes of a greater proportion of youth towards love relationships and commitment in the market economy. Whilst such attitudes might be seen as morally disgraceful and are the subject of a great deal of criticism, they demonstrate the present-day tensions between options and commitment in relationships. The less predictable futures of potential partners in the competitive capitalist-style labour markets lead young people either to delay commitments to lifetime marital choices or make marital decisions more difficult. Consequently they are more prone to short-term relationships.

As many youths are becoming more pragmatic and less serious in relationships, there are negative generalisations in portraying young people: older people as well as many youths themselves are shaking their heads and join in a chorus that 'Young people today are too materialistic and pragmatic'. Not only older people gradually lose trust and faith in this younger generation, but within the youth itself there exists a sense of suspicion and distrust towards one another, and this is making it increasingly difficult for young people to be sure when it comes to choosing a lifetime partner.

2.4. 'Modernity' in Courtship

As a continuing part of a discussion on the diversity of love and marriage, the following section of the chapter looks at an array of issues that are seen as 'modern phenomena' in present-day Vietnamese society.

Sex before Marriage

In 'traditional' Vietnamese society, premarital sex and unwanted pregnancy were strongly condemned. At the centre of the condemnation of sex before marriage was the woman. In accordance with Confucian ethics, a 'good' woman was to abide by the foremost principle of chastity (*trinh*), which included not only the defence of virginity before marriage but also absolute faithfulness and devotion toward one's husband (Marr, 1981: 192; Jamieson, 1993: 27). Chastity of the woman was not only the foundation of her dignity and morality, but also a matter of reputation or, if transgressed, of humiliation for her whole family and the kin network (see chapter 2, section 4.2 for further details on a range of 'traditional' Vietnamese values). It was in such a social context that the parents and grandparents of today's generation of youth had lived and grown up. For many of them, these traditional attitudes and values were a key factor in moulding their thinking and judgements on social behaviour. Consequently, these parents have, to a greater or lesser extent, expected their children to subscribe to the same 'old and conservative' way of thinking with regard to sexual behaviour.

The parents of Nga were amongst those parents who disapproved of premarital sexual relationships. They explicitly expressed their disapproval to the young couple and forbade them to behave in this way. Nga said that was why she and her boyfriend of three years were not having sex with each other:

There are times when we were holding each other, but my boyfriend hastily pushed me away and said: 'please stop and keep away. I'm afraid I won't be able to control myself'. We're under a lot of family pressure. When I first started to go out with him, my parents called me in, and my mom said: 'It is a matter of the whole family's reputation and honour, so we request that you and your boyfriends are not doing it so to help keep our face.' So that's why we can't do it [have sex] until we get married.

Nga did not keep it secret, and was not ashamed of the fact that at the age of twenty-five she was still a virgin despite her having a stable boyfriend. Clearly, to her and her boyfriend, premarital sexual abstinence was primarily a duty to their parents, so as to protect the 'face' of their parents. However, many of her friends, who were also unmarried youths, often joked about it. When I went out with her and five friends of hers, a young man called Liem entertained the group with this joke:

The other day Nga was really down, and she felt like she wanted to commit suicide. So she went to the doctor for advice. The doctor told her: 'You could get a gun, aim it at your left nipple and shoot'.

Nga went home and did the same thing, but she didn't die. Instead she was taken to hospital to get treatment for her stomach.

Everybody immediately cracked at the joke. Except me as I was slow to link up the story line and the fact that she was a virgin. This situation inferred to me two possibilities: either that everyone in the group had some experience in sexual relationships, or that these young people enjoyed joking about Nga, as her situation had become public knowledge, whilst they hid the fact that they might be virgins themselves.

During subsequent meetings and interviews, these young men and women told me of their experiences in romantic liaisons, including sex before marriage.³ It was clear that all the five youths, including one man and four women, had engaged in sexual relationships with their partners; amongst them there was one girl whose boyfriend was a foreigner. Setting aside the issue of dating foreigners, which I shall discuss in a later part of this chapter, the engagement in premarital sexual relationships, and even the openness to speak about it by these young urban, educated men and women indeed carried a significant sense of modernity and liberation – they were anything but traditional conformists.

Accounts of the personal experience of my interviewees show that sex before marriage for these youths had broad implications, ranging from sexual relationships with a stable partner to having casual sex and sex with prostitutes. Whilst it was generally the case that amongst my interviewees, young women only had sex with their boyfriends, a number of young male interviewees confirmed that they had had

experiences with prostitutes, and in some cases like Khac and Viet, even while they were in a long-term relationship. Khac, who had a stable girlfriend, told me that during a trip to Hai Phong one summer with some of his male friends, he had slept with a prostitute: 'We originally intended to stay in Hai Phong for the night, but we felt so "itchy" and "restless" and couldn't stand it, so we drove down to Do Son and stayed there the night to see some prostitutes'. Yet, it was not the only time he had done so. Viet was also in a long-term relationship, and intended to marry his girlfriend in the near future:

You'll find that it is quite a common practice in Vietnam to take clients out for entertainment at those places where you can drink and have girls. Funny that sometimes I was in my girlfriend's arms and found myself thinking of or missing girls [i.e. prostitutes]. My girlfriend knows it and she wasn't happy, but I told her that everybody is like that, and the most important thing is I love her and want to be with her.

Although these young urban Vietnamese have apparently gone a long way from the traditional norms towards sexual liberation, living with a partner before marriage is not an option. In this research, amongst all cases where interviewees confirmed having had premarital sex, no one actually lived with their partner, no matter how long they had been together in the relationship. Besides, their sexual relationships were normally without their parents' knowledge. One of the main reasons for this was the youths' continuous co-residence with parents and the strong parental influence. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter (see section 1.1), although in

many areas parents have relaxed their control on youths, many parents still exerted considerable influence in order to make sure that their children went out with the 'right person' and entered a compatible marriage. Furthermore, many parents were of the traditional view that premarital sexual relationships and unwanted pregnancies were shaming. Consequently, they went to great lengths to safeguard the virginity of their daughters. Viet said when he first went out with his girlfriend, the girl's parents watched the couple's movements closely. After the couple had been together for about two years, parental control was relaxed so they could have more time with each other, but this still did not mean that they could live together.

When we first went out with each other, her father used to be standing at the door every time I failed to take her home before nine-thirty in the evening. He would slap her as soon as she gets into the house, and that was in my presence. [...] It was difficult enough to ask permission from her parents to go out, let alone asking for permission to live with her without first getting married. If we want to live together, we'll have to get married.

(Viet, male interviewee)

Another important reason is the continued strong social pressure and prejudice against cohabitation outside of wedlock. Urban Vietnamese youths may be liberal in their own thinking with regard to sexual relationships, but they are also acutely aware of the social prejudice. My interviewees said that even those who had experienced sex before marriage would never consider cohabitation before marriage.

Duong who had had sex with her long-term partner, opposed 'trial cohabitation', and had this to say:

It is not something that is common in Vietnam whilst I know it is a normal thing in the West. But we are here in Vietnam and not in a western country, so there are the traditions and the culture and also social pressures that we can't ignore.

This last quote points to traditions and social pressures as reasons for youths not to cohabit before marriage. Nowadays young educated urban Vietnamese, like my interviewees, learn of what is going on in Western countries through television, videos, foreign magazines and literature, and the Internet. A number of them have also been abroad to experience life in a foreign country for themselves. However, Confucian influence with an emphasis on filial piety and submission to one's elders means that these youths do not wish to confront their elders, and directly their parents. Indeed, this tension between the old and the new, and the disinclination to confront parents and elders are the most obvious characteristics of Vietnamese youth. David Marr noted the 'considerable confusion in society over precisely which ethical norms deserve precedence, combined with an explosion in things foreign that young people find quite exciting' (1996: 4). At the same time,

When compared with young people in the West, Vietnamese youth show much less inclination to confront or shock their elders directly. Rather than argue with his father, for example, a young man is far more likely to stay away from home, to borrow money

from friends, to drink, and to slip quietly in and out of the house when parents are otherwise occupied. [...] A young woman cannot just come and go from home like young men, but must convince her parents she is safeguarded by siblings, female friends or her fiancé. Strange hairdos or tattoos are very rare, perhaps because these confront parents overtly, whereas unusual clothing, jewellery or cosmetics can be put on and removed away from home (Marr, 1996: 6-7).

Although it has been difficult to determine how popular it is for young people to engage in premarital sexual relationships, as some interviewees were understandably reluctant to share their personal experiences on the matter, sex before marriage is indeed a 'modern thing' of today's generation. Furthermore, we can conclude that whilst young urban Vietnamese have become more and more liberal in their attitudes towards sexual relationships, including premarital sex, they are still very Confucian in the sense that they do not overtly challenge their elders and specifically their parents. Not only do young couples not cohabit outside of wedlock, but also their premarital sexual relationships are normally without the parents' knowledge. It is, therefore, in the matter of sex before marriage that we see the old and the new in close interrelationship and characterising the tensions and contradictions experienced by this segment of today's Vietnamese youth.

Relationships with Foreigners

Amongst my seventy-five interviewees there were three men and eight women who were going out, or had been together with a foreign partner. This number is not a

large proportion of interviewees, and in the larger society, the percentage of youths dating foreigners is even smaller. Today, dating foreigners and mixed marriages are not popular in Vietnam, which has only been open to the outside world for little more than a decade, and is by no means a cosmopolitan society.

It is worth mentioning that before *doi moi*, when there were few foreign visitors to the country and contacts between local people and foreigners (including those from the former socialist bloc) were very restricted, there were virtually no romantic liaisons between the Vietnamese and foreigners (also see chapter 4, section 3). This was the case even for people who used to study and work in former friendly communist countries. Older people who had studied in Russia told me of their student days and certain of their fellow students, who were reported to the Vietnamese Embassy in Moscow for being in a relationship with a Russian or a foreign student, or of how Vietnamese students formed 'units' at each university to supervise one another and make sure that no one would become involved in a romantic relationship with a foreigner. It was official policy then that Vietnamese students studying abroad in these socialist countries should not form relationships with foreigners, and if someone was caught, the 'unit' would have the duty to report to officials at the Embassy who would subsequently decide whether to discipline or send the individual concerned home. A man in his fifties told me about his student days in Moscow, and about how his former Russian friends kept questioning him as to why he always insisted on having another man with him when escorting a [Russian] girl home after a party or a social event. In a joking voice, he told me:

My usual explanation is that 'We, Vietnamese people, like to be together. Therefore we go together so that when I drop you at your home, I would have my friend to go home with me, rather than going home on my own'. But reality was that we tried to avoid a situation where we were caught walking alone with a foreign girl.

(Interview with a man in his fifties)

In comparison with the pre-*doi moi* period, the fact that there are young people going out with foreigners is, on its own, sufficient to merit discussion. First of all, it is evident that between today's young people and their parents, there exist profound differences in the attitudes towards relationships with foreigners. As for older people living in the closed society of pre-*doi moi* Vietnam, regulations to control contacts between local people and foreigners and the lack of foreign visitors to the country restricted possibilities for romantic liaisons. Ordinary Vietnamese people then had very few chances of experiencing other cultures (see chapter 4), and this lack of exposure produced a generation of people who were rather inflexible in their thinking towards anything 'outside' or 'overseas'. When Vietnam opened its doors in the late 1980s, these older people suddenly found it difficult to understand, let alone relate to or identify themselves with different peoples and cultures. Therefore, when it comes to romantic relationships with someone foreign, they do not favour the idea.

Young people don't understand that mixed marriages can never work because of cultural differences. Western culture and Vietnamese culture are not compatible. So when a mixed couple move in and live together, they will gradually realise that they do

not really match each other and that there exist between them a lot of cultural clashes. By the time they realise that, it would have been too late to turn back.

(Interview with man in his sixties)

Sharing the same viewpoint, a woman in her forties told me the following story of her family:

My cousin is quite pretty and a student of English language. Besides going to university, she sometimes works part-time at international trade fairs and exhibitions, as an interpreter for foreign exhibitors. At these exhibitions she always attracts some foreigners who fall in love with her. She herself feels good about it, and also quite likes the idea of having a relationship with a foreigner. But our whole family is trying hard to make her understand that such relationships would never work. *Yeu nguoi nuoc ngoai* [loving foreigners] will only lead to suffering and misunderstandings due to cultural differences.

(Interview with a woman in her forties)

However, interviews and exchanges with young people in Hanoi showed that whilst youths did acknowledge the existence of certain cultural differences, they maintained that it was not sufficient to deter them from having a foreign partner, and their attitudes towards foreign liaisons were generally open and relaxed.

If I had a choice between a Vietnamese and a foreigner who are equal in personality, character, and all other qualities, I would choose the Vietnamese guy. That is because generally speaking it would be easier for us to understand and share life with someone of the same cultural background. Having said that, I do not insist on marrying someone Vietnamese. I have met a lot of nice and good Western men and I feel good being with them. The underlining matter is that it is important to be able to understand the Western culture. If you don't understand it, you will not be prepared to accept, or even be hostile to, those cultural differences.

(Le, female interviewee)

Compared to their parents, today's young Vietnamese belong to a generation that came of age in the era of *doi moi* and *mo cua*. They enjoy greater opportunities to see for themselves what other cultures and peoples are like. Besides, as there has been an increasing number of foreign tourists and businesspeople arriving in Vietnam whilst controls on contacts with foreigners have been relaxed, people now have the opportunities for more personal relationships with foreigners. In this research, interviewees generally have had higher education, together with computer and Internet skills, and an ability to speak foreign languages. All these factors combined with the urban environment of a large city mean that it is very likely for these young graduates to have regular contacts, exchanges with, and exposure to, things and people foreign through various everyday situations, the media, and even overseas travel. Therefore, they find it easier to accept the idea of romantic liaisons with foreigners or having a foreign partner.

In-depth interviews also revealed a factor that specifically encourages young educated women to engage in relationships with foreigners. To a number of women graduates with whom I spoke, being with a foreign man had the significance of boosting their self-confidence and reinforcing the ideal of gender equality. Le elaborated on why she found Western men 'nice and good' and felt more comfortable being with them:

I don't feel as if I was treated as a woman who should just be in the kitchen all the time... you know what I mean. A lot of Vietnamese men tend to think that women's place is in the kitchen and women have to be submissive to men. It is wrong. I cannot put up with men who are authoritative to women. [...] After all, I think the best scenario is to get married to a Vietnamese guy who has been living abroad for quite a long time. In that case you'd be able to enjoy gender equality, and get the support you need by the husband for your own career, and at the same time don't have to put up with any cultural differences.

Kim spoke English and French, had travelled abroad, and had just finished her Masters in Business Administration at an overseas university. She herself was in a relationship with a Frenchman for three years, whom she got to know during a visit to France. Kim stated her viewpoint by posing a rhetorical question: 'Who else to love, if not *yeu Tay* [love a Westerner]?'. Being very self-confident and well educated, she found it difficult to find a Vietnamese man who was on a par with her

in terms of knowledge and education, but also who appreciated her for her intelligence. The difficulty of finding a compatible partner was also experienced by Hien, who in a way described it as a dilemma:

I could not find a Vietnamese man whom I can get along with. Good and talented men have all married, whilst educated younger men tend to be too snobbish to put up with, because they look down on other people and also regard women as inferior. That's how I ended up being with a foreigner.

[...] I'd say that there are things that we [she and her foreign partner] don't have in common, and our views on a number of things are different, but the important thing is that we both listen to, and respect each other.

(Hien, female interviewee)

It is clear that, although dating and love relationships with foreigners are not popular amongst young people, its occurrence testifies to their general open-mindedness and their increasing understanding of different cultures and peoples, which is certainly a result of the country's reforms and economic integration with other nations. There exists a small number of urban, educated young women who are self-confident, independent and also increasingly unhappy with the continuing unequal treatment of women by men. Consequently, they seek relationships with foreigners as a way of escaping a future family life in which they are expected to be submissive to the husband, and of achieving a greater degree of equality with the male partner.

Internet Dating

Every day after coming back from work and evening class, Nguyet used to spend an hour or two on the Internet. She was, however, not surfing, but 'saying hello to everybody'. She was a member of what was called *cau lac bo lam quen* (friends-making club) – a club that was set up on a Vietnamese website for people to get to know one another. Through this club, she got to know a number of people, and although she did not start any romantic relationships, she developed strong friendships with two of them, one from Hanoi and one from Ho Chi Minh City:

It all started by exchanging messages via the chat room. Amongst my web-acquaintances, I really liked these two guys, and so we were 'talking' to one another everyday for several months. Then we agreed that we would want to speak on the phone. After several times talking on the telephone like that, we also arranged to meet up. Both guys have now become very good friends of mine, and I hang around quite regularly with Vinh, the guy from Hanoi.

As for Hung, one of his cyber friendships developed further. He found a girlfriend on the Internet, and had been going out with her for nearly a year. They got along well, and the relationship looked stable enough so they decided that they wanted to 'move ahead' and get married. Prior to this girlfriend, Hung had had contacts and meetings with a number of other girls with whom he also made acquaintance via the Internet. He found Internet dating 'fun, convenient and reliable' and recommended it to several of his friends.

Internet dating is different in Vietnam. In the West, everybody has access to the Internet, and the computer is not a luxury item. But in Vietnam, you can get to know other people, make friends and start a relationship on the Internet. Once you're connected, you belong to the more educated proportion of the population who not only know about computers, but also own a computer and can afford access to the Internet. You aren't just anybody. In Vietnam you'd find a lot of interesting people meeting each other on the Internet. There are a lot of students and professionals.

(Hung, male interviewee)

In Vietnam, telecommunications were not generally affordable; at least this was my observation whilst in the field. Internet connection was particularly expensive, even by Western standards. When someone is connected, it means that (s)he could afford not only a computer, but also a high monthly Internet subscription fee. In 2000, the fixed monthly subscription fee was 30,000 dongs, on top of which there was a per minute access rate of up to 300 dongs and telephone charge for Internet use. Take, for example, a youth who spent one hour per day in the evening to chat on the Internet. The fixed monthly subscription fee was 30,000 dongs, connection charge after 7 p.m. was 250 dongs per minute, and the telephone rate for local calls was 65 dongs per minute. This incurred a monthly bill of 559,200 dongs, which was equivalent to some 40 US dollars per month – not a cheap bill given the average GDP per capita of around 400 US dollars.

Recently, however, the government has showed commitments to improving telecommunications services, as it plans to invest 100 million US dollars in the information technology sector over the period of 2003-2005 with the aim to bring the number of Internet users from 175,000 in 2002 up to four million (or five per cent of total population) by 2005 (Asia Pulse, 9 September 2002; Associated Press, 3 February 2003). Since late 2001, the cost of Internet connection has started dropping, thus enabling the rapid expansion of Internet cafés in Hanoi and other urban hubs as well as allowing a greater number of people to access the web at cheaper rates. The spread of Internet cafés now means even if one does not own a personal computer, one can still get connected and go to 'chat rooms'. A survey conducted in 2002 by the Vietnamese Culture and Information Ministry shows that most of the customers at the country's estimated 5,000 Internet cafes are students between the ages of 14 and 24, and the vast majority used the Internet for chatting (Associated Press, 3 February 2003). In other words, the Internet is increasingly popular in Vietnam, but only among the young and educated urbanites.

In order to join a *cau lac bo lam quen* (friends-making club) or a *cau lac bo giao luu* (exchange club), one needs to fill in a registration form with one's personal details, and choose a log-in name and a password. Upon submitting the form, one is then registered, and can log in to view other members' information, choose whom to make friends with, or simply join the general discussion forum. To search for a person to make contacts with, one can make a search by one or more criterion, including name, interest, profession, academic title, age and gender of the target person. Personal information on a registered member of a *cau lac bo lam quen* on a

Vietnamese website comes in a page accessible to all other club members and looks something like this:

Full name:	Minh Tam
DOB:	04 May 1973
Sex:	Male
Address:	64 Le Quang Dinh
Telephone:	8412247
Nationality:	Vietnamese
Marital Status:	Single
Academic Title:	Bachelor of Science
Profession:	Architect, photographer
Email:	<u>tlines@bdvn.vnd.net</u>
Personal Website:	N/A
Self-introduction:	1m68, 47 kg. Interested in studying cosmology, fung shei, black and white photography, classical music, and satirical literature. Very keen on meeting other mates who share the same hobbies in order to exchange research experience and opinions, and enrich knowledge. It has been a very long time that I have not been able to find anyone, so through this club I hope to be able to get in touch with other peers who have the same interests.

Compared to other Internet sites that are based outside Vietnam but designed for overseas Vietnamese to make friends and find a date, members of the Vietnam-based

chat rooms – who are mainly people living in Vietnam – are prompted to provide quite specific and detailed information upon registration. Such information, as shown above, easily reveals the identity of the registered person. However, members generally do not seem to mind giving out their correct personal details, including genuine telephone numbers and contact addresses, and they seem to make an effort in presenting and advertising themselves. It shows that most people have the intention of making friends and starting relationships with one another on the web. In addition, requests for such information as profession and academic title indicates that administrators of the web site assume their members to be professional and well educated. A browse through the list of members reveals that indeed most people are either students or have graduated from university.

I also assessed the message board to read members' messages, and found that people communicate with one another in a polite and educated way. The following is an example, in which a girl called Thuy sent out a message to other club members in order to look for a boyfriend. The message reads:

I'm a gentle, nice and good looking, if not to say beautiful, girl. However, I still have not got a boyfriend, and I don't understand why. If anyone wishes to befriend me, please email me. If you want to see a picture of me, please look up in 'Members of the Club'. My name is Thanh Thuy.

And following is a reply from a youth, whose nickname in this web club is Bonjovi:

Hi Thuy! If you are indeed a nice girl as you said, the reason for your not having a boyfriend probably lies in yourself. Are you sure that you have given opportunities to those who wish to get to know you? Or do you have a personality that attracts others. To tell you the truth, a good-looking girl always attracts crowds of men. But that is only for the very beginning, because people tend to like beauty. Getting to understand each other is another matter. It depends on what kind of person you are, whether your personality, your inward beauty, match your beautiful looks. I am very straightforward, so I hope you'd understand if I was saying things that you might not agree with. My name is Thang. I am doing my fourth year at Van Lang University. I am quite normal, nothing special. I would like to get to know you and to find out why such a nice girl like you (as you said) does not have a boyfriend. And who knows, I might also be able to find the attractiveness and sweetness in you, and you might also discover the same thing in me. OK, email me if you like.

According to my interviewees, registering with a chat room or an exchange club does not mean they are lonely and have no chance to meet people, nor that they are desperately searching for a partner. Also, it does not mean that one is susceptible to unreliable, 'dodgy' or unknown characters. Rather it means that one is keen to interact with a network of people who have the same sort of social and educational backgrounds and who share the same interests. As I have pointed out, members of *cau lac bo lam quen* on a Vietnam-based website make up a rather 'exclusive' club

of more well-off and educated people. Thanks to this high credibility of the club, making friends and dating on the Internet is developing fast amongst young urban Vietnamese. In November 1999, Vietnamese Internet service provider FPT set up its *Cau lac bo lam quen* at <http://www.fpt.vn/clb-lamquen/>. In the month of August 2000 alone, when I looked at the website, there were 351 people who had joined the club, comprising mainly young people from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. By June 2001, when I accessed the website again, the total number of registered members was more than 8,000.

The fast growth of Internet use among young Vietnamese in larger urban areas needs to be considered in conjunction with a number of factors. First is the fact that the vast majority of the country's population lives in poorer rural areas, and the gap in wealth and living standards between cities and the countryside is widening. Secondly is the government's tightening control over the use of the Internet, despite its bid to improve telecommunication services and increase the number of Internet users (Associated Press, 3 February 2003). These two factors combined mean that despite its relative expansion, Internet use will continue to be restrictive and exclusive, at least to the rich and urban, for another considerable period of time. Therefore, Internet dating – being a modern development among young Vietnamese – reflects, and continues to reflect, the socio-economic background of the user.

3. Chapter Summary: The 'Old' versus the 'New'

In this chapter, my interviewees' perspectives of, and personal accounts on matters of family and relationships have demonstrated a mixture of the 'old' and the 'new' in the values and behaviour of Vietnamese educated youth.

Within the family, young people today maintain the traditionally close, significant, and yet submissive bonds with their parents. This parent-child relationship can be first attributed to the continuing co-residence with the parents until marriage, which is both a continuing Vietnamese practice and a result of the scarcity and the high cost of housing that hinders young people moving out. Secondly, Confucian teachings emphasising the meaning of parent-child relationships and the submissiveness of children to parents are still influential. When these factors are combined, the parents exert a continuing strong influence and control upon their children and expect them to obey.

Whilst young people are subject to parental authority, my interviewees found that parental authority had been relaxed in many areas of their lives. Yet it was still substantial in matters of love relationships and marriage. For example, youths today are given greater freedom to decide what to do in their free time or choose their profession, but they are not allowed to enter into relationships with a partner whom their parents deem 'incompatible'. Imbued by the virtue of filial piety, most youths obey their parents and make them happy by entering into a 'compatible' relationship or terminating an 'incompatible' one. Furthermore, whilst the general attitude of young people towards sexual relationships has become more liberal, these relationships are always conducted without the parents' knowledge, and young couples do not live together outside of wedlock. This is, as Marr rightly pointed out, another typical feature of Vietnamese youth. They rarely confront their elders and their parents directly.

The submissive parent-child relationship has also influenced young people's behaviour in various wider social contexts. It is most apparent in young people's interaction with those older than them in daily social encounters and in the work place. Although respect for seniors is considered proper behaviour, some people express the view that unconditional and excessive respect and submissiveness at work hinder professionalism and work efficiency, because young employees are always expected to listen to senior colleagues and not to challenge their ideas.

This chapter's brief detour into the perspectives of present-day young people on family and other relationships also reveals a number of 'modern phenomena', such as youth's greater focus on career, the tendency towards premarital sexual relationships, relationships with foreigners, and Internet dating. These trends suggest the increasing encounters of young Vietnamese with Western lifestyles. Such encounters occur as the society becomes more open and information is more readily available through education, the media, contacts with foreigners and opportunities to travel abroad. Due to this greater exposure to the outside world and other cultures, today's Vietnamese youth are more open-minded than their parents. Therefore, it is easier for them to understand, accept, and sometimes even identify with other cultures. This is particularly the case for urban educated youths, where social transformations as a result of *doi moi* and the 'open door' policy are greater. Together with this new open-mindedness, transformations in young people's attitudes towards gender can also be seen. Greater awareness about gender equality has led to more women delaying marriage to focus on careers and to the phenomenon of romantic liaisons with foreigners. What is more, interviewees have confirmed that pragmatism, flirtations and even sex with prostitutes, were taking place amongst

youths, causing concern among both older people and the youths themselves about social behaviour and the morality of young Vietnamese.

In sum, young people's attitudes towards family and love relationships demonstrate some continuity with tradition, but at the same time an interaction, and even contradiction, between long-established values and post-*doi moi* attitudes and behaviour. The evolution in young people's attitudes and behaviour towards 'modernity' clearly reflects social transformations after *doi moi*. In this tension between tradition and modernity, we need to examine how young people identify themselves. Their identity and value orientations will therefore be examined in the next chapter.

Notes to Chapter 6:

1. During the period of 1930-45, there was a number of novels by writers of the *Tu luc van doan* [Self-Strength Literary Movement] that focused on depicting strong parental influence in contrast to the more and more popular belief in individualism and marriage out of love by young French-educated people. See, for example, *Nua chung xuan* [In the Midst of Spring] by Khai Hung. A rather detailed narration of it in English can be found in Neil Jamieson (1993), *Understanding Vietnam*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
2. Simpson is the brand of motorbike made in the former East Germany. It was very popular in the streets of Vietnam during the 1980s.
3. Apparently, the fact that I am a youth myself helped greatly in facilitating these discussions, and made them feel comfortable to communicate, and share information with me about this issue.

Chapter 7

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY OF VALUES AMID SOCIAL CHANGE

Today young people are subject to a variety of influences from the state and public organisations, older people, their peers, education and the media in the context of the broader processes of globalisation and modernisation. Of course, these forces interact, though they are not always in harmony. Scenarios of conflict occur daily between the generations, the individual and the community, the 'old' and the 'new', the domestic and the foreign, and so on. Coming of age amid these conflicts and contradictions, young Vietnamese are caught in the middle, having to decide for themselves what is appropriate and inappropriate, and what is desirable in all aspects of life. Based on the empirical data presented in chapters 5 and 6, together with reference to the framework of Vietnamese values set out in chapter 2, this chapter provides an analysis of the value orientations of young university graduates, who will become tomorrow's national élite. Such an analysis will help in my attempt to provide some generalisations in portraying today's Vietnamese youth. In addition, I will also make some comparisons between Vietnamese youths and youths from other Asian nations, as such comparisons help to highlight contrasts and similarities between young people in Vietnam and other countries, and so helps to place the Vietnamese in a broader context.

1. Preserving 'Traditional' Values in Relationships with Parents and Older People

Data from my in-depth interviews combined with my own participant observation during the fieldwork and data from the national survey of youth (Thai Duy Tuyen,

1995) suggest that in their relationships with parents and older people, young people today continue to subscribe to Confucian moral and social values. However, the extent to which certain values are adopted by young people is different from the experience of their parents' generation, and so the question of whether young people subscribe entirely to the range of Vietnamese values described in chapter 2 needs to be considered further. Data from my research indicate three main tendencies in young people's relationships with parents and older people.

First of all and as a general rule, *young people are expected to listen to parents and older people*. As seen from the accounts of my graduate interviewees presented in the previous two chapters, it is common for youths to listen to, and follow their parents' advice and opinions. Interviewees said that they respected, and listened to their parents' views on matters ranging from schooling, employment and choice of marriage partner. This is a clear manifestation of filial piety (*hieu*) which has been a core virtue in the parent-child relationship. Nguyen Minh Tam writing on today's 'Vietnamese youth and the preservation and promotion of family values' remarks:

Today filial piety is still a moral standard for youth, although the way in which young people express their *hieu* is different to their parents' generation. They no longer obey their parents unconditionally, but they do analyse [these opinions and advice] and persuade their parents to accept the new [ideas and ways of doing things] (2001: 283).

While the strong continuous influence of Confucian doctrine is certainly acknowledged, findings from my interviews with young graduates show that the above remark is only partially true. My interviews suggest that young people usually try hard to listen to parents and please them. In many instances they obey the parents unconditionally, as seen in the story of the twenty-nine-year-old Nam, who said to his mother that she had the right to determine his life because 'you have given birth to me'. On the one hand, interviewees said that they have a greater say in such matters as choosing friends, schooling, employment, and lifestyles, although as demonstrated in chapter 5 some people will still choose a profession or a particular workplace entirely due to their parents' wishes. On the other hand, parents' opinions and approval on matters relating to choice of marriage partner are essential, even though free-choice marriages are considered commonplace. In other words, while parents do not force their children to marry someone without considering the importance of the emotional dimension of the relationship, they do want to be reassured that their children's potential spouse meets their expectations in such areas as morality, behaviour, social and educational background, and the economic and social compatibility of families (*mon dang ho doi*). When a youth falls in love with an 'incompatible' partner and meets opposition from parents, no matter how strong his or her love is, (s)he would rarely upset the parents by insisting on maintaining the relationship.

Therefore, my findings do not entirely support the claim, which I quoted above, that young people 'no longer obey their parents unconditionally'. It would be more appropriate to say that young people today enjoy greater flexibility in choice in certain areas of social life, such as choice of employment, friends, and hobbies, but

with regard to choice of marriage partner, they do not really have the option to oppose parental wishes. In other words, these twenty-something-year-old graduates enjoy freedom of choice within limits, and, in certain matters, particularly with regard to choice of marriage partner, they still have to obey their parents. Besides, the levels of parental influence vary according to specific circumstances, families and individuals, and therefore the levels of obedience vary accordingly. For example, as already demonstrated in chapter 6, concerning the matter of marriage, some parents exert their influence in the form of making frequent jokes about their children's celibacy, but when it comes to dating an 'incompatible' partner, parents can adopt a stronger method by categorically forbidding them to carry on the relationship. Whatever the circumstance, the overall tendency is that young people normally take great care so as not to damage the relationship with their parents and to maintain family solidarity. Sometimes when they are of a different opinion from their parents and when such differences concern matters not relating to love relationships and choice of marriage partner, young people often express their differences and seek to change their parents' views after having first tried out the parents' advice. For example, Kieu knew from the start that getting into *bien che* she would be poor and bored, but she agreed to follow her parents' advice, though only for a trial period of nine months when she then moved out.

Secondly, *there exists a degree of compromise from the parents in their relationship with their children*. Qualitative data suggest that parents nowadays grant their children greater freedom in their life choices. Particularly in matters such as marriage, it is no longer the case that the selection of the future spouse is made solely among the families without consulting their children. In other words, arranged

marriage is no longer the norm, although free-choice marriage is not practised as parents continue to direct their children in spouse selection. Today, in the context of a competitive market economy, parents recognise the need for their children to gain education, develop a career, and achieve some degree of economic security before getting married and having children, which was traditionally seen as the paramount expression of filial piety. Therefore, they no longer strongly oppose children delaying marriage.

Thirdly, to say that young people are very concerned about filial piety is not to deny that there is no *conflict between the generations*. In fact, young people find it extremely difficult both to please their parents and adapt to social changes brought about by the 'open door' policy, a market economy and cultural globalisation. Youths are caught in a paradox of trying to abide by the parental moral instructions and at the same time embrace what they value as 'modernity', and adopt a forward-looking perspective on their life and work. For young people a possible solution is through a compromise whereby they pay outward respect to the authority of the parents and elders, while living increasingly individualistic, personal lives. Outward respect is often manifested in the act of showing obedience towards the parents and elders. Outside their parents' home when they are together with their friends, they enjoy freedom to exchange their ideas and experiences, share information on a wide range of issues, and keep up with the latest trends. They can even engage in premarital sexual relations or date different partners. At home, however, they continue to listen to their parents and never confront them directly. This strategy has given them scope both to be up-to-date with modern social trends and fulfil the cardinal virtue of filial piety.

This strategy of non-confrontation also extends to many other circumstances. When dealing with elders, young people always exercise *le* with due consideration. *Le* emphasises social conformity, and more specifically proper manners and behaviour towards, and specifically submissiveness to older people. While interviewees agreed that the preservation of the virtue of *le* was necessary, it was apparent that abiding by it had also become a survival tactic for youth in many workplaces. Typically this is seen in government offices, where workers are appraised strictly in accordance with their seniority, and respect given to senior co-workers is usually placed above professionalism. As seen from the stories of a number of interviewees presented in chapter 5, when senior workers refused to adopt a more professional and liberal attitude towards younger colleagues, young people had no choice but to obey their seniors, compromise and conform to the code of conduct of *le*. In such instances, abiding by *le* and adopting a non-confrontational stance had become more than a means to preserve a traditional code of conduct, but rather a tactic for the young worker to survive the rigid seniority-based hierarchies in the workplace.

Outward respect and non-confrontation when dealing with parents and elders are indicative of the existence of a gap between young people's behaviour and the values they actually adopt. In other words, as these modes of behaviour are merely a compromise solution to parent-child conflicts and a survival tactic to cope with the hierarchical structure at work, they do not demonstrate that in their minds young people fully subscribe to the virtues of *hieu* and *le*, and submit to the rigid social hierarchy. Data from my research show that interviewees duly respected their parents and elders, but, at the same time, these young educated people often expressed their

frustration both at home when they sometimes could not give voice to their differences with the parents, and at work when they did not stand a chance of challenging senior colleagues on a professional level. To a greater or lesser extent, this frustration signals a potential change in young people's value orientation towards a lesser acceptance of *hieu* and *le* virtues, and a more individual-to-individual approach in relationships with parents and older people.

Although there are signs of young people's frustration with absolute submission to *hieu* and *le*, there are no indications of an immediate change in value orientation with regard to young people's relationship with parents and elders. Data collected from interviews show that young people normally displayed outward respect and avoided confrontation so as to maintain good relationships with parents at home, senior colleagues at work and older people in the wider society. On occasions when total obedience was either difficult or impossible, young people still did not challenge the 'traditional' system. Typical examples are found in the stories of some interviewees who were extremely unhappy with the circumstances in the state sector where senior colleagues were discontented with them precisely because they exceeded their seniors on professional terms, but they did not challenge either the system of seniority-based hierarchy or the senior colleagues. Instead, they quietly moved out to work in the non-state sector. There is yet no potential for change in these values, since young people were subject to strong moral prescriptions from their early days. Although today's twenty-something-year-old people belong to the first generation of youth who are witnessing and experiencing social changes brought about by the 'open door' policy, they still grew up in a social environment where the individual was taught not to challenge authority, including both parental authority and the

official authority of the socialist state. The lack of inclination to oppose or confront authority has been the consequence of a combination of parental moral teaching and state indoctrination.

Generally speaking, the qualitative data available in this research suggest a remarkable continuity in the pattern of behaviour and attitudes of young people towards parents and older people. In daily life, young Vietnamese still observe widely the fundamental Confucian values of *hieu* and *le*: they obey, respect and honour their parents as well as submit to the social hierarchy. However, it has also become apparent that changes have begun to emerge. Although they still uphold the behavioural expectations associated with *hieu* and *le*, young Vietnamese have made some adaptation and compromise in order to suit the social transformations of a more open and modern society. What I have uncovered in this research is not an indication of a radical change of values in relationships with parents and older people, because young people opt for avoidance rather than confrontation. Whilst this does not yet suggest either the substantial erosion of values associated with Confucian tenets or the rejection of parental and senior authority, it signals a new and more pragmatic interpretation, expression and demonstration of these values.

2. More Liberal Attitudes and Behaviour towards Courtship and Sexuality

Data from my research indicate that young urban, educated people have increasingly adopted more liberal attitudes and behaviour towards sexual relations. Interviewees, both men and women, were quite open about the fact that they engaged in premarital sex, ranging from sexual relationships with a stable partner to having casual sex and sex with prostitutes (see chapter 6, section 2.4.). Interviews also showed a number of

people, mainly men, playing around and dating more than one partner at a time (chapter 6, section 2.3.). This clearly contrasts with such virtues as chastity (*trinh*) and loyalty (*trung*) highlighted in the framework presented in chapter 2. In pre-*doi moi* Vietnam the value of chastity had always been emphasised strongly, and, as shown through life accounts of my interviewees, nowadays parents still insist on their children abiding by it. The reported behaviour among those young people of engaging in pre-marital sex, flirting around, and dating another while in a relationship is indicative of liberal values. At the same time, unlike their parents' generation, urban youths in general (including both those who do, and those who do not engage in premarital sex) do not stigmatise premarital sex on moral grounds, and have a rather relaxed and accepting attitude towards it.

The reported liberal attitudes and behaviour in courtship and sexuality and in-depth interviews with young graduates pointed to a number of possible value orientations. It is a possibility that these educated young people perceive that being modern is to oppose 'traditional' values and to adopt their perceived 'liberal' values of 'developed Western' societies. In other words, it is a form of expression of liberal values and a statement of 'modernity'. Another possibility is that being 'liberal' and involved in several relationships at a time helps these young people to widen their choice of partner, and therefore have a greater chance to make comparisons and select with whom among his/her partners it would be best to make a commitment. These 'liberal' attitudes are based on 'pragmatic' calculations (see chapter 6, section 2.3.). At the same time, it could also indicate a response by youth to current social changes, whereby education and employment opportunities have resulted in young Vietnamese becoming more oriented towards jobs and careers, and therefore

delaying marriage. In fact, late entry into marriage has been recognised elsewhere as one of the reasons for young people indulging in 'sexual experimentation' and engaging in premarital sex (Lee, 2002: 144).

As a matter of fact, liberal attitudes and behaviour towards sexual relations have been discovered elsewhere in contemporary Southeast Asian societies. In Manila, there is an increasing trend for young men across different social classes to engage in premarital sex. In a Catholic society in which there are strong pressures to marry a pregnant girlfriend and where abortion is illegal, many young Filipino men turn to casual intercourse with other partners, including *bayaran* (paid partners) (Lee, 2002). In Kuala Lumpur, the behaviour of young men and women 'loafing' and engaging in 'free sex' has stirred up intensive debate in the Malaysian press on youth morality in a modern environment and on the contrast between 'Western-style modernity' and 'conventional morality' (Stivens, 2002). In Thailand, the Asiaweek magazine reported, without specifying their survey sample, that 57 per cent of Thais aged 14-25 think pre-marital sex between mutually agreeing partners is normal (Tesoro, 2000: 38).

The increasing trend of liberalising sexual relations, with both paid and non-paid partners, among Vietnamese youth is, therefore, nothing new for young people in a 'open-door' society. However, on the basis of my own experience and research, there has as yet been no apparent evidence of unmarried cohabitation among young educated people in Vietnam. While unmarried cohabitation is common in Western societies and, according to the statement of Utomo in her research on youths in Jakarta, 'there is strong evidence that unmarried cohabitation is increasing in East

and Southeast Asia' (Utomo, 2002: 226), it still appears to be very rare and socially unacceptable in Vietnam. This is indicative of the fact that young Vietnamese have not yet openly challenged the mores of their parents, and, at the same time, that Vietnamese society is not yet prepared to accept changes which could potentially lead to change or disruption in the institution of the Vietnamese family. Professor Le Thi of the Vietnam Centre for Family and Women Studies, in her book on *The Role of the Family in the Formation of a Vietnamese Personality* also confirms this. She remarks:

Despite the influences of Western ways of thinking and lifestyles in Vietnam, marriage between young men and women is still regarded highly, and so are the state's legal recognition [of such marriage], approval of the parents and kin, and wedding ceremonies expressing national and religious characters. The incidences of couples cohabiting freely and out of wedlock rarely occur and are not yet supported by public opinion (1997: 109).

In addition to public disapproval, unmarried cohabitation and its possible consequence of childbirth outside wedlock are further discouraged due to financial pressures. Until as recently as the mid-1980s, people who had children outside wedlock often had their existing benefits and welfare supports cancelled as a disciplinary measure for their action. Recounted in Nguyen Thanh Tam's research on 'women who live without husbands', the experience of Mrs. T having a child out of wedlock is a testimony to both the severity of social prejudices and the lack of financial support:

When I decided to have a child [in 1984], I and he [the father of the child] had to write down our self-criticism. The management organised a meeting lasting for several nights in order to oblige me to receive [acknowledge] all the mistakes. Afterwards my salary was decreased, my bonus and all other subsidies were cut (Nguyen Thanh Tam, 1996: 88).

The practice of unmarried cohabitation was only recognised by Vietnamese law recently. The Vietnam News Agency reported in June 2000 the National Assembly's passage of the revised Marriage and Family Law, which allows cohabitation and 'trial marriages', and recognises that 'a woman could have a child without a husband'. While making such 'progressive' regulations as compared to the previous law passed in 1986, the new law stresses 'the preservation of traditional and moral values of Vietnamese society'. However, it also reported that the revised law was passed but not without discontent from some delegates who spoke of 'fears for possible unexpected consequences', and who wanted to have these practices outlawed (Vietnam News Agency, 2000). Although unmarried cohabitation has now been recognised by law, there has not yet been any regulation on financial provision and welfare support to single parents and children born outside wedlock. It is, therefore, still an unpopular practice due to both severe social prejudice against, and financial constraints placed upon single-parent families.

What is more, premarital sex but without cohabitation is enough to raise the eyebrows of older people and Party leaders, who regard the adoption of liberal values

in courtship and sexuality as the cultural consequences of, and even pollution from the West and therefore threatening to the national social fabric. Indeed, worries about foreign influences on youth were widespread among the populace and within the government, as reflected in a spate of articles which have appeared in the Vietnamese press since the mid-1990s. For example, in an article published in the national *Nhan Dan Cuoi Tuan (Weekend People)* on 24 March 1996, Dang Canh Khanh attacked young people who paid money for homosexual sex, students who organised their birthday parties in *bia om* (snuggling-beer) places, and young pupils who play sex games on the computer. He then went on to voice his worries:

What has led to the fact that this social misconduct and disgraceful phenomena can now be regarded as standards, and the 'latest' and 'reasonable' trends? [...] What will we end up with, if we do not use humane and cultural values to quickly awaken the good side among the youth of our country, and prevent them from falling into the immoral wave of a kind of sick culture that is widespread in contemporary Western societies? (1996b: 5).

Consequently there have been extensive campaigns to eradicate 'social evils' (*te nan xa hoi*), 'poisonous culture' (*van hoa doc hai*) and the 'residue' of Western lifestyles and culture, while stressing the urgent need to educate young people about 'traditional' virtues, including the Vietnamese family and its values. These campaigns especially target brothels, massage parlours, karaoke bars, *bia om* places, and *café vuon* (garden cafés) – places that are the 'nests' for youths to experiment and indulge in premarital sex, either with paid partners or with non-paid partners. At

the same time, television and other media constantly call for the need to educate the young generation about *cac gia tri truyen thong* (traditional values) and *van hoa dan toc* (national culture) both in the family at home and in society at large (for more on 'media with the education of traditional values for young people in the community and the family', see Dang Canh Khanh, 2001b: 266-271).

3. Gender Relations

The data gathered from interviews with university graduates also enable an analysis of gender relations in both public and domestic domains. To start with a general remark, young Vietnamese today endure less gender inequality, as compared with the pre-colonial and colonial eras. As shown through in-depth interviews, young urban women graduates might seem to be taking their opportunities for education and employment for granted, but not that long ago Vietnamese women, even in urban areas, had to assume the roles of a dutiful wife and mother at an age as young as thirteen or fourteen.

On gender relations in the society at large, my data suggest that urban youths are not really familiar with the idea of gender inequality in the public domain, i.e. at work or in social life. As we have seen in chapter 2, section 4.2, equal treatment of the sexes was achieved and exercised under the socialist regime. Since 'the ideological-legal-political barriers to equal male-female access to the public domain have been largely eliminated' (Marr, 1981: 248-251), young Vietnamese today are comfortable with gender equality and even take this for granted. Both male and female graduates talk of delaying marriage and family responsibilities in order to take advantage of education and employment opportunities.

On gender relations within familial contexts, young people share the view that there is still inequality, particularly in terms of the household division of labour. Within the family, though there has been increasing equality in the share of household responsibilities, young women interviewees have stated that it is still the wife who takes charge of most household chores and child-rearing responsibilities. Interviewees stated that due to the unequal household division of labour, married women face more obstacles and difficulties in taking advantage of employment opportunities, and in career advancement made possible to them by gender equality in the public domain.

The fact that my graduate interviewees have opted to delay marriage so as to have more time to focus on developing their career is indicative of both the rising equality in the public domain and the existing inequality in the domestic sphere. In other words, young people and young women in particular grasp equal opportunities in education and employment that are becoming increasingly available to them, but gender inequality in the domestic sphere means that they have to put aside childcare and other domestic responsibilities by delaying marriage. However, it is important to note that the same tendency is not necessarily occurring in the countryside. In rural areas, on the contrary, the state's policy of allocation of land to households has had the reverse effect of encouraging people to marry early, establish their own household and have children early in the marriage in order to obtain more land (Le Thi, 1996: 64).

Available data also suggest a discontinuity in a range of Confucian values dictating modes of behaviour for women in a male-oriented society similar to that in Vietnam during the imperial and colonial eras. No interviewees in this research mentioned *tu duc* (four virtues), their significance, and the need for young women to comply with them. Similarly, data from the 1995 nation-wide survey showed that young Vietnamese cited the importance of such qualities as being gentle and subtle, having good health, being educated, having good communication skills, and being in stable employment (see chapter 6, section 2.1). There was no reference at all to *tu duc* as the criteria for an ideal partner. This is in contrast to their parents' generation when young women had to perfect the four virtues of *cong* (labour and diligence), *dung* (good countenance), *ngon* (appropriate speech) and *hanh* (proper behaviour) in order to qualify as good future wives and mothers. In fact, there is nowadays neither real social pressure for young people to comply with *tu duc* nor the realisation by youth themselves about the significance of these virtues. Even at school, moral education focuses on lessons about thrift, diligence, honesty, and respect to parents and elders (*Education needs parents, ethics*, Vietnam News, 1999), rather than lessons on behavioural codes for women.

In the light of the available data it is possible to conclude that within the household women are still expected to take the larger share of the housework, but in the public sphere, young people do enjoy a greater equality between the sexes. Such advances in gender equality, compounded by a profusion of education and employment opportunities brought about by the market, have allowed young women to dream as ambitiously as young men. Particularly for women, there has been a significant shift

in value orientation, whereby becoming good wives and mothers no longer carries significance as the sole value and goal for them in life.

4. They are ‘Open-minded’

Other modern courtship practices seen among urban educated Vietnamese youths such as relationships with foreigners and Internet dating are further demonstrations of their increasingly liberal attitudes in a more open society. Almost all interviewees of my research have been exposed to foreign cultures and lifestyles and are relaxed about meeting and forming romantic relationships with new people, including foreigners and locals met on the Internet. They also enjoy greater physical mobility, which is significantly different from the situation of the pre-1990 period. As people no longer live within their *luy tre lang* (the bamboo curtain of the village), they can now think of opportunities not only beyond their area of residence but even overseas.

Other indications of this value orientation are the fact that almost all interviewees tend to speak English and they value highly the opportunity to go abroad to study and enrich their knowledge and experience. This change in outlook is also true for young Vietnamese in general, as seen in the fact that even rural youths today broaden their horizons by moving to large cities in search of employment and education opportunities. In fact, a new term – *nong thon hoa thanh thi* (ruralisation of cities) – has recently appeared in daily conversation and the popular press to refer to the obvious presence, within major urban areas, of rural migrants, of whom young workers account for a major part. However, I also observed that the levels of this ‘open-mindedness’ may vary among different groups of youths according to their socio-economic backgrounds. For example, while ‘middle-class’ educated youths in

larger urban areas like Hanoi might strive for overseas postgraduate studies, it is already a significant achievement for peasant youth simply to find jobs or some form of work in cities.¹

Open-mindedness and an outward-looking attitude are also manifest in young people's perception and selection of jobs. Unlike their parents, they no longer restrict the concept of employment to work and a straight line of advancement within the state sector, and place less importance on job security. They prefer to take up jobs that offer them the chance to go abroad, earn a high income, and challenge them professionally. Travel and study abroad have, in turn, taught them that there can be a wide window of opportunity for individual achievement.

Data from my interviews show that young graduates are conscious of the need to be open-minded and outward-looking so as to be ready to absorb and learn new knowledge in the age of globalisation. But at the same time, these qualities can sometimes have the adverse effect of generating even greater conflict between young people and their seniors. Travel and easier access to information enable young people to gain knowledge and experience which are new and difficult for their parents and older people to understand. As a result, in dealing with older people, young people feel as if they are more knowledgeable and so find it more difficult to agree with the advice and suggestions coming from their parents or older people. But at the same time the concepts of *hieu* and *le* dictate total submissiveness.

The incomprehension between the generations is a phenomenon observed in other countries. As Margaret Mead indicated, one sees the emergence of a situation where

parents who, in the past, transmitted to the next generation more or less all they needed to know in order to live their lives normally (she called this a society oriented towards the past), increasingly lose this role in modernising societies which are becoming future-oriented (quoted in Evans, 1998: 32). In its recent 'Survey of the Young', *The Economist* quoted Yvonne Fritzsche, a researcher at Frankfurt's Psydata market-research institute, as saying 'adults don't have all the answers any more. They're not in a position to tell young people what to do. Technology is one of the reasons that the relationship between the young and the old is becoming a dialogue, rather than a lesson.' ('Survey of the Young', *The Economist*, 2000: 9).

The difference in the case of Vietnam is that the term *mau thuan the he* (generational conflict) has not been regularly heard of until recently, when incomprehension and discord between the generations has become an increasingly noticeable phenomenon. What agitated *mau thuan the he* were the more liberalised socio-economic atmosphere, foreign influences and advanced technology brought about by the implementation of the open-door policy since *doi moi*. Confucian influence with strict hierarchy within the family and in society, and the obligation to fulfil filial piety have always required non-inquisition and absolute obedience to parental authority. In a 'still society' (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1983: 10; for more discussion on 'still society' and 'moving society' and the generation gap, see chapter 6, section 1.2) before *doi moi*, when the younger generation had little choice but to follow the same life and career path of the parents' generation, obedience was easier. For example, in agrarian society, people got married during their teenage years, and engaged in the same work that their parents and grandparents did. Later in the centrally-planned economy, like their parents, young people went to work in *bien che* which was more

or less the only choice available, and then got married. Only recently have young people been presented with new ideas and perspectives, diversified lifestyle choices and opportunities for education and employment. In such a context, as Le Thi remarks, situations of friction and confrontation have emerged due to 'the conservativeness and *su co chap* (unforgiving to the point of prejudice) on the part of the parents and elderly people and the liberalised and individualist attitudes on the part of the youth' (Le Thi, 1997: 151).

Young people see the qualities of being open-minded and outward-looking as undeniably significant in a society that is striving to integrate into the global economy. Indeed, these characteristics have also been recognised by older people and the government as important in helping the country to integrate into the world economy and achieve high economic growth. However, once again we see the worries among older people, particularly *cac nha cach mang lao thanh* or literally 'elderly revolutionaries'², and the government about foreign influences on young people. Routinely they express concerns that the greater exposure of youth to the outside world could seriously undermine the political orientation and awareness of young people, and encourage feelings of cynicism towards socialism. As a result, at precisely the time when the country is committed to, and strives for, international integration, political education is stressed more than ever before. An illustration of this political reaction can be found in the following quote from an article by Pham Bang, a researcher of the State's Institute of Youth Studies:

In addition to the propaganda by the [Youth] League, the [Students'] Association, and the popular media, there is a need to

increase the quantity and quality of the teaching of political subjects at universities and colleges. Without correct political orientation and a firm political stance knowledge that students have gained in lecture theatres will do no good for the country, and sometimes even the opposite (Pham Bang, 2001: 145).

Let us also bear in mind that, as already mentioned in chapter 5, the current amount of time allocated for political subjects in university curricula is already seen as 'excessive' by some lecturers from the National University of Hanoi. As curricula at all schools, colleges and universities, including even private ones, across the country are determined by government officials from the Ministry of Education and Training, these lecturers are not in the position to reduce the amount of political education despite the fact that some of them may share the youth's desire to depoliticise the curricula. Consequently, those students and young graduates who are 'forward-looking' and who want to become competitive in the job market, are left to themselves to take up *hoc them* (supplementary learning) to gain practical skills and knowledge that are much needed in the business world. This situation further illustrates the conflict between youth's value orientations and the government's political intention, and also the paradox faced by Vietnam's political leaders between the need to develop the country and also remain on the path to socialism.

Similar concerns of the state with regard to the proper socialisation and political education of young people are also found in other socialist countries, with perhaps the closest comparison being China. Marr and Rosen observed that, as there are few

young people who actually believe in the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism in China nowadays,

there has been a sharp increase in 'patriotic education', to teach students to be proud of being Chinese and to emphasize the achievements of Chinese culture, the Chinese people and the role of the Communist Party in honouring and furthering these achievements (1998: 149).

Efforts at such political education of youth, no matter what guise it takes, is a clear sign of acknowledgement by both older people and the socialist state of young people's open-mindedness and receptiveness, whilst also a sign of anxiety that these 'qualities' could lead to the questioning of the validity of socialism, and ultimately the endangering of the stability of the regime.

5. They are 'Materialistic'

There is a prevailing opinion among older people that the market economy has turned young Vietnamese into materialists. Many older people writing on youth often express their worries about a 'moral crisis' among them in light of the fact that nowadays 'under the impact of a market mechanism' young Vietnamese weigh 'the value of money more strongly than the value of morality' (Nguyen Minh Tam, 2001: 283). 'Since the day the country was reformed, [...] negative phenomena among a proportion of youth have caused us to worry. [...] The pragmatic way of thinking and lifestyle, whereby money and material things are highly regarded, are similar to a virus spreading a bad disease among the youth' (Van Hung, 1997: 3-4). Young

people are 'very pragmatic and have a strong desire to make money'. For them, the image of 'one thatched cottage, two golden hearts' is 'really out of date'. 'Materialism has developed fast' among young people (Truong Giang, 1997: 6).

Data from in-depth interviews in my research indicate a rising trend of youths making decisions on such matters as romantic and interpersonal relationships based entirely on materialistic calculations. This is when money-mindedness has become 'alarming' from the viewpoint of older generations. In the eyes of older people, today's youth are neither self-sacrificing nor willing to put up with hardship so as to contribute to the collectivity and the cause of socialism. Clearly this is a significant departure from socialist value orientations: under socialism before the mid-1980s, young people were expected to submit fully and contribute to the collective, to be dedicated to the common cause of socialism, and denounce private ownership and money values.

In analysing this value change towards greater materialism, there is a need to make a distinction between the judgements of youth by older people and by the state, as well as between the positive and negative sides of the matter. While being materialistic has been widely seen as a characteristic trait of young Vietnamese in the market economy, it is incorrect to assume that it is entirely negative or that every social actor agrees with such a view. In fact, as shown in the previous chapters, there are occasions when being materialistic is a positive value. In employment, the desire to make money makes young people more daring in business ventures and professional challenges. As employees, they work hard, are dedicated to their jobs and willing to take up greater challenges in the expectation of success and the resultant financial

and material rewards. Such attitudes are also encouraged by their employers, who might not be young themselves, but are running businesses in the competitive environment of a market economy. Other young people engage in risk in setting up their own business ventures. With the market economy and an emphasis on wealth, it is no surprise that more and more young people have been starting businesses on their own, and creating a generation of *cac nha doanh nghiep tre* (young entrepreneurs). When the goal of *doi moi* set out by the State and the Party is '*Dan giao, nuoc manh, xa hoi cong bang van minh*' (Wealthy people, strong country, equal and civilised society), it is hardly surprising to see the Vietnamese leadership – unlike the country's hard-line 'elderly revolutionaries' – endorsing this new youthful mentality. As a result, stories and examples of successful 'young entrepreneurs' are frequently featured and extolled in the media.

Young people's desire to get rich and the government's partial backing of their ambition is in fact a phenomenon common to other countries. Neighbouring communist China is a strikingly similar example: when Deng Xiaoping announced in the early 1980s that 'to get rich is glorious', he issued a rallying cry to Chinese youth 'as alluring as the refrain of any pop ballad' (Tesoro, 2000: 36). The ever-increasing number of 'young entrepreneurs' in Vietnam today is a trend that can already be seen in other countries having departed from socialism to join the global capitalist system.

6. The New Perception of Success

Although I did not directly pose the question of 'What do you perceive as success?' to young graduate interviewees, data derived from in-depth investigations reveal their perceptions of and attitude towards success at the present time. First of all, there

is an emphasis on a form of success measured by the parameters of professional success and wealth, as interviewees shared their desires and goals in career and profession, and express anxieties with regard to the realisation of these desires and goals. In contrast to the socialist era when only 'collective' success existed, the available data indicate that today's success in terms of profession and wealth is to be achieved by the individual, with learning being recognised as a major route to such success. Therefore, no efforts are spared to gain more knowledge and qualifications. Data from my research demonstrate that available ways of learning after university include studying for a second degree at a home university, pursuing postgraduate studies at home or overseas universities, and skill-based training on the job. There also appear to be patterns that particular employment sectors offer particular types of training. In the state sector, young graduates have a greater chance of gaining scholarships for overseas postgraduate studies. Outside the state sector, in local private businesses and foreign/joint-venture firms, there is little chance for overseas training, but youths can learn practical skills such as the use of the computer, foreign languages, and management and marketing skills – all these skills are increasingly useful in the context of a globalising Vietnam, but are not yet sufficiently taught in university courses. In addition, many young graduates take up supplementary training, or *hoc them*, for a second degree at a home university, so that they can attend classes after work hours.

Though it seems that the perception of 'achieving through learning' goes back as far as feudal society in the thirteenth century, the notion of success has clearly evolved through the different periods of Vietnamese history. Before the establishment of a socialist state, only men had access to studies and mandarin examinations. Success in

education and the public domain was then a notion restricted solely to men, and was directed essentially to gaining the status of a mandarin. Under the socialist regime, women were regarded as equal to men. Everybody could be successful as long as they contributed to the 'collective' and the general cause of building socialism. Now in the market economy, success is no longer an across-the-board notion defined by the socialist state. That is to say, success prior to the 1990s was a 'nationalised' notion, but in the *doi moi* era it has been 'privatised'. Young people today work hard and compete not because the state tells them to do so, but rather because of their own desired goals. Furthermore, there is no indication that young people distinguish between the notions of such professional and financial success for men and women. Young women can dream as ambitiously as young men, and can achieve the same success.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that achieving one's own desired goals in present-day Vietnam does not mean obtaining success merely for 'oneself'. Today we regularly hear of terms such as a 'knowledge-based economy' and 'learning society', showing the government's emphasis on promoting knowledge and technology as the cornerstone of its modernising policy. Parallel to such emphasis, the Vietnamese government widely assimilates the slogan of 'wealthy people, powerful country', together with the media extolling success stories of 'young entrepreneurs'. These lines demonstrate the leadership's commitment to integrate with the 'world community' via knowledge and economic integration. Therefore, although there has been no specific appeal for young people to become individually rich, it is clear that personal success achieved in terms of profession and wealth are acknowledged as directly contributing to the present-day national cause of

development and integration into the global economy. As one of my interviewees, Lam, specifically put it: 'It does not matter what you do, as long as you are becoming rich, not only are you admired and respected by others, but also you are contributing to, and helping to increase, the national GDP.' Such an attitude is very much a residual influence of the pre-*doi moi* socialist ideology.

'New' values are reflected in the behaviour and attitudes of young people, as we have seen earlier in this chapter. Here, what we see in such new perceptions of success are further reflections of these 'new' values such as materialism, pragmatism, equality in gender relations, as well as independence, hard-work and competitiveness. These 'new' values are indicative of a discontinuity in the 'traditional' attitude of passive acceptance dictated partly by a framework of Confucian values and behavioural codes, and partly by the *bao cap* (fully subsidised) system provided by a socialist state. For the previous generation, the individual had little power to decide his or her own life, as the state had a major say in who would be trained and educated, where one worked, and where one lived (Marr and Rosen, 1998: 161). The state also provided for everything, including not only education and employment, but also food, housing, healthcare and holidays. This full-scale provision led overall to the attitude of passive acceptance, and left little room for the individual to aspire and strive for more. Amid current social and economic transformations, the young people I interviewed no longer accept either predetermined 'fate' or state allocation of education and jobs. Instead they actively seek new opportunities and work hard towards achieving their life goals.

On this latter point, it is possible to conclude that the attitudinal shift towards individual success as demonstrated by the case of young graduates in Hanoi reflects a multi-layered and complex socio-economic reality brought about by *doi moi*. On the one hand, there is a 'capitalist' mentality of achieving professional and financial success through individual hard work and efforts. On the other hand, there remains in today's attitude towards success the influence of socialist ideology: as the individual is to contribute towards the nation's good, becoming individually rich and successful is seen as a way of contributing to national prosperity. Additionally, there is the preservation of the nation's long tradition of bending over backwards to attain knowledge, as these young graduates regard learning as the route to professional and financial success.

Similar attitudinal shifts towards the notion of success can also be seen in other socialist states in the region. In China, economic reforms have meant that youth no longer rely on the state to find work for them, but they have to search actively for jobs. Similar to the employment trend seen in this research on young Vietnamese, the majority of Chinese youth prefer to work in private, foreign-owned or joint-capital enterprises, whilst only a small percentage want jobs in government organisations and state-owned enterprises (Marr and Rosen, 1998: 161-165). In neighbouring Laos, where most people who grew up and worked under a socialist regime, share the older perception that success is to be achieved by being a politician, few young people say they would choose this path. At the same time, youth have a clearer understanding of the importance of education for success (Evans, 1998: 33).

Professional and financial success is a significant focus for many young people inasmuch as making money and becoming individually rich have become a major concern for many people in a country that is in the process of reformation and transition to a market economy, and that is striving for 'a rich people and a powerful country' (*đan giàu nước mạnh*). However, this does not mean that young people overlook achievements in the family and domestic sphere. As demonstrated in chapter 6, my interviewees are very concerned about achieving harmony and happiness in various interpersonal relationships, particularly relationships with parents and love relationships. They carry on the traditions of maintaining strong links with parents and the family, respecting older people, and obeying parents' opinions with regard to a 'compatible' marriage. This is an indication of their awareness of the fact that the notion of success in life is incomplete and imbalanced if it only contains professional and financial gains and lacks aspects of family success. Data from my interviews suggest that amid social change, young graduates regard ingredients for success in family life as still including 'traditional' cornerstones such as filial piety through respectful, harmonious and loving relationships with the parents and finding a 'compatible' spouse – a crucial element both for marital success and for fulfilling filial piety. These underpin the emphasis on the institution of the family and its values. Essentially interviewees still adhere to the core familial virtues such as *hiếu* and *nhĩa* and preserving *le* or the hierarchy within the family.

My data provide evidence of young people weighing between professional and financial success and family success. On the one hand, there are signs that these people are prepared to trade off their own personal life for professional and financial

success. Specifically, interviewees express a common view that career and employment are of greater importance than love relationships or marriage (see chapter 6, section 2.2). As a result, they put aside dreams such as having a family with a loving spouse and children, or even ignore parental pressure for marriage. As these young graduates are consumed with work or study, they delay marriage and children – delay the achievement of ‘success’ in personal life and the fulfilment of filial piety – in order to fulfil the objectives of earning money and establishing a career. Seemingly, they put aside the more ‘traditional’ form of personal achievement in terms of marriage and children. On the other hand, they recognise the importance of success in the domestic sphere, and spare no effort to succeed in keeping the ‘tradition’ of maintaining harmonious relationships with other members of the family, especially their parents. Also, ultimately they do have goals such as getting married, having children, and a happy marriage.

Within the scope of my research, there is not sufficient information to suggest how long young people would be prepared to put aside the achievement of success in personal life in order to achieve professional and financial success. However, it is possible to conclude that young Vietnamese do not disregard ‘traditional’ familial values nor neglect the importance of achievements in family life, but they also increasingly see the significance of professional and financial achievements in a market economy. This is precisely another scenario in which young people with higher education have to navigate between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ values.

7. Is 'Individualism' Imminent?

The family, occupation and the locality are among the principal external identities that help to define the self in Vietnam today (Marr, 2000: 795).³ With the available data and the scope of this research, it is possible to examine young people's perceptions of the self and the individual, as well as their attitudes towards the value of individualism, within the parameters of the family, occupation, and general social interpersonal relationships.

Data from my qualitative research clearly point to a number of signs of an increasing awareness of the self and individual among young people in present-day Vietnam. On the employment front, no matter which employment sector they are in, university graduates work hard and strive for individual success in both professional and financial terms. My interviewees hardly make reference to the idea of working to contribute to the 'national cause of building socialism' and other common causes which used to be the ideal (*ly tuong*) of their parents' generation who were willing to dedicate their youthful lives whenever the Fatherland needed them (*san sang hien dang tuoi thanh xuan khi To quoc can*). In addition, as evident in their ambitions to study almost everywhere (at home, at work, and at universities and colleges overseas), young graduates are acutely aware of the power of learning, knowledge and even degree certificates in enhancing personal prospects. While learning has been one of the 'traditional' ways of self-cultivation (*tu than*) so as to achieve 'personal enlightenment and virtue' (Marr, 2000: 773), learning purely for degree certificates (as seen in the phenomenon of *hoc gia* or fake learning) with the ultimate aim of career achievement and promotion signals a move towards greater self-

centred, individualistic and pragmatic calculations. The reason that I refer to 'individualistic and pragmatic calculations' is because such attitudes towards learning are purely for materialistic gains and not for the purpose of attaining knowledge and enlightenment.

With regard to interpersonal relationships, my research data presented in chapter 6 indicate trends such as delaying marriage and child-bearing (which is a form of fulfilling filial piety) for personal achievements in education and career, 'pragmatic calculations' and 'playing around' in love relationships, as well as an increasing preference for personal freedom in aspects of life (for example, premarital sex, and dating foreigners) seemingly with little regard to parental moral expectations and 'traditional' values, but rather with the sole purpose of satisfying personal desires.

In light of such signs of an increasing awareness of and belief in the self and the individual, and a seemingly consequential disregard of the authority of the community, older people and the parents, there have been voices of concern about the rise of individualism (*chu nghĩa cá nhân*) among young people since the implementation of market reforms. For example, director of the Youth Research Institute (*Vien Nghien cuu Thanh nien*) Dang Canh Khanh (1996b) denounces 'the wave of material culture with the domination of individualistic ideas' which has 'flooded the so-called advanced societies and is now permeating the society of developing countries like Vietnam'. Professor Ton That Bach (2000) writing on 'Vietnamese Youth on the Doorstep of the 21st Century' remarks:

In general, youths' aspiration (*hoai bao*) is still vague [...] Formerly, the aspiration of young people, regardless of what position they hold, was to contribute to the country so as to win victory for the nation, but today the thought of what to do for the country to soon catch up with other countries in the region and in the world has not really been a strong motivation for youths. For that reason, a large portion of youth is absorbed in scrambling for their selfish life, or even more harmfully, they indulge in intemperate behaviour in nightclubs and on the dance floor, in drug addiction and illegal motorbike racing.

Similarly, in my daily conversations with older people there is a common claim about today's youth that they have adopted Western-style individualism, and pay little regard to the common good and 'traditional' values.

On the other hand, data from my in-depth interviews reveal the fact that young graduates do not always act out of self-interest. Instead, what appears to be the case is that my interviewees also have a strong sense of family obligations in order to achieve harmony in relationships with their parents (that is, *hieu* or filial piety) and older people (that is, *le* or social conformity, specifically submissiveness towards older people). This is most evident in the fact that they do not put their personal happiness above all else to carry on a love relationship without parental consent and approval. Other evidence is that while my interviewees said they engaged in premarital sex, they did not cohabit outside of wedlock, which shows that they do not

gain personal satisfaction at the expense of their relationships with the parents, and other older people in the wider society.

My interviewees belong to today's young generation, who were born in the 1970s, grew up in a climate of intense political control combined with cultural and social fragmentation. At the time, the rhetoric of the 'collectivity' (*tap the*) and the community (*doan the*) eliminated the value of individualism and dominated the country's socio-political life. They spent their formative years in this social climate, and then in a climate where the state, in light of the potentially destabilising socio-cultural impacts of economic liberalisation, began to resurrect and encourage 'traditional' social practices and customs, and advocate family values and other virtues associated with Confucian tenets. By the early 1990s these young people have simultaneously witnessed both a multitude of foreign influences and a revival of 'traditional' values. Today foreign influences on young urbanites come from *mo cua* (open door) and commerce, and the consequential access to Western popular culture through a myriad of channels such as the Internet, MTV, CNN and other satellite televisions, imported newspapers and magazines, movies, contact with foreigners at work, in foreign language classes or even in the street, foreign consumer goods, and foreign travel. On the other hand, to counter these foreign influences, there is a revival of 'traditional' values, emphasised by the state and older people who are concerned about (and perhaps even afraid of?) the so-called 'negative' effects of foreign influences upon the country's young generation. Slogans such as 'First learn *le*, then learn knowledge' (*Tien hoc le, hau hoc van*), advocating the importance of moral education and social conformity among young people, are regularly mentioned in the media and in state discourse.

Indeed, the current workings of reformation, a market economy, and the 'opening' of the country have produced new contexts of interplay and contrast between consumer capitalist culture and the 'traditional' Vietnamese value system, in which young people are enmeshed. In such a situation, as seen through the accounts of my graduate interviewees, young people have to navigate between the now revived age-old traditions that underwent drastic changes in the socialist era, and recently imported values harmonised to the capitalist ideology and the market economy, in order to satisfy their personal desires and wishes and at the same time conform to 'traditional' culture and values. In such a situation, what we see is that whilst youth still uphold 'traditional' Vietnamese values, as demonstrated through their strong sense of family obligation and respect to parents and elders, they have adopted 'new' values that strongly emphasise independence, freedom and the desires of the individual. In other words, for the educated urban youths in my research, the adoption of the 'new' values does not entail the rejection of 'traditional' ones. This is a scenario of 'tradition' and 'modernity' interlocked in the value orientation of young university graduates.

I agree with David Marr's conclusion that:

The trend in the 1990s has been towards diversity and freedom of choice, certainly in comparison with the Stalinist command and control environment of earlier decades. In particular, young men and women are departing the village, loosening family ties, choosing their own occupations, and joining voluntary associations

to a degree that would have been unthinkable only ten years ago
(2000:796).

Whilst there has been an enhanced sense of individuality and a greater assertion of the self, the adoption of the value of individualism among my young graduate interviewees has so far not moved in the direction of total individualism, selfishly putting themselves ahead of others and above the family and the community. In this time of rapid socio-economic transformation as a result of market liberalisation and 'open door', it is, however, difficult to predict how educated urban youths, and Vietnamese youth in general, will ultimately perceive themselves and position their personal interest in relation to other external entities such as the family, the community, and the society.

Notes to Chapter 7:

1. A more detailed discussion on the degree as to which young people's outlook varies according to their socio-economic backgrounds would require a new research programme and the gathering of relevant data across different groups of youths.
2. In Vietnam, the term 'elderly revolutionaries' is used to refer to a generation of older people who participated in the Revolution against French colonialists during the 1930s through to the mid-1950s. They are held in high respect, for they are the 'grandparents' generation who had sacrificed their lives and fought for national independence. Therefore, in Vietnam's case, despite the pertinent meaning of the term 'revolutionary', the 'elderly revolutionaries' are often regarded as 'conservative' and 'hard-line' because of their strong anti-Western and communist attitudes.
3. The other external identities are citizenship, ethnicity, religion and voluntary associations (for example, cultural, age group, sports, avocations) (Marr, 2000: 795-796).

Chapter 8

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Since the introduction of *doi moi* in the late 1980s, today's Vietnamese youths live in an increasingly market-oriented society, one undergoing processes of modernisation and cultural as well as economic globalisation on a scale and at a pace never seen before in the course of Vietnam's long history. They experience socio-economic and cultural conditions and changes which are significantly different from what were experienced by their parents during the war years, or by the older generations during colonialism and, before that, during the imperial era. In such a turbulent and multifaceted context, my research to be manageable has focused on under-thirty-year-old university graduates from Hanoi, because it is among these educated and privileged people in the larger urban areas that the most rapid socio-economic transformations have been taking place. A focus on young graduates also reflects the increasing interest of the state in educated youths many of whom will become members of tomorrow's national élite and upper socio-economic echelons. In this thesis, we have seen that the current processes of socio-economic change have resulted in urban educated youths adopting a range of 'new' values, ideas and lifestyles, but at the same time, without altogether rejecting 'traditional' values imparted to them from their parents, the older generations, and the Vietnamese state.

Based on first-hand experience and extensive fieldwork (participant observation and in-depth interviews), and within a theoretical framework which has concentrated on the relationships between values and social change (Clammer, 1996), my research has identified two major domains which Hanoi university graduates often use as the medium to express their perceptions of what constitutes desirable attitudes,

behaviours, and objectives. These two domains are employment (and related matters) and the family (and relationships associated with it). Data collected from my interviews show that young graduates express a greater interest in matters directly relating to their personal lives, such as employment, career, training, the family, love and interpersonal relationships, than in participating in the cause of 'building socialism' or responding to emotive appeals from the leaders of the party and the state. In other words, the grammar of youth discourse under *doi moi* is no longer the political grammar prescribed for them by the socialist state, but instead the grammar of market society and individualism, focusing on the pursuit of happiness and of economic success.

With regard to employment matters, my research has found significant changes in young graduates' perceptions and practices of employment compared to their parents' generation. Reflecting *doi moi* realities, their perceptions of employment have expanded to include jobs in non-state sectors, while many of their parents and older people have for a long time adhered to, and continue to adhere to the notion of *bien che* and the security of employment in the state sector. The young graduates I interviewed have looked beyond what they termed the 'old-style' attraction of lifetime job security in state employment to subscribe to a wider range of new opportunities and ideas unknown to their parents, such as matching abilities and skills to jobs, better income, and professional challenges. Consequently, there has been an important shift away from employment in the state sector, and into foreign companies, joint ventures, and local private businesses.

My research has also found evidence of a considerable discrepancy between the skills and knowledge attained by young graduates upon leaving the state-controlled university system on the one hand, and the demands of the liberalised labour market on the other. This points to the fact that state-owned universities have not yet been able to prepare their students for the expanding and changing job market, and consequently these graduates need to resort to self-help in the form of *hoc them* (supplementary training) so as to be able to secure minimally stable employment and/or rewarding jobs in the new labour market. The inadequate education and training at home universities is also a major factor leading to a strong increase in the preference for overseas education, particularly postgraduate training, in the capitalist world (as opposed to university training in 'friendly countries' in the communist world, as was common before *doi moi*).

Within the domain of employment, we have seen many sharp contrasts between the 'old' and the 'new'. They are manifested in a number of oppositions: the centrally planned economy and the multi-sector economy, state allocation of jobs and market mechanisms of competitive job searching, the parents' static notion of *bien che* and the young graduates' flexible and diversified perceptions of employment, the inadequacy of the higher education system and the needs of young graduates to fit market demands, the rigidity of seniority-based hierarchy (rampant in the state-sector) and graduates' desire to prove themselves, the attraction of overseas training and the lack of funding or scholarship opportunities, life-time job security and material rewards linked to performance, and many more. In this scenario of a 'moving society' (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1983), young graduates' attitudinal change and responses towards the fluctuations and changing demands of the labour market

are indicative of the fact that they accept the challenge of change, they look forward, and they are responsive and adaptive to these ongoing socio-economic transformations and eager to achieve individual professional and financial success.

Moving onto the domain of the family and interpersonal relationships, we see that there also exists many contrasts, if not contradictions between the 'old' and the 'new'. The two areas where these are most clearly manifested are parent-child relationships and love relationships. In the first, there are tensions between parental authority and young graduates' increasing desire for independence, as well as parental expectations with regard to spouse selection and the youth's perceptions of free choice and marriage at a later age than before. In the latter, the tensions between 'tradition' and 'modernity' manifest themselves in various situations and phenomena, such as pre-marital sexual relationships, 'playing around', liaisons with foreigners, Internet dating, and pragmatic and materialistic calculations in romantic relationships.

My research shows that for educated youths, negotiating between these contrasts and differences in the sphere of the family and interpersonal relationships is a complex matter, requiring on the part of young people more than just 'open-mindedness', flexibility and responsiveness. Although there is evidence of the shifting of attitudes and value perceptions on the part of young people in the direction of 'modernity', an overt demonstration of such value change and/or a total rejection of 'traditional' values without disrupting family cohesion have been neither easy nor deemed desirable by urban educated youths. As a result, compromises are sought as we see them developing a strategy of outward respect of, and non-confrontation with, their

parents and older people, while they attempt to follow an increasingly personal and individualistic lifestyle.

In a fast changing Vietnam, the desire to live by, and enjoy the rewards of 'new' values, and the simultaneous attempt to maintain values held by their parents' generation demonstrate a scenario in which 'tradition' is not simplistically replaced by 'modernity', but interlocks with it in complex ways. Whilst recognising the existence of the 'old' and the 'new' for analytical and descriptive purposes, it has been impossible to draw a clear-cut line between the two, and conceptualise one as existing free from the influence of the other. One reason lies in the fact that both 'tradition' and 'modernity' are highly variable notions difficult to define or identify precisely. As Gusfield has pointed out, it is fallacious to assume that the recent past represents an unchanged situation, and that what is seen today as 'traditional society' is often itself a product of change (Gusfield, 1967: 353). 'Tradition' is not a consistent body of values and norms, but open to change: it is often renewed, constructed, and invented (Gusfield, 1967: 358; Hobsbawm, 1992: 1). In a similar fashion, 'modernity' is not a univocal concept, but full of ambiguities: there are many ways of being 'modern', and 'modernity' has different connotations for different people and societies. For instance, in Vietnam, how can it be distinguished from other associated notions such as Westernisation?

I recognise the difficulty of distinguishing 'tradition' from 'modernity' as well as in defining them in the case of Hanoi young graduates and their value orientations amid social change. However, like the operational *yin-yang* paradigm employed by Jamieson (1993), the concepts of 'tradition' and 'modernity' provide, in my view,

useful heuristic, analytical, and descriptive tools to capture certain processes of socio-economic transformation as well as the major elements of youth's value orientations. Although I employ these concepts, I do not agree with the assumption of modernisation theory that socio-economic development is a linear process (and this is precisely another reason for the impossibility of drawing a line between 'tradition' and 'modernity'). In this research, I have neither suggested nor concluded that socio-economic, cultural, and political change move simply in one direction, or that the 'old' and the 'new' are mutually exclusive or counteractive. Thus, my research does not reach such an extreme and overly generalised conclusion as expressed by a relatively conservative segment of Vietnamese society, worried by the current changes: that today's Vietnamese youths reject all 'traditional' values to adopt totally 'modern' and individualistic values; they put their personal achievements above the family and the community; or they have become so 'modern' as to disrespect their parents and older people and pay no regard to social opinions.

The complex interlocking between the 'old' and the 'new' also makes it a very difficult task to predict how urban educated youths will ultimately perceive themselves, and how fast they are moving in the direction of adopting 'modern' values uncritically. However, my research has identified a number of trends in young graduates' attempts at finding a middle path in order to maintain the value orientations they desire without alienating themselves from their social and cultural origins. They include a sustained conformity with parental expectations and respect for their elders while trying to increase independence from them in subtle and, most of the time, non-confrontational ways; experiencing and expecting an increasingly

liberal attitude towards romantic relationships; expanding awareness of gender equality from the workplace (an old concern in the Communist rhetoric) into the rest of social life; promoting 'open-minded' and 'pragmatic' attitudes; valuing individual success (particularly in terms of career and finance); and enhancing a sense of individuality and greater assertion of the self. Whether these or any of these trends in youth value orientations are likely to continue depends on various factors, including national concerns such as economic development, political stability and security. Marr (1996: 52) points out a number of possible 'disruptive events' which can impact on young people in unpredictable ways, such as an economic recession, a confrontation with China, or a public split within the VCP. However, without these 'disruptions', and given the rapid socio-economic changes taking place in Vietnam, and the fact that, unlike my interviewees, the next generation of young people have been born and are growing up entirely in market conditions, these trends can be expected to continue.

Another way to predict whether or not these trends are likely to continue and develop among the youth population is to look at youth experiences in neighbouring countries, particularly those which have experienced the impacts of forces such as urbanisation, educational expansion, geographic and occupational mobility, economic development, and the development of the mass media. Recent studies by Farrer (2002), Lee (2002) and Stivens (2002) have shown that in large urban centres such as Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila, more and more young men and women are engaging in pre-marital sex, including even sex with prostitutes/paid partners, as well as pre-marital cohabitation. This is indicative of the fact that youth's value perceptions with regard to interpersonal relationships are increasingly self-

centred and more liberal, focusing more on romance, personal desires, and free choice than on 'conventional morality'. In the context of 'opening up' the city of Shanghai, Farrer has reported on the 'pragmatic' attitudes towards 'international dating', particularly between a local woman and a foreign man, the tolerance towards extramarital love affairs and multiple dating before marriage, and the increasing importance of money in dating. At the same time, there are continued parental pressures on young people to remain virgins and to get married. Such pressures are especially great for young women, to a point that 'informants even spoke of leaving the country to avoid such pressure', whilst the 'naturalness or inevitability of marriage is increasingly questioned in popular culture' (2002: 158). These comparisons are not deterministic of the future outlook of young Vietnamese, but they provide hints that, given the continued process of market liberalisation and political and socio-economic change, the trends towards 'modernity' in the value orientations of young graduates as identified in this research will be likely to continue and expand beyond the segment of educated youth.

The change in young graduates' value orientations helps to a certain degree to shed light on politico-economic processes taking place in Vietnam. My interviewees voice their concerns about employment, the family and interpersonal relationships but fail to show interest in grand national projects initiated by political bodies such as, the Party, the State and the Youth League. This signals a disjunction in the relations between the state and youth, or at least with urban educated youth. In the post-*doi moi* socio-economic and political context, urban educated youths are more interested, and engaged in market competition and the achievement of personal success (in terms of career, finance, and the family) than responding to the state's appeals to

embrace grand national causes such as ‘building socialism’ or the ‘voluntary youth movement’ (*phong trao thanh nien tinh nguyen*). Thus, the state has lost its emotive appeal to youth as well as, one might argue, lost touch with them. At the same time, the ‘moving society’ has presented educated young men and women with empowering opportunities and shortcuts to success through education, travel, and access to the foreign media and the Internet. In the work of social scientists such as Thayer (2002), Thomas (2002), and Kerkvliet (2001), it is clear that the state has gradually lost its power to determine what people can read and hear, where they can go, and what they can do with their lives. Eventually, it seems, the state will have to accept the need for further political reform, though perhaps unwillingly, in order to both fulfil its commitment to continued economic reform and to re-establish its connections with the country’s young population. In short, the fact that the value orientations of young graduates have now become more self-centred and less influenced by state-generated political ideology is symptomatic of an increasing distance in the relationship between the state and young people, and ultimately opens up the possibility of change, albeit gradually and slowly, in the political landscape.

The thesis as a whole conveys the difficulty of predicting how *doi moi* will ultimately be judged in terms of its impact on young people, and in terms of its socio-economic and political consequences. Indeed, Vietnamese youth are not a homogeneous group, as Marr (1996) and Thomas and Heng (2000) so ably demonstrate. Even among urban educated youth, different socio-economic circumstances in different urban centres can result in their having varied experiences, perceptions and value orientations. It also has to be clearly stated that my research is neither an all-encompassing ethnographic survey, the results of which can be

generalised to all Vietnamese young people, nor for that matter to the entire national urban educated youth. What is more, for obvious historical reasons, there is still little available statistical data on Vietnamese youth. Beyond these limitations, however, I maintain that the findings about the life choices and value orientations of Hanoi graduates are significant, inasmuch as they relate to a significant segment of Vietnamese educated youth within the context of the complex and diverse reality that *doi moi* has brought into being. In my view, this research helps to open a new window on the long-overlooked subject of Vietnamese youth and how various aspects of post-reform Vietnam are experienced in everyday life as young people negotiate the transition between a 'still' and a 'moving society'.

Further research possibilities are diverse as much remains to be explored from the perspectives of young Vietnamese. One promising research direction is to examine closely the changing relationships between the state and youth or, from another angle, the role of young people in the current modernising of Vietnam. Has the emerging market changed the nature of these relationships, and if so in which direction? What role(s) do young people see for themselves in the country's process of modernisation in a 'post-socialist' age? A second line of inquiry is to investigate how a market-oriented society and the current processes of globalisation have led to the formation and development of a youth culture in the country. Comparative studies of young people within and beyond Vietnam is also a rich area of research, so as to explore the similarities and differences between urban and rural youths and between Vietnamese and other Asian young people. One of the socio-economic consequences of *doi moi* has been the widening gap in wealth and living standards between the cities and the countryside. What impact does this have upon the future

owners of the country? Does it result in differences in their attitudes, behaviour and value perceptions? How have Vietnamese experiences differed from those of other young people in neighbouring countries? I believe that the diverse and complex realities, some of which I have explored in this thesis, and which have been brought about by rapid socio-economic and political transformations over the last two decades, provide a fascinating environment for future studies of young Vietnamese.

Appendix A: GLOSSARY

<i>bao cap</i>	Full subsidy by the state. In a <i>bao cap</i> system the socialist state subsidises all losses occurred by state enterprises and provides everybody with all necessities and benefits.
<i>bia om</i>	Snuggling-up beer bars where punters can also 'buy' girls.
<i>bien che</i>	In daily conversation, <i>bien che</i> refers to employment by the state, whether it is in governmental ministries, offices, institutes, state organisations or state-owned enterprises.
<i>cac gia tri truyen thong</i>	Traditional values.
<i>café om</i>	Snuggling-up café similar to <i>bia om</i> where punters can also 'buy' girls.
<i>café vuon</i>	Garden café where there is normally a garden in the back with partition rooms to give young couples privacy.
<i>chu nghĩa cá nhân</i>	Individualism.
<i>co che thi trường</i>	Market mechanism.
<i>doi moi</i>	Reform/renovation/new changes. <i>Doi moi</i> refers to a wide-ranging programme of economic, structural and political reforms introduced at the Sixth National Congress of the VCP at the end of 1986.

<i>hieu</i>	Filial piety. This is the essential moral value governing the parent-child relationship, and the main parameter in the social judgement on youth. <i>Hieu</i> requires from children total submission and respect to their parents, as they owe to their parents an immense debt of birth and upbringing.
<i>hoc them</i>	Supplementary learning. In the context of my research, <i>hoc them</i> refers to the participation of a young person in either full-time or part-time education further to their attaining a university degree.
<i>hoc gia</i>	Fake learning. <i>Hoc gia</i> refers to a phenomenon in which young people attend courses but do not actually gain any significant knowledge.
<i>lam ngoai</i>	Employment outside the state sector.
<i>lam them</i>	Extra work to earn extra income.
<i>lam viec cho Tay</i>	Work for Westerners, but in reality it refers generally to jobs in the foreign/joint venture sector, regardless of the fact that the foreign employer might come from other Asian countries.
<i>le</i>	Social conformity by means of careful attention to social forms. As for young people, <i>le</i> particularly refers to proper and submissive manner and behaviour towards older people.

<i>ly lich</i>	Life history. Under socialism, couples were subject to life history checks in order to ensure political compatibility, and enable them to get married.
<i>mau thuan the he</i>	Generational conflict.
<i>mo cua</i>	Open door – a metaphor referring to the opening up of the country and the liberalisation of the economy following <i>doi moi</i> . The act of ‘open door’ brings together diverse (and normally beyond the control of the state) changes in the economy, society and culture.
<i>mon dang ho doi</i>	In marriage, compatibility of families in terms of their social and economic backgrounds.
<i>mot Han Quoc</i>	South Korean fashion.
<i>nha doanh nghiep tre</i>	Young entrepreneur.
<i>quan he</i>	Contacts, especially in the sense of networking or establishing contacts in order to obtain a job or promotion.
<i>tam tong</i>	The three submissions prescribed to women according to the Confucian doctrine, according to which a woman had to submit to her father when young, to her husband when married and to her eldest son when widowed.
<i>te nan xa hoi</i>	Social evils.
<i>thanh nien</i>	Youth.
<i>that nghiep</i>	Unemployed/unemployment.
<i>trinh tiet</i>	Chastity.

<i>tu duc</i>	Four virtues. <i>Tu duc</i> are the four traditional requirements of a woman: <i>cong</i> (labour and diligence), <i>dung</i> (good countenance), <i>ngon</i> (appropriate speech) and <i>hanh</i> (proper behaviour).
<i>tu tuong tieu tu san</i>	The ideology of the petty bourgeoisie.
<i>Van Mieu</i>	Temple of Literature.
<i>xa hoi chu nghia</i>	Socialism.
<i>xa hoi hoc tap</i>	Learning society.

Appendix B: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Female Interviewees

- Ai, 24 Graduate from National University of Economics; finished an MBA in Thailand; government official;
Living with parents and a younger brother; has a Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Anh, 21 Graduate of biology from the Hanoi National University; researcher at a government research institute; not been abroad;
Living with parents and an elder sister; has a Vietnamese boyfriend (also one of my interviewees, Phan).
- Bao, 26 Graduate from University of Foreign Trade; teacher of English language at a local private university; not been abroad;
Living with parents and a younger brother; has a long-term Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Binh, 22 Graduate of English and Chinese from University of Language Teachers Training; about to do a second degree in economics; employee at a government research institute; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has no boyfriend at time of interview.

- Cam, 24 Graduate of English from Hanoi National University, finished postgraduate studies in Canada; employee at a foreign bank; Living with mother (father died) and a younger sister; has a foreign boyfriend.
- Chi, 27 Graduate from the University of Foreign Trade; employee at a SOE, not been abroad; Living with parents, has no boyfriend at time of interview.
- Dieu, 24 Graduate from National University of Economics, finished postgraduate studies in the United Kingdom; employee at a foreign company; Living with mother (parents divorced); has a foreign boyfriend.
- Duong, 25 Graduate from a university in Singapore; employee at a foreign company; Living with parents and a younger brother, has a long-term Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Giang, 25 Graduate from University of Foreign Trade; doing a second degree in law; employee at a foreign firm; not been abroad; Living with parents; has a Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Hang, 25 Graduate of English from University of Foreign Languages; bank teller at a foreign bank; been abroad; Living with parents; has a Vietnamese boyfriend.

- Hanh, 29 Graduate from University of Trade; accountant at a foreign company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a long-term Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Hien, 24 Graduate from University of Foreign Trade; finished a Master's degree at an overseas university; government official;
Living with parents; has a foreign boyfriend.
- Hoang, 27 Graduate from National University of Economics; finished postgraduate studies in Germany; employee at a foreign bank;
Living with parents and an elder sister; has a long-term Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Hong, 25 Graduate from University of Foreign Languages; also doing a second degree at University of Foreign Trade; employee at an international organisation; not been abroad;
Living with parents and a younger brother; has no boyfriend.
- Huong, 26 Graduate from University of Foreign Trade; doing postgraduate studies at same university; secretary at a local private company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Kieu, 28 Graduate of Russian from University of Foreign Languages; Hanoi representative for a Vietnamese private company from Ho Chi Minh City; been abroad;
Living with parents; has no boyfriend.

- Kim, 25 Graduate of French from University of Foreign Trade; finished postgraduate course given by a French University in Hanoi; employee at a foreign company; been abroad; Living alone (parents work and live abroad); has a long-term foreign boyfriend.
- Lan, 25 Graduate of Japanese and English from the University of Foreign Languages; employee at a foreign company, not been abroad; Living with parents, has a Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Le, 27 Graduate from University of Foreign Languages; finished a second degree from Hanoi Law School; employee at a foreign law firm; been abroad; Living with parents; has had a foreign boyfriend.
- Lien, 24 Graduate from University of Teachers Training; employee at a foreign company; not been abroad; Living with parents; has a Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Linh, 25 Graduate from Institute of Foreign Relations; finished postgraduate studies in the United Kingdom; employee at a foreign firm; Living with parents; has a Vietnamese boyfriend (but used to have a foreign boyfriend).
- Mai, 22 Graduate of English from University of Foreign Languages; interpreter at a foreign recreation resort; Living with parents; has a Vietnamese boyfriend.

- Nga, 25 Graduate from University of Foreign Languages; employee at a joint-venture company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Ngoc, 23 Graduate from National University of Economics; employee at a state bank; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Nguyet, 25 Graduate of English from University of Foreign Language Teachers Training; doing a second degree at the National University of Economics; government official; been abroad;
Living with parents and two brothers, has a Vietnamese boyfriend from Ho Chi Minh City.
- Oanh, 23 Graduate from National University of Economics; researcher at a government research institute; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Phuong, 25 Graduate from University of Foreign Languages; office worker at a foreign organisation; been abroad;
Living with parents and a younger brother; has a long-term Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Quyen, 21 Graduate of biology from the Hanoi National University; researcher at a government research institute; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has no boyfriend.

- Quynh, 25 Graduate of English from University of Foreign Trade; researcher at a government research institute; not been abroad;
Living with parents and a younger brother, has a long-term Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Thanh, 23 Graduate from University of Teachers Training; secretary at a foreign office; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a long-term Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Thu, 24 Graduate from a university in Australia; employee at a foreign company;
Living with mother (parents divorced); has had a foreign boyfriend.
- Trang, 26 Graduate from the University of Foreign Trade; employee at a foreign company, not been abroad;
Living with parents, has a long-term Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Trinh, 25 Graduate from University of Foreign Trade; doing postgraduate studies in Canada; used to work at a foreign embassy in Hanoi;
Living with mother (parents divorced); used to have a foreign boyfriend.
- Tuyen, 23 Graduate from Hanoi Open University; preparing to do a postgraduate course given by an American university in Hanoi; not in full-time employment at time of interview, though she does take up freelance translating jobs;
Living with two elder sisters (parents live in Tuyen Quang); has no boyfriend.

- Tuyet, 25 Graduate from University of Trade; accountant at a foreign supermarket; not been abroad;
Living with parents and a younger sister; has a long-term Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Uyen, 28 Graduate from Hanoi Pharmaceutical University; employee at a foreign organisation; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese boyfriend.
- Van, 26 Graduate of economics from Hanoi National University; not in employment at time of interview, as she was preparing to go to the United Kingdom for full-time postgraduate studies.
Living with parents and a younger sister; has a long-term Vietnamese boyfriend.

Male Interviewees

- Cuong, 25 Graduate of English from University of Foreign Languages; finished a second degree at University of Foreign Trade; researcher at a government research institute; been abroad;
Living with mother (father died); has a long-term Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Dan, 27 Graduate of physics from Hanoi National University; finished postgraduate studies also at Hanoi National University and doing second degree at Hanoi Polytechnic; employee at a local private company; been abroad;
Living with parents and a younger brother; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Dang, 22 Graduate from University of Architecture; employee at a local private company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Di, 25 Graduate of economics from Hanoi National University; vice-director at a Vietnamese private company; been abroad;
Living with parents; has no girlfriend at time of interview.
- Dong, 27 Graduate from University of Foreign Languages; doing postgraduate studies; employee at a foreign NGO; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has no girlfriend at time of interview.

- Du, 28 Graduate of biology from Hanoi National University; researcher at a government research institute; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Dung, 26 Graduate from University of Foreign Trade; employee at a joint-venture bank; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a long-term Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Ha, 27 Graduate from Hanoi Polytechnic; research worker at a government research institute; not been abroad;
Living alone (parents live in the countryside); has a Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Hoai, 28 Graduate of economics from Hanoi National University; finished postgraduate studies in the United Kingdom; employee at a state bank;
Living with parents; has a long-term Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Hop, 27 Graduate from the Hanoi Polytechnic; finished a second degree in economics; doing PhD research at a home university; employee at a SOE; been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Hung, 30 Graduate from University of Transport; finished postgraduate studies in Singapore; employee at a SOE;
Living with parents and a younger brother; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.

- Khac, 26 Graduate from University of Construction; employee at a joint-venture company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a stable relationship with a Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Kham, 27 Graduate from Hanoi Polytechnic; finished a second degree in economics; employee at a local private company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Khoa, 28 Graduate from Hai Phong Medical School; doctor at a state hospital; not been abroad;
Living alone (parents live in Hai Phong); has a Vietnamese girlfriend
- Kien, 30 Graduate from a university in Moscow; finished postgraduate studies at a university in the United States; researcher at a government research institute;
Living with parents; used to have a foreign girlfriend, but now dating a Vietnamese girl.
- Lam, 25 Graduate from National University of Economics; employee at a Vietnamese private company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has no girlfriend.
- Liem, 29 Graduate from National University of Economics; marketing representative for a foreign company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.

- Long, 22 Graduate from University of Foreign Languages; unemployed; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has no girlfriend at time of interview.
- Manh, 25 Graduate from University of Language Teachers Training; finished a second degree in law at Hanoi Law School and finished postgraduate studies in Australia; lawyer at a foreign law firm;
Living alone (parents live in the countryside); has a long-term Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Minh, 29 Graduate from University of Foreign Trade; doing a Masters degree at the same university; lecturer at a state university; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a long-term Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Nam, 29 Graduate of Russian from University of Foreign Language Teachers Training; finished a second degree in journalism and doing a third degree in law; photojournalist at a state-owned newspaper; been abroad;
Living with parents, sister and brother; has no girlfriend at time of interview.
- Ngoc Anh, 28 Graduate from University of Teachers Training; self-employed; been abroad;
Living with parents; has no girlfriend at time of interview.
- Ninh, 23 Graduate from Hanoi Polytechnic; unemployed; not been abroad;
Living alone (parents live in the countryside); has a foreign girlfriend.

- Phan, 21 Graduate from Hanoi National University; preparing to go to the Netherlands for postgraduate studies; not in employment;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese girlfriend (one of my interviewees, Anh).
- Phuoc, 26 Graduate from University of Foreign Languages; doing a second degree at University of Foreign Trade; self-employed; been abroad;
Living along (parents live in the countryside); has no girlfriend.
- Quoc, 26 Graduate from Hanoi Polytechnic; self-employed; not been abroad;
Living alone (parents live in the countryside); has no girlfriend.
- Sam, 26 Graduate from Hanoi Pharmaceutical University; finished postgraduate studies at Hanoi National University; government official; been abroad;
Living with parents; has no girlfriend at time of interview.
- Son, 28 Graduate from University of Trade; finished a diploma course in Thailand; employee at a SOE;
Living with parents; has a foreign girlfriend.
- Tan, 27 Graduate of journalism from Hanoi National University; employee at a state newspaper; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Thang, 24 Graduate from University of Thang Long; employee at a local private company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.

- Thanh, 28 Graduate of economics from the Hanoi National University; self employed; been abroad;
Living with parents; has a long-term Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Tien, 27 Graduate from University of Transport; unemployed; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has no girlfriend.
- Trong, 27 Graduate from Hanoi Pharmaceutical University; employee at a government research institute; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has no girlfriend at time of interview.
- Trung, 22 Graduate from Hanoi Polytechnic; employee at a local private company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Viet, 27 Graduate from the University of Tourism; employee at a joint-venture company; not been abroad;
Living alone (parents live in Vinh Phu); has a long-term Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Vinh, 25 Graduate of biology from Hanoi National University; photojournalist at a state-owned newspaper; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a long-term Vietnamese girlfriend.
- Vu, 26 Graduate from University of Foreign Languages; doing a second degree in economics; marketing representative for a foreign company; not been abroad;
Living with parents; has a Vietnamese girlfriend.

Vuong, 29

Graduate from Hanoi Medical School; just earned a scholarship for postgraduate studies in the United States; government official; not been abroad;

Living alone (parents live in the countryside); has no girlfriend.

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