

Close to the Fire: History, Power and Morality in a Vietnamese Factory
Community

by

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For Jonathan, who made it possible

Abstract

The March Eighth Textile Company in Hanoi, Vietnam, is historically one of the most important factories in the country and was the focus of the Vietnamese Communist Party's attempts to refashion Vietnam's society and economy through state owned industrial production and communal living. This thesis is based on anthropological participant observation fieldwork conducted among women factory workers in the March Eighth factory and the collective living quarters of the factory and considers how these women experienced the transformations of the socialist revolution and how this shapes their life in the post-reform present.

Part One records the social history of the factory and its community from its founding during the early days of socialism in northern Vietnam. Chapters Two and Three describe the process of political and social education of the March Eighth workers. These chapters illuminate the workers' sense of achieving political power through their successful participation in state campaigns and their expressions of nostalgia for this past. In Chapter Four, I use the example of stories of President Ho Chi Minh's official opening of the factory to illustrate this nostalgia and the divergences between officially recorded history and the recollections of the workers.

Part Two describes everyday life for older women workers in the present. Most of the women workers by the time of my fieldwork were struggling economically in Vietnam's newly open market economy, and engaged in many social practices that were suppressed or discouraged during the socialist era, including materialism, consumerism and status competition (Chapter Five), and religious and ritual practices (Chapter Six). Through these practices, women evaluated socialist definitions of moral behaviour, incorporated and rejected elements of state discourse, and expressed their anxiety about their changing relationship to political power.

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I must first of all thank my supervisors at LSE, Charles Stafford and Rita Astuti. This thesis does not, could not, do justice to the intellectual rigour and grandeur that Charles Stafford has shown me in his own work and his guidance throughout this process. Rita Astuti has consistently been a warm source of support and encouragement, while always pushing me to think more, harder, better. I was also enormously lucky to be writing up at LSE while Stephan Feuchtwang was available for sage and generous advice and strong coffee. Jonathan Parry, whose own work is so inspiring, has been consistently supportive. Thank you also to Jonathan Spencer and Philip Thomas.

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I must thank several anthropologists from around the world who have contributed to my research and writing. Shaun Kingsley Malarney has been encouraging since the early days of this project, including suggesting to me that I look in the archives for directives on how to live in the *khu tap the*. This thesis owes him an obvious intellectual debt and any errors in interpretation of his work are of course my own. Glorianne Leck, Youngstown State University, and Mary Anne Pitman, University of Cincinnati, were early and continuing inspirations. Also deserving special mention are Natasha Pairaudeau and Duong Bich Hanh, who both taught me so much. Thank you to colleagues and fellow students at LSE, especially Sigrun Hardardottir and Peggy

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Thank you to Jonathan Birchall, who said: "Do a PhD, absolutely"; and "Vietnam, I'll come with you"; and "Is there anything I can do to help?"; and never, ever, said "When are you going to finish that bloody thing?"

A Note on the Text

Vietnamese Spellings and Translation

The Vietnamese language is monosyllabic, and so “Vietnam” is a Western rendering of the name of the country spelled in Vietnamese “Viet Nam”. Similarly, I write Hanoi for Ha Noi. The Vietnamese language is written with a Roman alphabet, but with diacritics for tone and vowel marks. I have made this decision to use the English “spellings” of place names since I am not using diacritics in this thesis. Thus, all the Vietnamese words that I transcribe (e.g., *khu*, *phuong*, *tinh cam*) are effectively English renderings. The question of whether to write Viet Nam or Vietnam has been discussed by foreign and Vietnamese scholars and there are important points to be made on each side; the topic was debated on the Vietnamese Studies Group (VSG) email bulletin board in June 2001 and the historian David Marr commented on the exchange that “the politics of orthography is alive and well”. I don’t take a political position but a common usage one, as the majority of English languages sources I quote use “Vietnam”.

Some scholars, including Malarney and Gammeltoft, translate *gia dinh van hoa moi* as “New Culture Family”. The Vietnamese scholars I asked about it prefer “New Family Culture”, which I also prefer mainly because it sounds more natural in English, and partly because I think it captures more of the general Vietnamese concern with “culture”. However, I do not think the difference is a large or significant one.

The factory I studied is named in Vietnamese *Cong Ty Det 8-3*. The word *det* means “weaving”, a stage in the textile production process, but is also used generically to mean textile, so that I have translated the name as the March Eighth Textile Company.

About Pronouns, Names and Terms of Address

Vietnamese pronouns are hierarchically inscribed, so that they represent the relative ages and status of the speaker and spoken to. In this thesis, I have used the familial pronouns at least on first reference, along with the names of my informants and friends, to represent the way in which I would refer to them in conversation. *Bac* (senior aunt or uncle) Nhu, for example, vice-president of the Women’s Union, was one of the strongest supporters of my research in the *khu*. In talking to her, I used a diminutive pronoun for myself, *Em*, little sister. I respectfully referred to most of the older or retired male and female workers (in their fifties and older) as *Bac*. The women closer to my

own age (early thirties) I called *Chi*, older sister; the men I called *Anh* (older brother). Younger workers I referred to as *Em*, as is appropriate, and children are generally addressed as *Chau*; they in turn would usually address me (and so I would address myself) as *Co*, junior aunt. One aspect of state campaigns to promote egalitarian social behaviour centred on language and tried to introduce the general use of *dong chi* (comrade) between adults regardless of age and status. The use of *dong chi* now is rare, except for some official contexts, or occasionally ironically, and age and hierarchy-based pronouns are used by everyone.

About Money

The Vietnamese currency, the *dong* (VND), was exchanged at about 11,000 to the US dollar during my fieldwork.

Glossary of Vietnamese Terms

anh--older brother
ao dai--traditional dress for women; “long shirt”
bac--senior aunt or uncle
cong nghiep--industry
chau--child, grandchild, niece or nephew
chi--older sister
chua--pagoda
dinh--village communal house
det--weaving
doi moi--renovation policy; market reforms
don gian--simple
em--little sister or brother
gia dinh--family
hien dai--modern
ho khau--household residence registration
khong--no, not
khu, khu tap the--collective living quarters
lac hau--backward
lam them--work extra
nha que--peasant, rustic
phong kien--feudal
phuong--city ward
que, que huong--home village
soi--spinning
thoi gian bao cap--state subsidy time
tinh cam--sympathy; sentimental relations
van hoa--culture
xe om--motorbike taxi

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1998/9:

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Preface

The March Eighth Textile Company, Hanoi, Vietnam: Fieldsite and Methodology

I have a small stack of black and white, eight by ten inch photographs of my fieldsite in an envelope that has shuffled around my desk for the last two years while I have been writing this thesis. Periodically I take out the photos and look at them, usually to procrastinate, sometimes for inspiration, occasionally to consult them for significant detail. Once to take them to the photo shop to make them into slides, which I have used for diversion and discussion when presenting seminars on my work in progress.

These photos were all taken by Vietnam News Agency photographers in the 1960's. The pictures are of the March Eighth Textile Company, a large state owned textile and garment factory in Hanoi, as it was being constructed and when it was officially opened. These photos appeared in newspapers and magazines at the time, and subsequently were catalogued and stored in the Vietnam News Agency photo archives, which is where I found them and bought prints of them. In the 1960's, north Vietnam, then the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was governed by the Communist Party and had a centrally planned economy. State owned enterprise development was a central focus of the Party's plans to transform Vietnam's economy and society. The March Eighth factory was an especially significant part of these plans because it primarily employed women workers, and was intended to make these women into a vanguard of the socialist revolution. The women workers were to embody and enact the egalitarian principles of the revolution in their political involvement, in their work in the factory and their domestic life in the factory community. They were to fulfil Ho Chi Minh's call: "If women are not freed, the construction of socialism will only be halfway done" (cf. Anh and Le 1997: 49).

The photographs fascinate me because they add a new dimension of imagination to the other sources I have used to try to understand what the women workers at the March Eighth factory wanted to say to me about their past. Three of the photos show Ho Chi Minh, the President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, on the day he officially opened the factory. One shows women "labour heroes" posing in front of a sloganeering

poster. Others show women at work in different sections of the factory, and another, a panorama of two negatives spliced together, shows a wide view of the main factory building, with a row of bomb shelters along the side of the building. This handful of photos, then, shows many of the main subjects of this thesis: how politically important these women were in the past (important enough to be visited by the heroic Ho Chi Minh himself); how in some ways they were committed to the ideals of the revolution (and so won labour awards for their efforts); and how their connection to the factory shaped so many aspects of their lives.

This thesis is based on fieldwork carried out on the shop floor and in the collective living quarters of the March Eighth Textile Company (*Cong Ty Det Mong Tam Thang Ba*), in what is now the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. I concentrated my research on the oldest generation of women workers, now in their fifties, those who had been the eager young women of the photographs. These older women have worked in the factory since its founding and lived in the collective living quarters (*khu tap the*, or *khu*) since it was first built in the same period. They are almost all originally from small villages in the countryside, and most were recruited when they were unmarried and young, in their late teens and early twenties. Many still work in the factory as they have done for some thirty years, while others have retired and still live in the *khu* factory community.

The original women workers recruited for the March Eighth factory were brought to the outskirts of Hanoi to the construction site of the future factory and housed in bamboo huts, which were eventually replaced by large concrete apartment blocks as the *khu* community grew. The *khu* was designed to be wholly collective, with communal kitchens and dining halls. The concrete blocks had shared bathrooms and small single-room flats which housed four to six women each. While learning to perform new kinds of productive tasks in the factory, the women were also taught how to live collectively, in order to become good socialists, including concerted efforts to teach them how to have ideal sexual equality as well. These women who worked in the factory since its founding lived through this period of high socialism, through the period of state subsidy (*thoi gian bao cap*) and central planning ending in the 1980's with the introduction of market reforms (*doi moi*), over which time many of them married and had children and

grandchildren, and experienced multiple shifts in the social and economic relations in the factory and in the factory living quarters.

This thesis is based on ethnographic data from an intensive period of fieldwork from January 1998 through August 1999, including long term participant observation in both the factory and the factory *khu* as well as formal interviews and discussions about contemporary life in the factory and the *khu*. These conversations were ostensibly about a present in which the older generation of women workers were caught up in the enormous social and economic changes that characterise post-*doi moi* Vietnam. However, facing contemporary anxieties about morality about family, work, neighbourliness, and spiritual practice, in their attempts to sort out their attitudes and experiences in these present circumstances, the women I studied often turned to talk about the past.

This talk about the past makes up a large part of this thesis. I am concerned here to unravel why these women talk so much about the past, and what they mean to say about it. I propose that all of this talk about the past illuminates what I can describe of the present. I hope to show that these women experienced in the past a kind of power that they enacted and expressed through their involvement in the political activities of the socialist revolution. They then experienced a sense of losing power, in the present, and instead have begun pursuing other goals, such as economic success and family happiness. In these pursuits, paramount among their contemporary concerns is their desire to define a moral position that makes sense of their past and the present, often expressed through nostalgia for the past.

I begin by considering the history of the factory and these workers during the early high socialist days of the factory, followed by descriptions of their family life and work in the factory and factory community in the recent post-reform days. I suggest that for the most part these women workers have not reaped much benefit from economic reform but have been considerably disadvantaged by the changing economic and social context of post-*doi moi* Vietnam. I consider the experience of these women workers in relation to the socialist state, through the social institution of the factory, comparing discourses about morality in the socialist past and the new economically competitive present. I examine the ways in which new economic pressures have influenced social

patterns affecting these women's relationships with husbands, children, neighbours, co-workers, ancestors and ghosts.

Methodology and Research

Considering the methodological implications of urban anthropology, I have found nowhere a better description of how to do it than in a classic work of urban ethnography, Tally's Corner (Liebow 1967). In it, the anthropologist describes how he was baffled about how to begin approaching his project, a study of black American "streetcorner men". He went to his supervisor for advice, who told him " 'Go out there and make like an anthropologist' " (Liebow 1967: 235).

In my own fieldwork, I frequently felt that the best I could do was "make like an anthropologist". When I first began fieldwork, it was haphazard and only slowly began to develop into a routine. It seemed to progress organically, was constrained by the requirements of official permissions, and was complicated for me by the fact that I lived with my husband in Hanoi and studied a community that I commuted to, rather than lived in. Although this thesis is not much concerned with self-reflexivity or my own role in research, I hope my ethnography captures not only my attempts to conduct systematic research, but also some of the sometimes fragmentary and serendipitous ways in which I received and analysed information and impressions in the field.

I was first taken to the March Eighth factory by a researcher at the Centre for Research in Gender, the Family, and the Environment in Development (CGFED). CGFED had sponsored my research visa in Vietnam and had already spent a frustrating few months trying to arrange a fieldsite for me. I had already been refused research permission from other factories. In one case, I learned that the proposed factory was producing army uniforms and predicted to my CGFED colleagues that I would not be permitted to research there for very long once the Ministry of Defence heard of my presence. Sure enough, the next week CGFED was politely notified that this was not a convenient time for the factory to host a foreign researcher. In another case, the factory director told CGFED that they would be happy to host me, and calculated that if I paid the factory US\$3000 per month, that would cover the cost of lost production time while I was interviewing workers. While getting progressively more nervous about whether my

hope of finding an industrial fieldsite would be realised, I tried to stay aware of the possible political sensitivities of my research and present my intentions as honestly but as diplomatically as possible. In the process of trying to obtain research permission, and eventually retaining it at the March Eighth factory, I perfected my answers about why I wanted to study women factory workers. Phrased in the official language of socialist discourse, I found that on the surface at least my interests corresponded to official concerns about the lives of women workers and conditions in state owned factories.

As I waited for research permission and settled into Hanoi, I worked on my Vietnamese language competence, studying with a teacher and of course talking to people as much as possible for practice. The conventions of anthropological writing often assume linguistic fluency, and perhaps in this thesis I inadequately challenge this convention, but in fact I always struggled with language throughout my fieldwork and not infrequently felt like I just did not know what was going on around me. Saving me from complete despair was the fact that my reading level was not as bad, as a result of having studied in Hanoi for a summer previously and also studied at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London for two years, where the emphasis was not on pronunciation and speaking. However, I am not linguistically gifted and although I was functional in speaking, I never felt very expressive in Vietnamese, and I don't think I ever approached real fluency. My comprehension became much better than my speaking and by the end of my fieldwork I could understand much of what people said to me, but my language skills were never outstanding. However, I concluded that being able to understand more than I could say was not necessarily an insurmountable disadvantage; it was better than the other way around, for example (that is, being able to say more than I could understand). I was aided by what seemed to be a natural talkativeness on the part of most of my informants, and found that, perhaps the same as in English, most people were content to talk much more than they listened, if I could prompt them sufficiently. In formal interviews, I was often accompanied by my research assistant, Chi Khanh, who did not speak English but could help me with a kind of Vietnamese-to-clearer-Vietnamese translation when I was stuck. We also recorded all of our formal interviews, so that I feel confident when I quote long passages of reported speech that they are accurately rendered. Perhaps my pleasure in being able to read Vietnamese better than I speak it also

buoyed my interest in using Vietnamese language text sources, particularly the official history *Cong Ty Det 8-3* (that I describe in Chapter One) and official directives and regulations about *khu tap the's*, all of which I enjoyed translating during my fieldwork.

When I first entered the compound of the March Eighth factory with my CGFED guide (as I describe in the following section), I was excited by its size, larger than the other factories I had seen, and spread out over many buildings. I could already hear the noise coming from the main weaving section building, which faces onto the central driveway of the factory complex, next to the main administration building. Somehow this noise was wonderfully exciting to me; it sounded serious, and productive, and important. I was charmed by the large blue and grey stained-glass window on the front of the administration building, a Soviet socialist realist style depiction of women working at what I later recognised as a weaving machine¹. The factory looked like what I thought a big state-owned factory should look like, and it looked like a great fieldsite.

Once in the main building, we drank tea with Chi Tam, the social welfare official who would become my main ally in the factory and facilitate my introduction to the production section heads. She agreed with my short explanation that it was important to study “the working conditions of Vietnamese women in building socialism through industrialisation and modernisation”. When I said I wanted to interview workers, she said that I could interview twenty of them over two weeks. At this point, I did one thing right and one thing wrong, learning lessons that would serve me well throughout my fieldwork. The thing I did right was not suggest that two weeks was too short and that I needed long term access, but accept gratefully. I was later able to repeatedly extend my stay when I had built up positive exchange and *tin h cam* (sentimental) relationships (described in more detail in Chapters One, Three and Five) with Chi Tam and others in the factory, and demonstrated that I could do research in the factory without interrupting production or causing any problems. The thing I did wrong was ask if I could take photographs. If I had waited, or even begun to photograph later without asking, when my presence was already accepted, probably this would not have been a problem. At the

¹ Cf. Taylor 2001: 111 for a description of socialist realism: “It advocated art for the masses and pushed for artists to portray ‘positive’ views of workers and peasants to convey the ideals of the proletarian class. In Vietnam, socialist realism was equated with patriotism, and works that depicted soldiers, farmers, and labourers were considered de facto ‘patriotic’.”

time, however, Chi Tam looked uncomfortable and said “No”, a decision she then was obligated to stick to much later when I asked again. Although I regret that I have no photos of the factory from my fieldwork, even this had one accidentally positive result. It encouraged me to look for other photographs of the factory, leading me to the Vietnam News Agency photo archives and the wonderful old photos that now sit on my desk and have provided me with so much information and inspiration in the writing of this thesis. Later, when I started research in the *khu*, I was careful to leave open-ended the question of whether I could use a tape recorder or take photographs, and thus was able to do both.

I started my formal research in the factory, with my research assistant, Dang Bao Khanh, a cadre from the National Institute for Social Sciences and an experienced fieldworker within the Vietnamese social science tradition, which is weighted heavily towards statistical surveys and quantitative data. We conducted all of our work in Vietnamese, although, as I mentioned, Chi Khanh was especially graceful at explaining things to me in simple Vietnamese when I became linguistically confused. We went daily together to the factory for three months, spending long days in different sections of the factory, before later starting research in the *khu*. After obtaining some background information about the factory overall, we began a process of surveying workers in each section of the factory, from the thread spinning and weaving sections to the dyeing and sewing sections, roughly, although I didn’t realise this until later, in the order of production (raw materials come into the thread spinning section, the thread is spun into cloth, the cloth is dyed and patterned, and then cut and sewn into clothes). Chi Khanh and I wrote the survey questions together and in the beginning I followed her advice on what to ask, although as we spent more time in the factory I added new questions as I learned more about production and the background of the workers. The survey basically asked for statistical data such as age, salary and educational background, while also discussing career history and work attitudes. I have not represented the survey much in this thesis because although it gave me a good overview of the workers, it quickly began to seem the least interesting source of what I could learn in the factory. The survey instead became a good excuse for me to spend time in the factory, doing what appeared to be research, while I had the chance to observe and learn more about the factory in my own way. Thus, after we had done the first few interviews together in each section, I would

leave Khanh to conduct the survey and wander more casually by myself throughout the sections, learning how to use many of the machines and chatting with workers in the quieter sections. During this informal discussion and observation, I absorbed what I could about the mechanics and flow of work, the attitudes of workers and the relationships between and among workers and cadre. At the factory, I also participated as much as possible in non-work activities, such as lunch and after-work meetings. Khanh and I also spent many days in the social welfare and personnel sections of the factory, with management cadre, chatting and observing as well as formally interviewing them about their work and the factory.

From meeting workers and cadre in the factory I began to be invited to visit homes in the *khu*, and decided to begin research there as well if possible. At the time, after three months of conducting the survey in the factory and contriving as many ways to become involved in factory settings as possible, I was losing interest in my original intention to write about labour relations in the factory, which were less compelling than I had imagined they would be. (This is also why the factory-based research, although it was invaluable to help me understand more about the lives of women workers, occupies so little space in this thesis.) In answer to the survey question “Where do you live?” most of the workers (except the younger ones, as I explain in Chapter Seven) had replied “*Khu tap the cua nha may*” (“The collective living quarters of the factory”), usually specifying which building (A1, A2, B1, and so forth). The *khu* is down the street from the factory and I had bicycled past it every day on my way to the factory, but somehow it wasn’t until I actually went to visit women in the *khu* that I looked at it properly or realised what it was. There are many *khu tap the*’s scattered around Hanoi and they had become part of the urban landscape for me: sets of large, crumbling, concrete apartment blocks, usually painted a mouldering yellow fading and peeling to weather-beaten grey, often festooned with laundry hanging out the windows.

The first time I went to a flat in the *khu*, Chi Khanh and I had been invited to lunch with Chi Thanh, a shift boss in the weaving section who was in her fifties, to whom I had already spoken about the war and socialist campaigns. I knew Thanh was a Party member and had been in the self-defence brigade of the factory during the American War. I saw her as a key example of a dedicated cadre, a category whose historical

importance at March Eighth I was just beginning to understand. I knew that Thanh was a widow with two children: a married son who lived elsewhere in Hanoi, contrary to patrilocal Vietnamese tradition in which at least the eldest married son lives with his parents, and a thirteen year old daughter, who lived with her in the *khu*. We parked our bicycles at a shop on the corner of the A2 apartment block. (In the *khu*, as elsewhere in Hanoi, to park a vehicle in public required paying a small charge for someone to look after it.) Thanh had given us directions to her flat, which was in the A2 block, but we were unable to figure out how to get into the building and we had to ask the woman who ran the shop to show us where the flat was. She led us into a narrow hallway under the cement staircase on the ground floor, sloshing through the mud of an unpaved entrance, ducking under an impossibly low door frame. “Thanh *oi!*” she called politely, “*Nguoi tay cua chi day!*” (Hey Thanh, your foreigner is here). Thanh met us at the door and brought us inside her flat, passing her daughter in the hall outside, who was cooking our lunch on a coal burner in a little alcove that comprised the collective kitchen space and two toilet stalls, which stank. As we sat inside Thanh’s little flat, Khanh surprised me by commenting about how large it was. After visiting others, I was later to realise that Thanh’s flat was indeed a little larger than some of the other *khu* flats, having two small rooms instead of one. As we were chatting, a young man stopped by, greeted Chi Thanh, and went out, leaving his bicycle leaning against the wall next to us. Thanh complained that because her flat was larger and she had no husband with whom to share it, the neighbours next door requested that they use the space in her front room to park their motorbikes and bicycles. “There are thirteen of them living in the same size as mine, so how could I refuse?” she said to me as we sat eating noodles among three motorbikes and four bicycles. Neighbourly *tin cam* (sentiment) as well as the ideology of communal living demanded that Thanh allow her already cramped bedroom to become a parking garage, where the smell of petrol dripping on her tile floor competed with the wafting stench from the overused public toilets outside her front door.

The whole experience of visiting Thanh crystallised for me a number of issues that are central to this thesis. I was struck by the squalor of the *khu* buildings, the shared kitchens and bathrooms, the overcrowding in tiny flats. I viewed Thanh as a hero of the revolution, someone who fought in the war, who had been a loyal cadre and hard worker

in the efforts to develop industrial socialism. Yet there she sat among the fruits of this struggle: a dilapidated flat and an absent son. In many ways, this whole thesis is Thanh's story, recapitulated and modulated through the stories and actions of Thanh and other women workers, tracing their telling of their experiences, and the official narratives of their experiences, from the days of heroic revolutionary effort, to my observations and their discussions of the tensions and disappointments of the post-reform, post-revolutionary, present.

While I first began to think about these questions when I first visited Chi Thanh and the *khu*, my strongest impression was, as I had felt when I visited the factory for the first time, that the *khu* seemed like an ideal place to do fieldwork. Although it is urban, it is bounded geographically, socially, and politically, and it is an integrated part of the history of the March Eighth factory. After a few more social visits to workers in the *khu*, I requested official permission to do research there. With the support of CGFED and Chi Tam, representing the factory, I made a request to the People's Committee of *phuong* (ward) Quynh Mai, the city ward that comprises the *khu*. The People's Committee, in granting permission, asked the *phuong* Women's Union (*Hoi Phu Nu*) to assist me. From this, I met Bac Nhu, vice-president of the Women's Union, who became a good friend and indefatigable supporter. One specific effect of these alliances that I developed was a privileged access to a relatively large number of local officials. This helped me develop my ideas about local power and political involvement, which I explain in the following chapter, and allowed me to contrast the experiences and attitudes of political activists with workers who were less active.

Bac Nhu arranged many of my interviews in the beginning, from which I developed my own network. I recorded some fifty of these formal life history interviews with women and men in the *khu*. Inevitably the questions I asked and the subjects I pursued shifted over time as I learned more about history of the factory and life in the *khu* and developed my interest in the themes that are central to this thesis. For these interviews I was often accompanied by Chi Khanh, who would follow along the loose format we designed together, while we took turns to ask questions and sometimes pursued new subjects of interest as they came up. Sometimes I learned as much from Chi Khanh's questions as from the answers. Sometime she would seize on a subject for

imponderable reasons of her own. Sometimes she thought my questions were ridiculous and argued with me even as I asked them. She was almost always a helpful presence, with a knack for making people feel comfortable. Those interviews were tape-recorded, which I recognised could make interviewees feel constrained but I felt was worth the accuracy, given my linguistic limitations, to know that I could review an interview. After recording several interviews I began to think that the tape recorder didn't make much difference to how people responded to questions; some were more reticent than others, as is unsurprising. I returned to visit several of the older workers who I found most interesting or who were most welcoming, and later informally asked follow-up questions to stories they had told originally or asked about new issues that I was pursuing.

Besides the formal interviewing, which went on sporadically over the months of my fieldwork, for those months I spent all day and many evenings in the *khu*, in the houses of a handful of families. Those families included those of some of the older workers I met through interviewing, and particularly that of a worker in the dyeing section, Chi Loan, and her teen-age daughter Chau Ha. In the *khu*, I engaged in traditional anthropological participant observation, especially spending time with women, with whom I shopped in the market, learned to cook, ate, gossiped, cleaned, napped, went to the pagoda and fortune-tellers, watched many hours of television, and looked after children. Although I did not live permanently in the *khu*, I observed and shared in a broad range of activity of people's lives there throughout the day, spending late evenings and early mornings there, and sleeping over at Loan's house occasionally and during the week of lunar New Year, Tet.

Interviewing and Reported Speech

Given especially my interest in interviewing and recording stories in my fieldwork, I tried in the conduct of my fieldwork to stay particularly aware of the different kinds of speech I was hearing and recording. The disciplines of anthropology, history, and linguistics have chewed over the theoretical problems of cross-cultural interviewing, oral histories and recorded speech, and the problems of language, meaning and context. In this thesis, I use reported speech both to help communicate people's

expressions of experiences of the past and their comments on the present. Kopjin suggests that description of oral narratives must include: “the linguistic resources or styles available to the speaker; the different linguistic or speech events available to the speaker; and the rules of interpretation and norms that govern different types of social interaction” (Kopjin 1998: 145). Kopjin’s own interviews with rural Javanese women in Surinam appear initially incoherent until she traces the connections that the women have made between elements of their stories. Kopjin classifies these life histories as “communicative events”, with unusual speech features that she likens to the speech used in public rite of passage rituals. Other norms that Kopjin finds affect her interviews are gender and age hierarchies, with women expected to be silent when men are talking, and the avoidance of conflict that made women change the subject when certain topics arose.

Kopjin also considers the problems of transcription and how texts lose “paralinguistic features of interview data” including intonation, volume, and speed of speech (ibid.: 151). For this reason, I have also tried to note some of the key paralinguistic features of my interviews, particularly in terms of laughing, pausing, and interrupting, and including the conventional use of bold type to indicate a speaker’s emphasis on a word or phrase. Also similar to my experience, as Kopjin noted in her own fieldwork, although the conventions of the oral history interview requires that they are conducted in private, in the cultural context in which she researched this was usually impossible and Kopjin found that the presence of others sometimes had unexpected rewards in supplemented and provoking stories. Gammeltoft, in her long-term ethnographic research in northern Vietnam, also found that in some cases one-on-one interviews were less productive than group discussions, especially in the subjects she focused on, including contraceptive measures, work and health. She writes: “I was surprised at the openness with which sexuality and gender relations were often discussed in these groups; in some respects group discussions turned out to be much better ways of researching personal and sensitive issues than individual interviews” (Gammeltoft 1999: 49). On the other hand, anthropologists can make rather too much of how cultural difference weighs on interview techniques. Hinton, for example, suggests that it “would be rude” to ask former Khmer Rouge cadre in Cambodia whether they had killed people because this would put them in a situation where they could “lose face” (Hinton 1998:

104). While this is perhaps belabouring the social idea of saving and losing face, Hinton's methodological point is still a useful one. He chose to ask indirect questions in those interviews such as how and why others killed. I occasionally employed this approach in my interviews in the March Eighth *khu*, asking about the behaviour of others where my interviewee seemed uncomfortable about the turn my questions were taking. Like Hinton's experience of repeatedly receiving the same kind of response from his informants on certain questions, I began to be able to somewhat predict who would find what topics troublesome. Looking back over my fieldnotes and interview transcripts, often I discovered even more patterns and similarities in ways of discussing certain subjects, adding to my impression that older women workers expressed social memory, as I discuss in Chapter One.

Kopjin also addresses the ideological assumptions of the interviewer, particularly with regards to the unity of biography and norms of a subjective experience of self. Kopjin found that homogeneity in Surinam led to a strong sense of group identity that meant that the women she interviewed had "experience of self less individual than might be expected" (Kopjin 1998: 154). Because of this, Kopjin suggests, it would be an ethnocentric assumption to look for psychological depth in their narratives or expect them to reflect on their lives in "a revealing or self-confessional manner" (ibid.: 155). For the older women factory workers in March Eighth, the experience of group identity can also be defined through their experience as a generational cohort (as I describe in the following chapter) and can be seen in the ways their narratives often reinforce and repeat each other.

Leshkovich, in her work on south Vietnam, suggests an interesting model for the life stories that she collected, the "personal history statement" (*ly lich*). These *ly lich* statements were a kind of self-confession that was widely in use in the socialist North. After the end of the American War and re-unification of the North and South, many Southerners were compelled to write *ly lich* to determine their class identity. One of Leshkovich's informants declined to be interviewed in person but chose to write out her personal history in a way that recalls the *ly lich* style (Leshkovich 2000). In the North, workers would have been accustomed to writing *ly lich* and repeating their class histories (cf. Belanger and Hong 2001 for a discussion of the importance of *ly lich* compatibility in

marriage choices). The people I interviewed formally at the factory and the *khu* almost all seemed quite comfortable with being interviewed and talking about their personal histories; their experiences with *ly lich* may have contributed to this, and may have influenced their use of certain standard phrases, particularly old campaign language. This observation is reminiscent of the assertions of ethnographers in China that the “speak bitterness” campaigns of the socialist revolution, which encouraged people to complain of pre-revolutionary class oppression, has influenced the way many people still talk about their lives (cf. Rofel 1999: 14).

I also considered the problem of memory and participant observation. As Bloch writes, anthropologists in the process of fieldwork internalise vast amounts of knowledge that is not told to them (Bloch 1998: 17; 25). Bloch proposes that cultural knowledge can rarely be rendered explicit in language, that it is transmitted by practical activity and not by language (and in fact that when cultural knowledge is explicitly expressed in language, we should ask why, since it is so unusual a situation). By conducting long term participant observation fieldwork, anthropologists gain access to this implicit, non-linguistic knowledge, what he calls “what goes without saying” (ibid.: 22). Bloch suggests that we gain this knowledge through practice, and then it is confirmed in the linguistic expression of our informants. This analysis supports the recent trends in anthropology towards practice-based, highly contextualised description. In the writing of this thesis, I have relied on much reported speech to confirm what seemed increasingly obvious to me about the lives of the people I studied. That language is a crucial part of Vietnamese social life sounds like a truism of the most banal sort, but in fact only begins to capture what I first perceived to be an almost extraordinary garrulousness in Vietnam. During the course of my fieldwork I got used to it, and it became part of “what goes without saying” for me that an enormous amount of things got said. This is certainly a significant part of why, in this thesis, I make fairly extensive use of reported speech. Particularly in long passages this tends to be what I recorded in formal interviews, but otherwise are from notes I took during or after visits, or from off-hand or overheard remarks and other incidental conversation; for example, I cite a motorbike taxi driver in Chapter Five who gossiped with me on a street corner.

Although it is not a primary concern of this thesis, I also take from Hershatter, an historian of China, her example of how to examine the historical traces of subaltern voices in the official records. In one example, in her study of prostitutes in Shanghai, she is helped to reconstruct the actions of prostitutes by pamphlets warning clients how not to be defrauded by them (Hershatter 1999: 127). Similarly, my research includes examples from the vast record of regulatory policies for domestic and work life in revolutionary Vietnam. I use these official policies not only for insight into Party ideology about idealised behaviour but also to infer from them the kinds of behaviour that prompted such regulations. Why would central Party directives need to warn husbands not to feudally beat their wives, for example? (see Chapter Two)

Finally, I am frequently asked if my American-ness affected my experience during fieldwork. Since I was officially introduced everywhere as a student from the London School of Economics, many people assumed I was British. I occasionally tried to correct this assumption but was surprised how little my own nationality seemed to concern people (see also the following section for my experience in national identification when entering the factory). I eventually settled for introducing myself light-heartedly as “*Nguoi Anh goc My*” (English person of American origin), the same formula by which overseas Vietnamese are designated (e.g. *Nguoi My goc Viet*, an American of Vietnamese origin). I include in this thesis a few of the handful of times that specific reference was made to my American-ness. However, I have not much discussed my own positioning as an American because it is my perception that it did not affect specifically my research so much as my general status as a white, Western, expert, and even that I am not sure was so remarkable or transformative an issue. There has of course been much attention paid to the practice and conduct of long term, participant observation based, ethnographic fieldwork. Some have charged that it is a neo-colonial process; others that, like Schroedinger’s cat, cultural and social environments are so changed by the presence of the anthropologist that observation is irreparably tainted and rendered invalid. I was more concerned about these issues abstractly before I went to the field than I was when I was there. Once in the factory and the *khu*, it seemed to me that my presence had relatively little impact on the actions of most people. Of course, what people said to me was shaped in some way by our identities and the context of our interaction; I hope to

capture some flavour of that in this thesis, but I am much more concerned with accurate and evocative description of some aspects of the actions and experiences of workers, regardless of my presence or absence.

Economic Context, State Owned Enterprise Reform and Doi Moi

Economic reform in Vietnam has proceeded at an erratic pace over the last decade. The passage of the *doi moi* policies by the Congress of the Communist Party in 1986 opened the way for some forms of private enterprise, including the petty trade by women that I discuss in Chapters Five and Six, and the beginnings of state owned enterprise reform. Since the state has retained considerable economic control, however, Vietnam has not shifted to a fully capitalist economy resembling that of its Asian Tiger neighbours. The Vietnamese system, like the current Chinese one, is described as a “socialist market economy” that allows some private trade and foreign investment. According to the Party’s political report to the Ninth Party Congress held in April 2001, the “path forward” for Vietnam involves “the transitional development to socialism bypassing the capitalist regime, that is, bypassing the establishment of the dominating position of the capitalist production relations and superstructure, but acquiring and inheriting the achievements recorded by mankind under the capitalist regime, especially in science and technology, to develop rapidly the productive forces and shape a modern economy” (Vietnam Communist Party 2001: 9).

Following its long-standing ideological support for state ownership, the Party continues to stress the importance of the state sector. State owned enterprises (SOEs), like the March Eighth factory, continued to be given preferential treatment by state-owned banks, consuming a disproportionate share of bank credit in comparison to the private sector. In the 1990s, the SOEs were also still benefiting from preferential access to export quotas, affecting garment and shoe exports and rice exports. Additionally, SOE debt remained a heavy burden on the banking system; the system of preferential, often non-performing loans from state-owned banks to enterprises kept the entire banking system from functioning independently. In 1996, just over 3.1 million people worked in the state sector out of a total work force of 35.7 million. Of these, 1.8 million worked for SOEs, or roughly 5.2 per cent of the total workforce (IMF: 14).

According to the international community and what are labelled the reformers within the Vietnam Communist Party, a key part of economic opening is the privatisation of state owned enterprise, and the closure of loss making enterprises. The object is to free the banking system from the costs of supporting the SOEs debts, and to increase access to bank credit for the private sector, while developing internal private financial markets to fund future development. However, by the time of the Eighth Party Congress in 1996, the Party was still holding on to its historical idealisation of state owned enterprise. The Eighth Congress stated the aim of the Party in relation to state owned enterprise: “To build up a comprehensively developed working class, well-developed in membership and class consciousness, its educational level and professional skills heightened, capable of applying and innovating new technologies, in possession of an industrialised workstyle and a sense of organisation and discipline, operating with ever higher productivity, quality and efficiency, serving as the core in building an alliance comprising the working class, peasantry, intelligentsia, and strengthening the great national unity bloc” (Vietnam Communist Party 1996: 80). The Party was still ambivalent about economic reform and state policies had been confused and contradictory. The official line promoted a cautious “market-based but socialist-driven structure of economic development”, with the Party fearing that loss of political control would accompany economic change² (Pierre 2000: 72). As Evans has stated for the “post-socialist states” of Laos, China, and Vietnam: “it is important to understand that among these states ‘socialism’ no longer represents an economic program, or a program of social and cultural transformation. Instead, it is a

²How to reconcile economic change with Communist Party political dominance is a problem for the Party in Vietnam. I had many conversations with reform-minded Party members about the need to keep pushing for change, especially state-owned enterprise reform. The well-educated Hanoians I knew, including two Party experts in political science, were passionate and enthusiastic in debating the details of economic reform policies. Once, after along evening of such discussion, I asked these two if the Party proceeded with the reforms they endorsed whether they would still consider their system a communist one, and if so, why, since it seemed to me what they were advocating was a capitalist free market. Neither of them answered very quickly, and eventually one said, “It’s a stage, the capitalist stage towards building communism.” What was most interesting to me was that they both had to think about their answer for so long, indicating that Party ideology, which usually could be slotted in to answer difficult questions on these kinds of topics, had clearly not provided them with a suitable answer. The Vietnamese Communist Party finds itself, for example, in the odd position of marking with a national holiday the October 1917 anniversary of the Russian Revolution, an anniversary that is no longer publicly celebrated in Russia. Cuba has a similar problem of reconciling socialist history with capitalist changes (Cf. Miller 1996: 163-166, describing October Revolution anniversary celebrations in Havana). China recently gave May Day labour medals to entrepreneurs and named businessmen as model workers (McGregor 2002).

device of political rhetoric which proclaims, both externally and internally, that the one-party state has no intention of allowing liberal-democratic reforms” (Evans 1998: 2).

At least up until the Ninth Party Congress in 2001, progress in economic reform related to SOEs was slowed by disputes over the privatisation process, reflecting both political resistance from party traditionalists, and difficulties over arranging sell-offs to management, workers, and in a very few cases, foreign investors. The international community in the form of the international financial institutions and foreign governments seeking trade agreements and economic liberalisation have regularly lobbied Vietnam to speed the pace of this reform. They argue that high level of state subsidies required to keep state owned enterprises afloat is an excessive drain on government resources, and trade barriers maintained to preserve state monopolies and advantages have curtailed foreign investment and the growth of private enterprise.

The Vietnamese government had begun to implement the reforms fitfully as of the time of my fieldwork. The first round of SOE reforms took place during 1989-94 and the second round began after the middle of 1998. The first round reforms were effective in reducing the number of SOEs as well as their output and employment share. Over the next ten years, the number of SOEs was reduced from around 12,000 in 1990 to around 5,300 in 2000, with the government initially closing down, or in a few cases privatising, small-scale, loss making enterprises, but with most of the big industrial projects still functioning. Most of this reduction took place by 1994, but around 450 enterprises were privatised between 1998 and 2000. Only four privatised companies were sufficiently independent to be traded on the Vietnamese Stock Exchange when it opened in July 2000 (Pierre 2000: 80). It is a mark of Party discomfort with the privatisation process that Vietnamese communist orthodoxy has prevented the word “privatisation” from being applied. The manufactured word that the state introduced to name their economic strategy is translated as “equitisation” (*co phan hoa*, which literally means “splitting into parts-isation”).

The share of SOEs in total industrial output fell from 62 per cent to 42 per cent between 1990 and 2000, and SOE employment fell from 2.5 million to around 1.6 million (World Bank *et al.* 2000: ii.12). The March Eighth factory at the time of my fieldwork was still protected by its historical importance and not facing imminent closure.

However, as I will discuss, the factory and workers seemed unaware of the potential risks of SOE reform in potentially closing the factory altogether.

Setting and Contemporary Economic and Social Context

I first visited the March Eighth Textile Company in January, 1998. I was taken to the factory on the back of the motorbike of a staff member of CGFED, the organisation that sponsored my research permission in Vietnam and provided my introduction to the factory. On all my subsequent visits I came by bicycle, my usual method of transportation, usually with my research assistant, Chi Khanh.

The factory is set back from what is now a busy, booming road, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Street, that is full of lorries rushing by at precarious speeds and motorbikes zooming in between them, with bicycles veering to the side of the road to avoid sudden snarls of traffic. There are other factories along the road, marked with large white signs and often small alleyway entrances. The March Eighth factory has an imposing entrance, with a short driveway from the street to the front gate. There is a gatepost at the factory gate, and there was always some confusion among the guards there over what their responsibilities were regarding my entrance. They settled for shouting, daily over the months that I was to visit the factory, “What country?” as I cycled in, to which my research assistant or I would shout back, “American,” which eventually mutated to “English” when word went around the factory that I was studying in London and it was determined that my nationality had shifted. On that first day we stopped for formal introductions, but this so flummoxed the guards that they waved us in before we were halfway through our explanations.

I later concluded that part of the confusion at the gatehouse may have stemmed from my mistake as to its purpose. Since the lorry-width sliding gate is almost always closed, forcing bicycles or motorbikes to enter or exit single file through a narrow space next to the guard’s window, I assumed that the guards were there to monitor who entered the factory compound. I realised much later, however, that their primary purpose is to keep track of who leaves. Specifically, they are there most of all to open and close the

gate three times every twenty-four hours, to let in and out the rush of workers at shift changes. Otherwise, they are there to keep workers in.

The March Eighth Textile Company is an integrated textile and garment factory. The separate sections (*xi nghiep*) of the factory begin with raw materials of cotton and polyester, spin thread in the spinning sections, weave it into cloth in the weaving sections, dye and pattern it in the dyeing section, and sew it into garments in the sewing section. There were about two and half thousand shopfloor workers in the whole factory during my fieldwork in 1998 and 1999, with about nine hundred managers. The factory was in production twenty-four hours a day, with three shifts from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., 2 to 10 p.m., and 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., and most workers scheduled into a rotating shift pattern such as one morning shift, two afternoon shifts, and three evening shifts in a week.

I will describe in upcoming chapters the period of socialist mobilisations in the history of the factory, when there was enthusiasm among many of the workers and what I call a morality of productivity. This period of high socialism was followed by the *thoi gian bao cap*, the period of state subsidies, rationing, and low worker morale and productivity. As I will describe in Chapters Five and Six, this whole environment began to change quite quickly with the introduction of *doi moi* from 1986. The immediate flourishing of private trade began to give the March Eighth workers access to food and many new kinds of consumer goods. In this trade was also the potential to make money from entrepreneurial pursuits. At the same time, the state radically cut back social services, undermining the health care and educational systems, and froze state salaries. Sending children to school and receiving health treatment now required cash, in many cases because state employees in those sectors were supplementing their own inadequate state salaries. The introduction of a form of private property allowed some mobility that had not been available previously, and families that prospered in the new economy could buy land outside of the *khu* or improve their property within. The only way that March Eighth workers could compete in this newly visible arena of consumer display and class aspiration was by pursuing sources of wealth outside the factory.

However, with the abolishing of ration coupons and without the excuse of the need to wait in line, as well as the factory's ostensible interest in the management techniques of capitalist enterprise, attendance for workers was re-enforced. Workers

could no longer sign in and then wander off back to the market or home; they were required to stay, and work, for the duration of their shift. In order to help enforce this policy, during shifts the guards locked the large parking sheds that housed the bicycles of which most workers commuted from the *khu* down the street. The sheds were only open at shift changes, during which time the departing workers all rushed out and the arriving workers rushed in, to get their bikes put away before the gates locked again. Like the gate at the factory entrance, the bike sheds were one way to keep workers on site and at work.

Additionally, with *doi moi*, the factory laid off large numbers of workers of workers in an attempt to streamline production, reducing the labour force from around 10,000 to around 3,000. Although many of those laid off were redundant or drawing salary without working, enough of them were engaged in production that their absence increased the labour load for the remaining workers. One worker told me, “Now there is more work to do in my section than in the subsidy time, before we had the same amount of work for thirty people and now it’s for twenty people to do.” During my fieldwork, workers who “worked extra” (*lam them*) had to fit it in after shifts, often in small cottage industries such as contract sewing and machine parts assembly. This added to their complaints about being “always tired”, which is how most workers described themselves.

The reforms have affected the March Eighth workforce in various ways. There is much confusion about what the factory should be if it is not a traditional state owned enterprise, which reflects the wider confusion in state policy and folk interpretations of economic reforms. March Eighth managers are now told to pay more attention to productivity and market competition, but the ones I knew either admitted outright or implied they were unsure of how to achieve this. Most of the workers I talked to had never heard *co phan hoa*, the Vietnamese word for equitisation, and when I tried to explain it assured me that I had misunderstood something I had read. The situation was the same contradictory one as described in a Chinese setting by Rofel, where the state encouraged factory managers to adopt capitalist methods but then criticised them for not having proper socialist spirit (Rofel 1989: 246).

Problem, Problem, Problem: Production in the Factory Now

Exacerbating the anxiety about market competition was the dire state of the factory machinery, most of it the original almost forty year old Chinese equipment. The only higher quality machines were a handful of second-hand spinning machines from Italy, bought in 1986, which were the pride of the factory and housed in a special unit (*soi Y*) with a well-trained workforce. Some second-hand weaving machines had also been purchased from India in the late 1980's, allowing the factory to produce a broader and more marketable width of cotton fabric. Bits of other equipment had been added from Japan and the Soviet Union some ten years previously. The factory was having a disastrous financial year at the time I did fieldwork, and like many state owned industries was only surviving with massive state subsidies classified as development loans, which added to their enormous, as-yet-unpaid debts from the various purchases of the imported machines. Total March Eighth debt was \$10 million at the time of my fieldwork (Consulting and Research Company 1997).

The factory suffered an immediate drop in demand for its products after *doi moi*. This was due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, the factory's main export markets, as well as a drop in domestic demand due to competition with an increasing flow of smuggled cheap cloth and clothes from China. The factory has maintained what export market it could through the privileged export quotas through which the state maintains a competitive advantage for state owned enterprise against private firms. This privilege has backfired on the factory, though, when they have had problems meeting the demands of the export market. Twice in the months I was doing research in the factory, I encountered angry foreign buyers complaining about the quality of the products they had ordered. In one instance, I was in the folding and packing room of the main sewing section, where a set of resort wear for a Taiwanese company was rolling off the production line. The outfit was a polyester ensemble of elasticised black and white striped shorts and an aquamarine blue kimono jacket embroidered with the legend "Valentino Coupeau—Paris". Two Taiwanese men in sharp suits, bellowing at their interpreter, were snatching the clothes from the hands of the folders and throwing them up in the air to land in piles on the folding table. "Maybe they don't like the

colour?” giggled the worker I was interviewing, as we watched from a corner of the table. No factory representative, even the quality control manager who was present in the room at the time, intervened or even acknowledged the presence of the unhappy businessmen. I thought perhaps workers were embarrassed, as displays of anger can make everyone uncomfortable, but I also saw that no one would take responsibility for the problem with the products. Over lunch, the women from the sewing section gossiped about the commotion and asked those of us who had been in the folding room to describe the whole scene in detail, and as they mimicked the businessmen throwing the clothes, they speculated about what the problem had been. They concluded that it was the bad temper of the Chinese businessmen, who were probably trying to take advantage of the factory by bargaining too hard. Rofel recounts a similar experience of the discourse about quality in the silk factory she studied. “The new, more intense pressures for higher quality, as most workers were well aware, resulted directly from western expectations. ‘You foreigners have such picky taste,’ I was told over and over again as Hangzhou’s silk factories scrambled to make their cloth into the ‘first-grade’ type the Foreign Export Bureau insisted upon for shipment to Hong Kong, the United States, and Europe. ‘The Russians,’ someone once explained, ‘are not nearly as demanding’ ” (Rofel 1999: 124). In another instance, I was also in the sewing section when a Japanese buyer stormed through in a fit. Stopping when he saw me, he asked in English “You from the U.N.?” (I still don’t know what prompted that question.) “No, I’m a student,” I answered. “Not so nice factory,” he said. “Problem, problem, problem.”

Despite their lack of sympathy for harassed foreign buyers, workers generally understood that the factory was struggling with production. A thirty five year old male engineer who worked on the plumbing and waste water system in the factory told me:

The factory has little work these days because the products are not marketable. Mainly the army uses them and we send them to sell in the countryside. Now that we have to send them into the open market the fabric of the March Eighth factory can’t compete. We’ve already designed some models for new and improved products but we can’t make them because they require large expensive machines...The machines in my section are very backward (*lac hau*).

The dyeing section of the factory suffered the most from the March Eighth's tentative foray into the free market, as the service least in demand. Products from other production stages still had some market value: thread from the spinning sections, undyed fabric from the weaving sections, and finished clothing from the sewing section. In Hanoi, though, dyeing had become the successful business of small private shops and so even the factory's domestic market had collapsed. Additionally, the factory's integrated structure meant that production bottlenecks more often occurred at the end of the weaving process than in any other section. Workers in the dyeing section were often unemployed and sometimes were asked to accept layoffs when there was not enough work, with token partial pay, a radical departure from the full lifetime employment that workers at the factory had previously experienced. As I will describe in Chapter Five, when recounting her household expenses, Chi Phuong, a thirty-nine year old worker in the dyeing section, is typical: during slow times, she is asked to take days off. It makes her household economy difficult to predict and sustain. She said: "In these recent months there is too little work so we are rather unsteady. Now for ten days a month I don't get salary or bonus, because I can't get a production bonus with no products!" Loan, my closest friend in the *khu*, worked in the dyeing section and although she liked working daytime, "administrative" hours (*hanh chinh*), she fretted about having enough money for her family during the months that she was told to take extra days off.

The dyeing section also had a number of large machines that had never been repaired since the war, after being dismantled in evacuations, shipped around, and reassembled entirely at least twice, as I will describe in Chapter Two. Ostensibly because of health concerns about dangers in the dyeing section, but I suspect also out of embarrassment at the section's underemployment, I was only invited to talk to workers in the parts of the dyeing section that were considered safe and had relatively full employment: the small art department, where four young women drew patterns to be imprinted on the fabric, and the large folding and packing sections, where I met Loan. Walking through the dyeing section to get to these safe parts I formed a surface impression of the section as the only part of the factory that really looked like my image of a Victorian sweatshop, hot, dirty, and smelly in a vaguely sulphurous way. One room was full of gargantuan machines that were permanently broken. In a room of functioning

machinery, big rollers turned out wide strips of dyed fabric in black, dark blue, and khaki colours. Only men worked in those rooms, loading the big rolls of fabric into small trucks and watching over the machines. I was shown how fabric was cleaned with strong cleaners, softened and erased, then coloured and then patterns printed on it. The pattern printing group where I sat had to wait for the fabric to get through the earlier steps, so the women who worked there often read newspapers, doodled pictures and chatted languidly for days or even weeks on end while waiting for the next order. On the days that I spent in the pattern printing section, all the patterning machines were silent, some even covered with dusty tarpaulins, and no orders came in. The packing and folding room stayed busier, since they were also responsible for the undyed fabric from the weaving sections of the factory.

Working in the Factory now

This is a description from my fieldnotes of my first tour of one of the main buildings of the factory:

My overwhelming impression of the big building where the main spinning and weaving sections are is of noise, even as we are outside walking towards it. It is a dull roar, like the ocean, which differentiates into distinct noises as we come inside. There are vast rows of weaving machines, clattering and clanking, and I look to my right and see another vast room, also with hundreds of machines, then down a long corridor into a slightly quieter but still loud set of spinning rooms, then rooms and rooms of spun thread, all piled up like oversize loo rolls. Tam takes me on a tour of the section, beginning with the fluffs of white cotton wool which get plucked out into big machines where it is spun—it goes through several processes of spinning, as it gets finer and finer. The work is repetitious and looks potentially dangerous. The air in the carding section floats with bits of cotton like snow. By the time I leave, I look like I've rolled around in a bed of cotton wool. The workers look the same; they have bits of it in their hair, making them all look prematurely grey, and a light fluffy coating of it on their clothes. In the weaving section, the big, slamming noise is exactly like the clickety-clack of a hand loom writ large and rendered in steel (20/3/98).

In the thread spinning sections, for example, each worker is responsible for a row of twenty automated winding machines that they have to keep from clogging and on which they change spindles of thread when they are full. In those sections, women

wander solitarily up and down their rows, occasionally grappling with a tangled thread or jammed machine. The noise is such that you can walk up behind a worker, calling for her, and she will not hear you until you are upon her. I sometimes saw one worker tease another by popping out from around the end of the row, startling her. During the American War, according to the official history, workers on these machines could not hear the air raid sirens to warn them to go into the bomb shelters. Eventually a system of warning lights was rigged up on the machines so that workers could see when the alarm went (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 45). The workers at these machines told me they are boring because they cannot chat. Vietnamese sociability considers being alone to be almost a spiritual deprivation. When workers said that working in these sections is “unfriendly” (*khong co ban*) and “unsympathetic” (*khong co tinh cam*), they expressed a serious discontent with their daily mode of production. Workers in these sections were more likely to eat in the subsidised public canteens, rather than bring packed lunches from home, so that at breaks they could mingle with their fellow workers away from the noise of the shopfloor. Similarly, the difficulty of jobs is also judged by whether, during night shifts and afternoons, they allow workers to catch some sleep. Em Hoai, a woman in her early twenties in the weaving (*det*) section, works in the preparation of machines for the machine operators. She complained to me “As for night shifts, we have to stay awake all the way through. We even have to eat quickly, hurry up! hurry up! in order to get back to work. The rest of the section has forty-five minutes to eat but we have to use that time to prepare for them to weave. At night I only have time to eat a bowl of *pho* [noodle soup, a kind of fast food].”

On the other hand, underemployed workers such as the designers in the pattern section also complained of boredom because of having nothing to do. Workers in the packing and folding rooms in both the dyeing section and the sewing section were most content with the pace of their work and its sociability. They could chat easily while doing their work, and by working in groups could regulate the pace of production so that they were never rushed by a speed set earlier on in the line. In all of those sections, workers brought lunch in stacking tin lunch pots and sat together in their sections during their lunch break, finishing with several cups of tea from a communal pot. In these quieter sections, workers had adapted existing surfaces into nap spaces, curling up on the

packing tables, on the drafting desks, or in the curved belly of the rolling machines for after-lunch snoozing (a common activity in Vietnam).

Men working in the higher skilled professions within the factory tended to have more autonomy and social interaction. A twenty nine year old male electrician in the power plant of the factory told me:

Because I have some education they don't call me a worker (*cong binh*) they call me technology staff. The work discipline in my section is pretty relaxed. If someone comes to visit there's a separate reception room where we can meet them. My section isn't strict like in the textile sections because our numbers are few. It's a special characteristic of my section to be relaxed, we don't have to stand by the machines all day.

At various times when I was in the factory, a power cut would plunge shopfloors into darkness and silence, as the lights went out and machines stopped abruptly. Invariably, a round of pleased applause would go around, and the women would gather in little groups to chat while they waited for the electricity to return. When this happened once while I was in the sewing section, the clatter of electric sewing machines ceased into a peremptory hush. The quality control manager, with whom I was chatting, joined in the round of applause and set down the shirt she was examining. Her work required no equipment, and since there were high windows in the packing room and plenty of natural light, she could have continued to check the pile of shirts in front of her, but she stopped for as long as the electricity was off, about half an hour in that case. In my experience, in power cuts workers did not stray far from their machines, apparently out of concern of being caught out when the power came back on, although on this occasion in the sewing section several of the workers went off to take showers, and came back combing their wet hair. Since each worker on that project was responsible for a whole section of a garment, they were under less pressure from the assembly line³.

Management Torpor

The only part of the factory in which men hold a majority is in the somnolent management units, which are carefully bracketed off into separate buildings from the

³ Cf. Westwood (1984) for a study of women textile workers in England, describing the production line of a textile factory.

factory sections. Rofel in her silk factory in China, writing about space and factory discipline, observes that rather than functioning in a Foucauldian panopticon, workers are visually cut off from managers, who work in separate sections where their own labour cannot be observed by the workers (Rofel 1999: 270). In Chapter Six, I described how a fortune-teller was consulted in the opening of a new office for the B Weaving Section. Previously, the office had been in an enclosed space on the edge of the section shopfloor; the new offices were built as a free-standing small building behind the main production hall. The section chiefs almost all had offices near their sections, like the new B Weaving Section office. All other managers were housed in the cavernous main administration building, into which workers rarely ventured. These buildings are always underpopulated, since managers have an easier time abandoning their desks than workers do their machines.

By comparison to the fairly constant pressure of production that most shopfloor workers labour under (with the exception of some of the dyeing workers, for example, as I have described), managers tend to have relaxed schedules and extremely low expectations to produce much. The working day for a management cadre is not expected to last more than three hours and even this involves extensive newspaper reading and napping, usually on or under desks, or on chairs pushed together in unused meetings rooms. In one of these management offices where I spent a fair amount of time, nominally learning how the factory allocated social welfare benefits, none of the four men and two women who had desks in the room ever did more than two minutes worth of identifiable work. The men smoked cigarettes and read the state newspapers, of which Vietnam has a plethora, and the women made tea, chatted and read novels. One morning I was there from nine a.m. until about eleven, during which time the only thing that happened that appeared work-related was that the telephone rang twice. On each occasion, the occupants of the office glanced around at each other for several rings before one of them got up and walked across the room to answer it. The second time, the woman who had answered it the first time heaved a huge sigh as she walked towards and muttered, "*Ban qua* (I'm so busy)!"

It is in the context of these enormous social, political, and economic upheavals, and against the backdrop of this once-proud, now struggling factory, that I learned about the lives of the March Eighth factory workers.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Theory and Literature

In this introductory chapter, I set out the theoretical basis for this thesis and introduce the literature that informs my analysis. This literature falls roughly into three major categories, following the three topics of this thesis: history, power and morality.

On the subject of history, I consider some of the literature from both Vietnam and China, particularly Jing's (1996) study of social memory in China. I discuss the role and interest of individuals and the revolutionary state in memory and forgetting. I propose that the older March Eighth factory workers are interested in their own glorious revolutionary history and so their individual narratives have important convergences with official narratives. However, I also propose that the divergences between these narratives, both critical and nostalgic, reflect judgements about political leadership and dissatisfaction with contemporary, post-reform morality.

On the subject of power, I discuss the problem of studying "the state", including Foucauldian (1977) notions of power, and examinations from China of revolutionary and post-reform state power. I propose that the model of power of the revolutionary state in Vietnam included local action and political involvement, and the exemplary performance of new modes of domestic life, all of which privileged the actions of women factory workers and thus allowed them to create and express political power through engagement with state campaigns and model behaviour.

On the subject of morality, I examine Malarney's (1996a) discussion of "state functionalism" in Vietnam, about the role of the revolutionary state in establishing standards of virtuous behaviour and shaping moral judgements, and how these have been absorbed and adapted in the post-reform environment. I propose that expressions of nostalgia represent traces of state functionalism and are one way that March Eighth workers reflect on the social changes that have accompanied economic reform.

Finally, I briefly review, and place this thesis within, the anthropological literature on Vietnam and the scholarly debate about women and gender in Vietnam.

Through this chapter, I establish the main themes that I will illustrate and examine through the remaining, ethnographic chapters of this thesis.

Close to the Fire

The title of this thesis comes from a Vietnamese metaphor, “close to the fire” (*gan lua*), which alludes to both the advantages and potential disadvantages of a relationship to political power.¹ Being close to the fire can warm, or burn; but too far away from the fire is cold. Ideally, you want to be close, but not too close. The *gan lua* metaphor is used in various ways. One is for family relationships, such as when I was told by Bac Cao, a man who lived in the March Eighth *khu*, that it was better to have a brother who worked in a ministry than to work there himself. Bac Cao could take advantage of his brother’s status to negotiate a move into the newest apartment block in the *khu* (Building D15, described in Chapter Five), but said his brother’s life was “very difficult” (*rat kho*) partly because he had so many relatives demanding favours from him. In another example, as I was walking across one of the *khu* courtyards one day with a member of the Women’s Union of the ward (*phuong*), we passed a new house half-constructed where it was going to virtually block off an existing small house. The *phuong* office is supposed to oversee and approve all new construction in the *khu* and this seemed like a violation of reasonable design. “Anh Ban’s house,” commented my companion. “*To qua!*” (How large!) I observed. “Anh Ban, *gan lua*” (“Brother Ban, he’s close to the fire”) replied my companion, by way of explanation. I have taken this expression as a title because, as I explain in this thesis, the lives of the women workers at the March Eighth factory have been to a large degree shaped by their relationship to political power and the goals of the socialist state. Looking at their past and their present, I show how the older March Eighth workers experienced in their revolutionary youth the excitement and enthusiasm of being close to the fire, while also experiencing and in some ways, as I show, embodying the intrusiveness of a socially interventionist state. Now in their late middle age, they experience less coercion but also a sense of loss,

¹ Kleinen (1999: 152) quotes another metaphorical expression “I have no umbrella” (*khong co o*) used by Vietnamese villagers who have no position or influence.

anxiety and nostalgia as Vietnamese history moves past them and they feel themselves cold and far from the fire.

Framing the State

The fire metaphor raises the question of the relationship between individuals and the state, or state power, an issue extensively discussed by social theorists and anthropologists. This thesis argues that March Eighth women workers participated in the Vietnamese state's predominantly locally situated power, presented as the base of its legitimacy and authority, especially during the period of high socialism, and that this locally situated model confirms that there are ways to consider power as cooperative as well as coercive.

Linked to the question of how to study and analyse power is the question of how to define, and thus to study, "the state". In an essay, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State", Abrams (1988) explains the problem of the assumption that "the state" rests somewhere separate from people; that it is defined by its institutions and structures and is a distinct entity, a hidden reality. What the state actually is, proposes Abrams, is ideas and systems that appear to be outside of everyone within a society. Abrams believes that the work of the social scientist in studying the state is to demystify this reification of ideas and systems. In this analysis, "the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is" (Abrams 1988: 82). Extrapolating from this argument that the state is a collective misrepresentation, we can consider that it is socially constructed, a kind of Durkheimian social fact.

This argument is further extended, and nuanced, by Mitchell (1991) in his critique of statist approaches to studying social organisation. Statist approaches present the state as coherent and autonomous from society. Contrasting this, Mitchell criticises any attempt to distinguish between the state and society and to define the borders between the two. He argues that these boundaries are chimerical, an "abstract effect of agency, with concrete consequences" (Mitchell 1991: 91). This "state effect" is produced internally but appears external, making power appear as an exterior constraint.

Thus Mitchell turns to Foucault to explain how power works in the model he proposes. According to Foucault, power is not the property of institutions, but an ensemble of technologies, techniques and strategies that Foucault named disciplines. Therefore, Foucault's image of power is not represented in commands or policies that are enforced through violence or its threat by any authority separate from society. Rather, disciplinary power works within distinctive institutions and circulates within networks of social relationships to produce certain kinds of political subjects. Foucault asserted that the mechanisms of power are not only prohibitive, they are productive, creating and moulding subjects and subjectivities, forming knowledge and discourses (Foucault 1977). The March Eighth community was an experimental attempt to create an environment in which the social and cultural goals of the revolution could be pursued along with its political and economic ones. This was intended to create an entire context of revolutionary belief and practice. Explicit moral instruction requires such a context, with ongoing reinforcement that is implicit as well as explicit (ibid.). The March Eighth factory and its collective living quarters formed a fairly bounded environment (although not as completely bounded as Foucault's prisons) in which disciplinary power could circulate and in which new political subjects could be created, or create themselves, through the enactment of political campaigns.

I agree with Abrams that the work of studying the state, as an anthropologist, is in part the studying of the idea of the state. And I propose that in my fieldsite in Vietnam, the idea of the state became synonymous with the actions of people, not just of leaders but of many workers who engaged with state policies and campaigns in the most everyday ways. A similar ethnographic example of Mitchell's theory of the "state effect" can be found in Hershatter's (2000) work on Chinese peasant women. Hershatter, an historian, draws on Mitchell's critique of the state/society dichotomy. She interrogates the notion of a Communist state that is distinct from the real China of suffering peasants, in which the state is seen crudely as a coercive manipulator of public discourse. In that common formulation of state/society boundaries, as Hershatter describes, the state is like the Wizard behind the curtain in Oz, contriving new versions of virtuous peasants and labour heroines. Instead Hershatter proposes how this state effect was created for rural women experiencing China's period of high socialism (what Hershatter calls "campaign

time”), partly through the creation of local labour heroes who were genuinely respected by villagers, and who in turn were genuinely hard working and dedicated. For Hershatter, the “state effect” describes the way that political activity in China, including campaigns like the ones I describe in this thesis, was built up locally, by individuals who were part of their communities. This locally situated model of state power challenges the perception of the Chinese state as a looming bureaucratic power separate from “the people” (Hershatter 2000). In an example from Vietnam, Turner notes how women were chosen as models to encourage other women to revolutionary zeal in supporting the war: “often the heroines to be emulated were local, those whom people knew” (Turner 1998: 122). This shifted the boundary between who is inside and outside of the state, as well as valorising and propagating virtuous behaviour by individuals as political action.

In the socialist context, in China, Jing describes the intimacy of how political power was locally enacted in the village he studied: “A notable characteristic of the Maoist campaigns that ravaged the Chinese countryside was the close link between political victims and their tormentors...society was not a passive universe helplessly rocked by political campaigns launched from above...[there were] local collaborators trying to manipulate these campaigns to their own advantage...more often than not, their victims were neighbours, childhood playmates, or even immediate relatives” (Jing 1996: 87). This is similarly described in Fanshen, in Hinton’s (1997) meticulous documentation of how Long Bow villagers themselves organised the revolution within the village. In an industrial context and another example of how individuals engaged with and enacted state power, Perry and Li describe how workers in Shanghai took over power from the Red Guards as the leaders of the Cultural Revolution. These rebel workers, by following Mao’s initiatives, challenged the local Party structure and organisations, evincing “an impressive amount of bottom-up organisation” (Perry and Li 1997: 5).

In considering this context in which local collaborators enforced political judgments, Jing is writing about a “community of suffering” (Jing 1996: 165), looking at the families who were radically disadvantaged by communist policies. By contrast, the March Eighth *khu* was a community that was radically advantaged; the women workers there had high status and prestige and benefitted materially from their positions. So

Hershatter's example and my own offer a self-reflexive model of the perception of political power, in which women became "indistinguishable" from the state. The factory women I describe were, like the old women interviewed by Hershatter, model workers and eager campaigners; as I hope to show, in some ways, during their enthusiastic and active attempts to remake themselves into good socialist workers and good socialist women, they felt they were the state, in its incarnation at a local level. They were *gan lua*, close to the fire. They were warmed by the fire of the political power they were part of and that they helped to create.

It is the later introduction of market reforms that has led to the March Eighth workers' subsequent sense of being separate from the state, whose policies are no longer primarily aimed at themselves. Also looking at local leaders, Yan (1995) analysed the changes in power relationships between cadre and ordinary villagers in a Chinese village, Xiajia, from China's period of high socialism to the post-reform milieu. He interviewed a former party secretary from 1959-61, the time of China's Great Leap Forward when the village had suffered famine and poverty as a result of agricultural collectivisation and its attendant "irrational" policies. This man had been a brutal but honest leader, and the villagers subsequently had an ambivalent attitude towards him, blaming him for the harshness they suffered under the policies he enforced, but respecting his incorruptibility. He had been scrupulous in his enforcement, and had been selected as a national model grass-roots cadre. Like the older women workers I knew in the March Eighth factory and the former labour heroes Hershatter studied, when Yan interviewed this former leader post-reform, he "was still immersed in happy memories of his glorious past" (Yan 1995: 225).

In the period of high socialism in the March Eighth *khu*, consumption was not the primary producer of status; political action was. Similarly, during the time of the village party leader whose career Yan describes, political rewards were the paramount concern of local cadre. In discussing social stratification, Weber (1946) also asserted that social status, or honour, is usually linked to economic status, life style and convention. In this way, he linked consumption to the production and maintenance of social status. The socialist valorisation of proper political action and involvement

created an alternative model for the expression and enactment of political power, linking activism to the production and maintenance of social status.

I do not intend for this analysis to sound myopic on the subject of state power, nor do I dismiss the sometimes coercive ways in which the Vietnamese socialist project intruded on the lives of women workers. I do observe that this is not the way in which the socialist state is memorialised by the women themselves, and that they participated actively in the political work of their youth. Subsequently in Vietnam, this kind of engagement with state directives and campaigns has certainly diminished, if not ceased, in its power to generate social status or political importance. This has been described in China as “the decline of ideocracy” (Benewick 1999: 134); or, as Kleinen writes of Vietnam: “The domination of ideology over culture seems to be over” (Kleinen 1999: 185). The diminution of this power is why the question of nostalgia is so central to this thesis. As I will show, since *doi moi* economic reforms, most of the older workers of the March Eighth factory have experienced considerable disadvantages and anxiety about social change, so that they talk nostalgically about their experiences of the past, of high socialism and campaigns, when they were *gan lua*.

History and Social Memory: Remembering

As I have just suggested, while describing a locally situated model of state power, this thesis is also concerned with how workers talk about the past in which they view themselves as having been close to the fire, and how they place themselves in relation to a national history through their social memory.

Jing in The Temple of Memories (1996) describes how, after a village in China was destroyed by a dam project, the resettled villagers formed a new community and re-established an important Confucian and ancestral temple. The Kong families that Jing studied had been targeted by Communist campaigns because they were descendants of Confucius and represented the old order. They experienced poverty and persecution during the Communist era. By rebuilding their Confucian temple in the post-reform, post-Mao era, the Kongs were able to assert their new economic and social status and redress some of their past suffering. Jing calls this “a study of social memory” and

defines the goal of social memory research: “to investigate the transformative impact of group-life requirements and collective interests upon the overall framework and specific contents of personal recollections” (Jing 1996: 3).

The experience of the March Eighth women workers who still live in the March Eighth *khu* can be considered through the lens of social memory in the *doi moi* era. In this thesis I consider such “group-life requirements” as economic necessity, status competition, religious practice, and anxiety about domestic morality and work productivity. I also consider “collective interests” including political discourses and habits. I assert that all of these elements “affect the overall framework and specific contents of personal recollections”, in the workers’ choice of what kinds of stories to tell me about the past, and in some cases the contexts in which they raise them, as well as their dispositions towards such recollections, especially the recurrent expression of nostalgia that is a theme throughout this thesis.

Adding to the elements of social memory in this study, the group of older women workers from the factory represent a generational cohort. Jing also studied a generational cohort in his village, in that case the old men from the Kong families who became the keepers of the rebuilt temple. He describes how cohort analysis focuses on people “who share historical moments that forge their identity” (ibid.: 59). Members of a cohort share experiences that are distinct from those younger and older than them and this shapes their collective identity. Rofel in a Hangzhou silk factory also studied differences between women of different generational cohorts, and found that “each of these cohorts came of age as workers during distinctive and dramatic political movements under socialism...the self-definitions of these women as political actors were forged in terms of cohort identity” (Rofel 1999: 21). The older women workers at March Eighth came to the factory when they were young themselves and the factory was new, and they experienced together the turbulent but also apparently exciting time of the war and the socialist mobilisations, in a context where the state itself, through policies of social and spatial organisation and moral education, promoted their solidarity and intimacy. One result of this experience is that there are key confluences in the oral narratives and life histories of women workers (and the occasional male one) of this age group, as I discuss in the next chapter of this thesis.

Adding to this, according to Jing, is another feature of social memory, which is that autobiographic memory and historical memory are different, and autobiographic memory is usually expected to be more powerful and detailed than historical memory. Studies cited by Jing find that memories of directly experienced events are strongest when formed in a person's teens and early twenties, the age of the March Eighth workers during the dramatic days of high socialism in the factory and the *khu*. As Jing points out in the case of his Kongs, this is also re-inforced by reiteration of those stories, as throughout their life the villagers who had been relocated retold their stories (of the flood when the gates were opened, of the scramble to resettle graves, of the famine that followed the destruction of fertile land) so that even their grandchildren could repeat them as vividly as if they had been there themselves. In one example he recounts, a young man in a boat on the reservoir over the site of the former Dachuan village sailed along the invisible street of the village and pointed out where his father's house would be, under the water (Jing 1996: 78). Jing agrees that the rehearsal of memories is crucial to recalling an event. He also cites the repetition of these stories as passing on to a later generation the nostalgia for an idyllic and prosperous, pre-revolutionary past (ibid.: 79).

Bloch (1998) also examines the use of autobiographical memory, concerning a person's experience. He distinguishes between recalling, which applies to memories that are accessible and expressible by a person, and remembering, which is broader. For the most part, in this thesis I am particularly concerned with recall, especially the ways in which recollections are framed. Bloch also stresses the "social character of memory, because recalling involves communication with others...individual memory is continually being transformed and reworked as communication occurs" (Bloch 1998: 117). As Bloch points out, in some cases what is recalled is not the memory of the experience itself, but the last time the person told the story of the experience. Thus, I am informed by Bloch's suggestion that what is recollected is only sometimes the story as it has been told before. Sometimes it may be the memory itself, not often revisited, with many multifaceted aspects recoverable through interview; "...in the real world, autobiographical and historical memory merge into each other" (ibid.: 124). Or, as Hershatter writes: "There is no clean line between knowing and remembering, remembering and reinventing, reinventing and storytelling" (Hershatter 1999: 14).

History and Social Memory: Forgetting

The stories that March Eighth factory workers told me of their pasts and the factory's past are of course incomplete and fragmentary. They shift between registers, of official language and domestic, of personal experience and national, and they are necessarily limited by the inadequacy of memory and narrative (Bloch 1998). However, even these fragmentary narratives contrast, counterpoint, and in some ways vindicate, official narratives, including the official history (1995) of the March Eighth factory, *Cong Ty Det 8-3, 35 Nam: Xay Dung va Truong Thanh (1960-1995)* (The March Eighth Textile Company, Thirty-Five Years: Building and Growing).

As Jing, Hershatter, and many others have documented in China, and is also true of socialist Vietnam, socialist regimes have attempted to dictate what is remembered and what is forgotten. "Even today Chinese authorities seek tight control over society's memory at several levels. At the archival level, such control takes the form of restricting access to historical documents. At the level of mass media and public education, control is exercised through censorship, political propaganda, and the careful writing and rewriting of history textbooks. At a more personal level, control relies on intimidation and sometimes physical punishment of those who offer a radically different and unwelcome version of the past" (Jing 1996: 18). Yan (1995) describes how local cadre became economically prosperous in the post-reform era, or lost their political influence and slid down the economic ladder, while some villagers who had suffered under socialism made new fortunes. As Jing points out, all of this social and economic mobility, as well as political reversals, rendered the Marxist campaigns and experiences of the recent past threatening and contradictory at the local level, making history into contested ground. In an even more brutal experiment with radical socialism, in Cambodia during the Democratic Kampuchea period, the Khmer Rouge's imposition of anti-hierarchical ideology reversed the status and honour roles of rural/urban, poor/wealthy, and illiterate/educated and shaped peasants into violent enforcers of new policies (Hinton 1998). Many of these people still live in the same communities and among the people whose kin they killed and there has been no national level

reconciliation or settling of accounts. History thus remains dangerous territory in Cambodia (Chandler 1991: 318; Kiernan 1996: 465).

In Vietnam, as in China, history is also considered potentially dangerous, with the state and Party controlling the public transmission of history in written form. Recorded history has been the subject of intense political pressure, and a high literacy rate, the aggressive circulation of state texts and the enforced absence of alternative texts have disseminated official versions (Pelley 1993; Giebel 1996). Even seemingly innocuous questioning of received historical constructions can be met with implacable opposition from the state. During the time of my fieldwork, for example, a history professor at a university in Ho Chi Minh City researching shipping logs from the French colonial records discovered the site from where the young Ho Chi Minh had departed from then-Saigon for his scholarship studies in France. According to this historian, the future President had embarked from a site further up the river than the quay where the museum and official memorial to the departure now stands. The research was suppressed. A leading Vietnamese dissident who had seen his own anti-war efforts airbrushed out of official histories said of the Communist Party: "Their history consists of ideology and imagination. They want to make it seem as if they did everything; everything else they want to throw away. They want to abolish history" (Birchall 1998). Jing addressed this problem of fear of history in the recounting of stories by the Kongs. According to Jing: "I abandoned the direct approach and paid more attention to subtexts in my informants' narratives. By subtexts, I mean random but revealing comments, indirect references, passing assertions, and private gossip. Once I began piercing these together, the fragmentary elements characteristic of oral narratives began to shed important light on a number of matters" (Jing 1996: 57). This fragmentary aspect of oral narratives contrasts with the master narrative of state history. In Jing's example, while the Kongs are still suffering from the flooding of their village and the misery they experienced afterward, the Chinese government continues to produce and propagate official accounts of the dam project's success that avoid mention of any relocation.

The Vietnamese state's obsession with historical control highlights the significance of the book-length official history of the factory (*Cong Ty Det 8-3*), which I quote from several places in this thesis. The book was published in 1995 to mark the

thirty-fifth anniversary of the factory's inception. I noticed that there were several dusty copies of the book around the factory offices after I learned of its existence in my first days of fieldwork in the factory. I was interviewing Chi Tam, my first contact in the factory and a social welfare official in the management offices. Chi Tam was apparently becoming frustrated by being unable to respond with the specific details I was requesting. I was asking her what I considered to be routine background questions such as the dates the factory began construction and was officially opened; the numbers of workers employed in each of the main production sections; and the provenance of the production equipment and machinery. "For you, in order to answer all of your questions," she told me, handing me the book.

The book *Cong Ty Det 8-3* is attributed to the factory's Standing Committee of the Party (*Thuong vu Dang uy Cong ty Det 8-3*), which it lists as "editors" (*bien soan*). When I asked around about who actually wrote it, several people at the factory told me they did not know. I was told by one factory manager that the book had been commissioned from the history department of the University of Hanoi, but after investigating at the University I could find no one to whom to attribute the writing of the book and one historian told me he had heard nothing of it. Its rather anonymous production contributes to my sense that *Cong Ty Det 8-3, 35 Nam* represents state narrative par excellence. It recounts the history of the factory from the point of view of such official concerns as numerical membership in the Party and the Party organisations, the factory's contribution to the war effort, and adherence to targets and quotas. It is written in the official language of the socialist mobilisations and alternates between heroic narrative and bureaucratic exactitude. This official language is also used by women themselves sometimes when they talk about the past. Hershatter points out that the Communist Party history gave voice to the oppressed classes, which she prefers to call subalterns, by turning their histories into moral narratives of oppression and triumph. Through these histories, the oppressed classes spoke in a state-provided revolutionary voice; this vocabulary "helped to form the speakers as particular kinds of subjects in a socialist state" (Hershatter 1999: 22). Women can also deploy considerable agency in their use of revolutionary vocabulary, as I show in this thesis.

Additionally, one element that is left out of the official narratives, and which I think influences the stories that the March Eighth women told me of their past, is pleasure. On this subject, I am inspired by the example of the book Picturing Power (eds. Evans and Donald 1999), which sheds new light on the experience of socialist mobilisations. By examining the propaganda poster art of the Cultural Revolution in China through its social context, the book considers among other subjects the “politicisation of aesthetic practices and the development of aesthetic genres through political motivation” (Evans and Donald 1999: 4). It ties the posters to a “sophisticated notion of political spectatorship” (ibid.: 5). As the editors point out, “There is considerable evidence that many people, notably of the Red Guard generation, actually recall the Cultural Revolution as a time of exhilaration, experimentation, and freedom from parental constraints” (ibid.: 15). Women particularly in some cases felt “independent and empowered as political subjects,” and for some, the Cultural Revolution had elements of “sensual liberation” and “sensual immediacy” (ibid.:16). In one example, Chen discusses the “selective memory” of Cultural Revolution memoirs in which survivors tell terrible stories of persecutors. Chen’s own academic memoir, recounting how she relished her experiences of youthful political passion, helps to problematise the historical account of socialist campaigns as a time of heroes and villains. Chen further nuances the point by explaining how her interest in political action was fuelled by a desire to “play it prettily,” adding a sensual and aesthetic element certainly unintended in the campaigns (Chen 1999: 110). Chen found theatrical pleasure in her performance of revolutionary roles, such as wearing simple, masculine clothes to emulate the humble heroes of the people. In this role-playing, she experienced the pleasure of transgressing societal norms, including expectations of gendered behaviour. Women in the March Eighth factory enthusiastically engaged in industrial labour, public campaigns, and military action; all new activities that they recall as important and exciting.

Morality and Power

Another primary concern of this thesis is to analyse how March Eighth factory workers express concerns about morality. The older women in the March Eighth factory community see the post-reform present as bringing some economic and consumer advantages, but these come with what they see as great costs, in the form of corruption, dangers to children and family, and moral decay. Concerns about morality in the factory and *khu* community are tied both to the moral education of the socialist past and the changing relationship of factory workers to state power.

Virtuous behaviour is a key goal of state socialism. In Vietnam, as in China, the use of models made heroes of some individuals, and reinforced expectations of correct revolutionary action. In China, as Landsberger writes of the Maoist time, “Correct ideas (orthodoxy) are believed to follow automatically from this proper behaviour (orthopraxy)...the confrontation with a model that is held up for emulation will cause a desire in a person to recast himself...This was the result of an exaggerated belief in the power of ideology on human consciousness” (Landsberger 1996: 203). The Vietnamese revolution, through the promotion of ideology, as well as the reform of economic, social and cultural activities and relationships, attempted to radically transform definitions of virtue and achieve lasting change in the moral system of Vietnamese people (cf. Luong 1992: 145; Malarney 2001a: 75-88).

In a northern village not far from my fieldsite, in Thinh Liet commune, Malarney (1997) examined how the Vietnamese Communist Party’s definition of “revolutionary ethics” affected political power and practice at a local level. Malarney traces the political fortunes of two very different leaders to show how complicated and contradictory the moral judgement of the villagers was. One of the commune officials was a stern and incorruptible, loyal and experienced Party leader who became unpopular because of his unwillingness to compromise on policies that negatively affected the villagers, such as forcing them to help build a new road within a deadline when they wanted to prepare for the lunar New Year instead. Another leader was accused of corruption but still popular because under his leadership, the agricultural collective was economically successful. Malarney describes how pre-revolutionary discourse evaluated the virtues of local leaders and how this contrasted with and was absorbed into revolutionary discourse. In

the feudal setting, the elites who the Party would later deride as “landlords” were not always unpopular with the people. Rather, landlords were evaluated according to their relationships with the peasants. The ones who were seen as arrogant and refused to engage in local weddings, funeral, and rituals of commensality, were said to “live far from the people” (*song xa dan*) and despised. But some were seen as “good with the people” (*tot voi dan*) and did not hold themselves aloof. One way that they were seen as “good with the people” was by using their power and official position to the benefit of villagers, rather than maintaining the impartiality that the Party demanded (Malarney 1997: 911). The greatest measure of determining virtue in a political leader, however, was the assessment of an official’s *tin h cam*, sentiment. Relations of *tin h cam* are fundamental to Vietnamese social life, represented by attendance at life cycle rituals and eating and visiting together. (See Chapters Three and Five for further discussion of the importance of *tin h cam* relationships in the March Eighth *khu*.) According to Malarney, leaders who had *tin h cam* were deemed virtuous (*co dao duc*), thus eliding a pre-socialist concept of virtue into a revolutionary one. In another example, Giebel (2001) describes how the commemorative symbols for former Vietnamese President Ton Duc Thang draw on pre-revolutionary notions of heroic leadership as well as the revolutionary virtues of incorruptibility and selflessness. Similarly, as Hershatter (2000) describes, one of her labour heroines was respected locally because she did not remarry after being widowed young; staying faithful to her dead husband represented a pre-revolutionary, feudal value, but it enhanced her reputation as a model of revolutionary virtue.

Crucial to notions of morality and ethics are elements of action and performance. Jing writes: “By definition, moral authority is the ability to lead by actions that are deemed ethically exemplary in a given culture” (Jing 1996: 90). According to Malarney’s description of assessment of political leadership, Ho Chi Minh is clearly the most virtuous leader in recent northern Vietnamese history. Ho adhered both to Party doctrine of idealised behaviour, living simply and frugally and dedicating his life to the Revolution, while also maintaining popularly idealised *tin h cam* relations with the people. He is still held up as a model of virtue by the Party, for example as expressed in the slogan “The Great President Ho Chi Minh Lives Forever in the Deeds of All of Us” (*Chu Tich Ho Chi Minh Vi Dai Song Mai Trong Su Nghiep Cua Chung Ta*). He is also

still revered by the people, however, and used by them as a model to contrast with the Party leaders they are critical of today, as I discuss further in Chapter Four. By contrast to Ho Chi Minh, as Malarney also describes in Thinh Liet commune, local leaders in the March Eighth *khu* are criticised for excessive greed and moral corruption. As Malarney writes, “Given the questionable behaviour of many party members, local residents doubt that party members are truly committed to the people and no longer feel as compelled to follow their orders as in the past” (Malarney 1997: 918). Kleinen also found in the northern village of Lang To, where Party membership is declining as it has been across Vietnam, that “political power is no longer the only viable gateway to economic success...[some] Party members asked their local chapters to be relieved of their duties. Others, among them many women, engage in economic activities like trade and use their Party connections for business relations in a wide network which covers the district and the province” (Kleinen 1999: 195).

Similarly, Yan (1995) finds in China that cadre, who once defined virtue solely in terms of political action, now pursue material gain instead in China’s open market present. Yan writes, “economic benefits have replaced political rewards as the key object of cadres’ careers” (Yan 1995: 226). And what the people want from the cadres now, in turn, is non-interference in their own pursuit of economic advancement, what Yan calls a “leave me alone” mentality (ibid.: 235). People no longer consider the power of cadres to be absolute, but try to negotiate around cadres through personal networks of exchange and obligation. The political power of cadres in Xiajia village has waned, but for some of them, their economic power has increased. In those cases, access to resources and opportunities has benefitted cadres in pursuing their own economic ends. Whereas power for cadres once rested in proper political action, Yan now finds it primarily in personal monopoly over the distribution of goods and services (ibid.: 237).

But in the *khu*, of course, it is not only leaders who are criticised; so are neighbours and daughters-in-law, colleagues, anyone in the March Eighth *khu* who is seen as too eagerly embracing the status competition and consumerism of *doi moi* Vietnam. Still used by workers is revolutionary language criticising certain behaviour, such as what can be described as backward (*lac hau*), corrupt (*tham nhung*), or feudal (*phong kien*), the last particularly related to gender and family roles. While pursuing

economic goals, workers still express their concern about the moral inadequacy of this pursuit and the shifts in post-*doi moi* society.

Where socialist doctrines of equality dovetail with pre-socialist notions of *tin h cam*, where disgust with *doi moi* excesses and anxiety about social status converge, contemporary notions of virtue and morality in the March Eighth *khu* are formed and reformed. Even if cultural traditions are interpreted as invented, they must still be legitimated in social context, so that they must have cultural resonance and relevance and achieve popular emotional appeal. As an example of how social practice is influenced by historical contingency, Jing rejects the idea that tradition has been simply revived in the Kong temple rebuilding he studied, describing a more complex situation. “These ideas and practices are not mechanically retrieved from the past; they are blended with cultural inventions, shaped by the local experience of Marxism, and permeated with contemporary concerns” (Jing 1996: 12).

Malarney (1996a) offers a persuasive examination of this development of cultural tradition, the construction of resurgent ritual in Vietnam, which he says illustrates the “limits of state functionalism”. In his study of the revolutionary state’s attempts to reform ritual, Malarney shows how the use of ritual to advance state ideology affected the way funerals and other rituals were organised in Think Liet commune. Elements of the funeral ritual that the state deemed inegalitarian included symbols of social status and wealth. Since reform, some of these elements reappeared in the rituals Malarney observed, such as the lavish feasting that also accompanied weddings in the *khu*. Other symbolic elements of the funeral ritual had changed or dropped out, including long term displaying of the coffin and the gender differentiated ritual humiliations of children. Overall, funerals were shorter and simpler than pre-revolutionary ones, but still included such officially proscribed symbolic actions as food offerings, geomancy in determining grave sites, and the burning of votive paper objects. But while in this way some of the reforms were not implemented, Malarney asserts that the campaign changed the “nature of public discourse” about ritual in the community, and that funerals always sparked public debate about proper methods (Malarney 1996a: 553). People expressed concern about waste and status in these discussions, using ideas and language drawn from official ideology. As Malarney points out, ritual practice and

symbolism is complex and mobilises different and competing ideologies, as well as reflecting social divisions and difference. So state functionalism could not establish single, simple meanings for symbols in ritual, nor ensure that everyone experienced ritual in the same way, but could introduce new meanings to be considered, debated, incorporated or rejected. Thus state functionalism failed to completely reform the practice of rituals, but did incorporate official values into the realm of meaning and interpretations associated with them.

Herzfeld uses Malarney's theory of state functionalism as a description of social agency. "[T]here are limits to the functional efficiency demanded by the most controlling of regimes: the denial of agency does not mean that it has been truly eclipsed in practice, any more than—conversely—the existence of a powerful state automatically means that everyday contraventions of its authority necessarily constitute acts of deliberate resistance" (Herzfeld 2001: 51). This question of resistance and agency is one that dogs factory studies in particular. Rofel (1999), for example, draws on the work of Ong (1987), as do other studies of factory women, for inspiration in analysing the behaviour of workers as resistant to management attempts to control their bodies and moralities. Ong asserted that women workers in a transnational factory in a Malaysian free trade zone suffered spirit possession as a protest against labour discipline in industrial production (Ong 1987).

However, the issue of how or whether an anthropologist uncovers resistance to state power is also related to the problem of nostalgia in the March Eighth community. Rofel extends Ong's notion of protest to the stories that the women workers she interviewed told her about the glorious socialist past of their factories. "The oldest cohort's stories of liberation, when revisited with an ear to their nostalgia, open up a space for women of this cohort to remember themselves as creative political actors in a world that now denies them this ability...Older women workers drew on this dominant form of socialist nostalgia, which portrays an innocent state at one with its citizens. They, too, remembered a time when they sacrificed on behalf of the new state" (Rofel 1999: 131). According to Rofel, this nostalgia undermines the governmental project of modernisation. In Rofel's formulation, these narratives challenge hegemonic historical state discourse. Malarney's theory of the limits of state functionalism offer another

model for talking about divergence from historical state discourse, and I propose that nostalgia in the narratives of Vietnamese women workers can be viewed in this light. In Chapter Four, I discuss at length one example of how personal stories diverge from state narrative, in the stories that workers tell of the day Ho Chi Minh opened the factory, and consider this as an example of the limits of state functionalism.

The socialist nostalgia that Rofel found among older workers in Hangzhou and that I could not escape in the March Eighth factory is not unique. Chen, in her memoir of the Cultural Revolution, notes that young people in China do not always describe the time in terms of heroes and villains, but say from their parents they have an impression of the time as one of sincerity and political commitment. “The parents characterised the period as free, one in which drugs and prostitution were unknown, with low and stable grocery prices, a low crime rate, and honest officials” (Chen 1999: 119). They contrasted it with the post-reform present, in which money was more important than morality. Chen also mentions that part of contemporary imagining of the Cultural Revolution expresses a distinctive ambiguity; she proposes that the posters present this ambiguous space. For people critical of excessive materialism, the Cultural Revolution represents not just the violent and destructive upheavals by which it is frequently characterised, such as in the official designation of the time as “ ‘Ten Years of Chaos...in which nothing good took place’ ” (cf. Gittings 1999: 27). Thus, people who lived through the time may describe it in a positive light. Their children may have the impression of a time “when people were sincere, passionate, and enthusiastic about their ideals” (Chen 1999: 119). (On the other hand, as I mention in Chapter Three, not all children in Vietnam have this impression; many do not.) Children growing up in the March Eighth community are likely to have heard positive stories of the political pasts their mothers experienced. This glorious history has shaped the past and the present of the March Eighth factory and its community.

Gender and the anthropology of Vietnam

There is a small but quickly growing body of anthropological literature on Vietnam. In this thesis, I draw especially on the work of Malarney, who was one of the

first Western social scientists permitted to conduct fieldwork in Vietnam after the *doi moi* reforms began to open up access for foreign researchers. His extensive body of work focuses particularly on socialist policies to reform culture, a central concern of this thesis. I have already summarised Malarney's (1996a) argument about the "limits of state functionalism" in ritual change and reform, which considers how state ideology penetrated local moral discourse. I use the idea of state functionalism throughout this thesis to consider the ways in which aspects of socialist reform persist in the language and practice, attitudes and orientations of women factory workers.

In this thesis, I also draw on the important contribution made by Gammeltoft's (1999, 2001) studies linking socialist state aspirations to women's everyday lives, examining the prosecution and reception of Vietnam's family planning policies in one rural community. Gammeltoft demonstrates how state campaigns affect the ways in which women express their attitudes about families and children, showing that state policies are absorbed into local discourses, even while women sometimes act counter to them. The family planning policy that Gammeltoft describes is a contemporary example of the kind of high socialist campaigns in the history of the March Eighth factory that I document in Part One of this thesis. Although not described in the same terms as in this thesis, Gammeltoft's treatment of how state power is expressed and circulated at a local level describes similar circumstances to those shown in this thesis.

Another anthropologist who has written prolifically on Vietnam is Luong, including his study of revolutionary change in one village (1992) and ritual resurgence (1993). His more recent work has focused on trade and industry (1997 with Brook; 1998). Another source I have used is Kleinen's village study (1999), which also focuses on ritual resurgence and the question of to what extent cultural tradition will re-emerge following the decline of state control. I have also followed a convention of Vietnamese studies and used Chinese ethnography for comparative purposes. Since discussing the similarities and differences between China and Vietnam is far beyond the scope of this thesis, I have tried mainly to use examples that are instructive in their similarities.

Two other recent works have also particularly illuminated aspects of the study of women in Vietnam: Leshkowich's study of women cloth traders (2000); and Norton's study of mediumship rituals and ritual and musical change (2000a; 2000b). As I have

mentioned and as this thesis is concerned to examine, an important part of the socialist project in Vietnam was to reform and transform gender roles and the lives of women. The current discussion of gender and women in Vietnam often starts with a decontextualised debate about Confucianism versus Southeast Asian gender roles. Marr (1981), for example, explains how orthodox Confucian values, imported during centuries of colonial Chinese conquest and occupation, shaped traditional attitudes in pre-revolutionary Vietnam. According to Confucian roles for women, chastity was paramount, and a woman was to be submissive to her three masters in life, first her father, then her husband, and then her eldest son. Besides these “three submissions”, women were to follow the “four virtues” of labour, physical appearance, appropriate speech, and proper behaviour. Jamieson proposes that in traditional Vietnamese ideology, women were submissive to men, although there could be disjuncture between ideology and practice. “Vietnamese myth, legend and history are filled with stories of strong, intelligent and decisive women...men and women often worked side by side. Women performed many arduous physical tasks, ran small businesses, and were skilled artisans” (Jamieson 1993: 18). Some argue that Confucian roles contradicted indigenous, pre-conquest roles for women, which were characterised by bilateral kinship reckoning and gender complementarity as found elsewhere in Southeast Asia (cf. Whitmore 1984).

Adding to the literature on women in Vietnam, scholars have written about socialist attempts to remake these roles. Marr describes why socialist policy determined to affect family relationships: “Traditional Vietnamese formulations provided the family with near-religious status and endowed the father with quasi-priestly functions. In any serious effort to alter the self and society...relations between parents and children, husbands and wives, and older and younger siblings would have to be reanalysed completely. The various roles of women was one obvious place to begin” (Marr 1981: 191). In Chapters Two, Three and Five, I describe some of the revolutionary state’s policies on women and the family and their reception and rejection by women in the March Eighth factory and *khu*.

In this discussion about gender in Vietnam, rather than consider extensively how March Eighth women workers may fit into defined roles, I have tried to follow Norton

(2000a) in a practice-based analysis. He argues against the use of the ongoing debate about whether gender in Vietnam can be described as Confucian, Southeast Asian, or socialist. For contemporary ethnographic research, this debate, he writes: “has serious shortcomings because it essentialises gender identity [with a] tendency for Vietnamese to be rendered as passive recipients of a ‘naturalised’ system (whether it be Confucianism, indigenous folk culture or whatever) in favour of paying attention to what Vietnamese men and women say and do in particular contexts” (Norton 2000a: 65). As an example of how gender can be contextualised rather than essentialised, Norton shows in his study of *len dong* spirit mediumship how mediums traverse gender during rituals. Both male and female mediums are possessed by male and female spirits, speaking, dressing, dancing and behaving when possessed in both stereotypically male and female ways, with the melodies of songs played during these rituals also differentiating the gender identity of the spirits. Additionally, outside of the rituals, female mediums are seen not as typically feminine, but as “difficult” and “hot-tempered”. Male mediums tend to be “effeminate” men, possibly transsexual. Norton suggests that in ritual acts, mediums can somewhat destabilise established gender categories, and mediums, “more so than other Vietnamese, have scope for assuming unconventional subject positions in their everyday lives” (ibid.: 199). On the other hand, aspects of ritual practice as well as the everyday lives of mediums reinforce stereotypical gender identities, with male mediums accumulating more prestige and wealth than female mediums, and female mediums pursuing family happiness.

Similarly, Gammeltoft (1999, 2001) analyses family planning and fertility control in Vietnam to show how women negotiate state discourses on gender and womanhood. Gammeltoft examines the cultural context and the social conditions of Vietnamese women’s lives that may help to explain their acceptance or rejection of biomedical technologies, especially fertility control measures. She is interested in how reproductive technologies are managed and negotiated by women as a form of socially situated human agency. As Gammeltoft points out, the women she interviewed in many cases maintained what she calls “dual ethics” towards generalised state norms and specific family circumstances, and she explores the concept of “local moral worlds” to explain the local contexts of power that affect women in the village she studied. She

quotes from women who felt that their own families required more than the state maximum of two children still endorsed state rhetoric on the value of population limitation, agreeing that small families were more economical and practical. Rather than rejecting or resenting the attentions of the state campaigners who tried to persuade reluctant women to participate in birth control programmes, village women often agreed with their arguments and in many cases were persuaded to accept them, despite the absence of obvious coercive methods of state control. Gammeltoft suggests that in this stressful environment, women can express their discontent and overwork in socially acceptable complaints about the physical side effects of birth control methods, while more emotional or psychological expressions would be viewed as inappropriate or unacceptable. By expressing distress as somatic manifestations including weight loss, weakness, and headaches, women can also benefit from gender stereotypes of women as physically fragile and weak, gaining sympathy from husbands and other women, without being seen as indulgently complaining or shirking. Rather than taking sides in a debate about where Vietnamese women are on a scale that has “Confucianism” on one end and “Southeast Asian” on the other, by examining women’s physical symptoms within their social context, Gammeltoft unpacks a range of conflicting and complementing cultural traditions and ideologies regarding women. She writes: “Gender exists not only as a social construct but also as a subjective experience, as basic ways of being and acting in the world...human experience is socially situated and embodied, grounded in the social interactions of everyday life” (Gammeltoft 2001: 265).

Leshkowich (2000), in her study of women market traders in south Vietnam, offers another example of women’s creativity and agency in negotiating gender expectations and norms. She describes how women use the Confucian virtue of “labour” (*cong*) to explain their contribution to the household economy, adapting traditional expectations to justify women’s success in trade and business. She examines the ambiguities in the way women’s relationship to trade and money is viewed, the “simultaneous danger and necessity of combining women, money, and markets” (Leshkowich 2000: 31). According to Leshkowich, anxiety about this morality informs the way that women portray and position themselves in relation to these negative views.

Additionally, it probably reflects American gender studies and publishing interests more than the state of scholarship on Vietnam that two books examining the role of Vietnamese women in the American War have been recently published (Turner 1998; Taylor 1999). Neither are by Vietnam scholars and both are based on extensive interviews through translation, somewhat decontextualised. Taylor relies more on secondary sources and is more ambitious and comprehensive. Both suffer from a degree of credulity in their use of sources and interviews, although both contain interesting and useful material, and I have drawn on them both in my discussion of the role of March Eighth factory women in the War.

In this thesis, I show how the March Eighth women workers at different times and in different ways embraced and rejected aspects of the socialist state's project. They enacted state campaigns on the work and domestic roles of women that gave them access to a kind of political power that I have described and that I detail further in Chapter Two. They welcomed some of the independence that they gained through their association with the factory, such as relative freedom in marriage choices, and even during the hardship of war, they also found pleasure in their new-found political importance and passion (see Chapter Two and Four). They also now are pursuing forms of wealth creation, in trade and commerce, that are stigmatised, as well as engaging in religious practice that is explicitly gendered, and maintaining the central importance of family happiness and harmony (Chapters Five and Six), while still working hard in the factory under the demands of the market economy, but without the political passion to inspire their work. In all these ways, the women I studied tried to create and determine their own choices within a constrained context of ideological and structural limitations.

There is no other ethnographic study comparable to this one of state-owned industry in Vietnam or the lives of women factory workers, as far as I know. I hope that this thesis can contribute to the on-going illumination of the effects on everyday lives in Vietnam of socialist policies and *doi moi* changes on culture and society, work and family.

PART ONE: THE PAST

CHAPTER TWO

Warmed by the Fire: Early Days in the Factory and the Construction of a Revolutionary Social Institution

In this chapter, I present a fairly unified history of the early days of the March Eighth Textile Company, during the period of high socialism in Vietnam, roughly from the establishment of the factory in the early 1960's to the end of the American War and reunification with the South in the mid-1970's. Many of the policies and state campaigns that I describe in this chapter continued after this period and some into the ethnographic present, but, as I explain in later chapters, without the kind of popular support and widespread impact that they are reported by my informants to have enjoyed in these early days. To construct this history, I have used official and scholarly sources, added to recollections from interviews with older workers in the factory. In this chapter, I suggest that there is considerable homogeneity in many of the versions of the past that these various sources tell, including much consensus from workers about the experience of political campaigns in the factory and domestic life in the *khu tap the*. This consensus emerges in the stories of the workers, reflecting the experience of older women workers as a generational cohort. For this reason, I have chosen to present this material first as an agreed reconstruction of the past. I propose that the nostalgia these stories invoke reflects these workers' dissatisfaction with contemporary morality and social changes. In the following two chapters, I will also problematise this somewhat seamless narrative by considering more closely the way that these older workers tell their stories, including their divergences from official stories.

Also in this chapter I will explain how the attempt to create a new way of life in the factory and the *khu* is often remembered as a cooperative rather than a coercive experience. The women workers who experienced and participated in state campaigns designed to transform their domestic and public life and work found themselves embodying, enacting and expressing state power in their enthusiastic support for state policies on marriage, children, productivity, communal life and national defence.

The Birth of State Owned Enterprise and the March Eighth Factory

When North Vietnam achieved independence from the French in 1954, its economy was based almost entirely on small scale agriculture, with some small industrial output by handicraft and only seven modern factories in the region (Beresford 1989: 163). The Party Congress in 1960 decided that socialist industrialisation was the most important economic aim in the North, and the first Five Year Plan (1961-5) specified extensive investment for industrial development (ibid.: 166). Vietnamese industrial policy was based on Soviet ideology of the late 1920s and 1930s, using a large central bureaucracy to allocate resources directly into what the state determined were the priorities for national reconstruction, with central planning to ensure the distribution of scarce commodities to those who needed them most (Fforde and de Vylder 1996: 57). For this development, Vietnam relied heavily on investment and aid from China and the Soviet Union. During the period of the First Five Year Plan, however, the drop in productivity that resulted from agricultural collectivisation led to increased prices and decreased state wages. This trend continued throughout the period of collectivisation until *doi moi* economic reforms in 1986 and led to state subsidies and control in the distribution of food and other resources. In part because of the resulting privileged access to distributed goods, urban industrial employment in the state sector before economic reforms was eagerly pursued by rural farming families. “A state worker was part of the leading sector of the economy, receiving priority allocations of resources from the state. Housing, medical care, and access to various other facilities were important. State employment came to be increasingly valued for the access it gave to cheap resources, above all to food and social security” (ibid.: 63).

While this industrial development focused primarily on heavy industry, Vietnam’s state planners were also keen to develop self-sufficiency in the production of key goods in light industry, including thread, cloth and garments. Additionally, employing women in industrial production was also an important Party objective. Ho Chi Minh wrote: “What needs to be done to build socialism? Definitely it means significantly increasing production. To produce more, a larger labour force is required. To do this, the female labour force must be liberated” (quoted in Anh and Le 1997: 49).

One of the main industrial centres in the North was in the provincial capital of Nam Dinh, south of Hanoi, where a large textile factory already operated. Plans to establish the first state-owned textile factory in Hanoi were developed, with the support

of the Chinese government and initially with the participation of the national Vietnamese Women's Union. Through the Women's Union, women all over the North were solicited for contributions to help fund the factory's construction (*Cong Ty Det 8-3 Vuot Kho, Di Len* 1998: 18-19; *Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 11; Gough 1978: 104). From its official opening in 1965, the March Eighth Textile Company became the largest textile enterprise in Hanoi and the second largest in north Vietnam, exceeded only by Nam Dinh. Throughout the 1960's and early 1970's, the March Eighth factory was the main supplier of fabric to the state sector and the army (Consulting and Research Company for Technology Transfer and Investment 1997). This made it a priority operation for the Vietnamese government and also attracted unwanted American attention during the bombing campaigns of the war. Until after *doi moi*, the March Eighth factory's main export markets were the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries.

It is almost impossible to underestimate the ideological importance of the March Eighth Textile Company in the history of Vietnamese socialism. The factory's construction and development was the focus of intense interest and attention by the National Communist Party and the Politburo. The name of the street on which the factory was situated was re-named Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Street after a revolutionary heroine and martyr of the resistance against the French (cf. Marr 1981: 243-44). The factory's name, March Eighth, is the date of International Women's Day; as I have mentioned and discuss in more detail in Chapter Four, the factory was opened officially on that day in 1965 by President Ho Chi Minh (Uncle Ho) himself. Enormous pressure was placed on this particular factory, early in Vietnam's industrial development, to be a good model for future projects, even beyond the basic socialist demand that all political effort and behaviour must be exemplary.

The factory itself was built on what was then the rural outskirts of Hanoi, on swampy, undercultivated land. The factory was built with the help of Chinese advisers according to Chinese architectural design. All the original textile equipment and machinery was of Chinese origin, installed by Chinese engineers. Some of the Vietnamese workers and cadre were sent to southern China for technical and political training. The official history of the factory describes the development of the plans for the factory:

The state advocated building a large scale textile factory in Hanoi in order to raise the level of fabric and thread according to the needs and the desires of the people, to solve the employment issues for a sector of workers in the capital, especially the women workers, and to contribute to rebuilding Hanoi from a consumption city to becoming a centre of the economic home front in the North...At the end of 1958, the Party and state officially included the problem of building a weaving factory in Hanoi into a negotiation programme with the People's Republic of China. The government of China discussed helping Vietnam by designing and supplying all the equipment and expertise to build a cloth factory with an integrated production cycle with a foreseen capacity every year from thirty to thirty-five million metres of cloth (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 9).

Given the political importance of the factory, the efforts made to establish its ideological shape coincided with its physical construction. While the engineers were just beginning to solve the problems of draining the swampland for the construction site, the Central Party was already establishing the Party organisations that were to govern the political life of the factory and workers. *Cong Ty Det 8-3, 35 Nam* describes in great detail these early days. In 1960, as ground was broken, the factory's "Party cell was pressing for urgent speed to strengthen all the Party Organisations, the mass organisations, the Trade Union, the Youth Union, for the strength of the leaders in general" (ibid.: 9). At the same time, the Party itself established its dominant role in the internal organisation of the factory: "The Party Committee of the factory was clearly aware that the most important issue at that time was to strengthen the leadership of the Party concerning ideology and organisation, and promote the role of people's mastery as the collective owners of the factory in every stage of activity of the factory" (ibid.: 15).

Despite the Hanoi People's Committee's professed intentions of absorbing an existing female labour force, most of the original women workers had agricultural backgrounds. Like Chinese communism, Vietnamese communism suffered from the fundamental contradiction between its political aspirations, to build an industrial, proletarian revolution, and the economic and political realities facing a primarily agrarian nation. The Party tried to build an urban proletariat from the rural young people who were recruited into factories such as the March Eighth. According to official statistics, with the growth of northern industry, between 1955 and 1965 around 650,000 young people from peasant families were recruited from the countryside into industrial jobs in urban centres, representing a large population shift, and by 1965 about 70% of the entire industrial labour force in the north was under thirty years old (Woodside 1976:

261). In order to create a self-identified proletariat class, foster grass roots socialism, and equip these new workers with proper “industrialisation and modernisation” (*cong nghiep hoa, hien dai hoa*) orientations, the state and the Party promoted extensive political socialisation within industrial settings. Factories in northern Vietnam constituted one of the most significant locations for the implementation of revolutionary policies. According to the March Eighth’s company charter, the “rights and tasks” of the factory’s General Director include: “Safeguard and improve the spiritual life of the workers” (Ministry of Light Industry 1996: Article 16). The March Eighth factory illustrated Walder’s thesis that: “The state-owned factory in a communist economy is less an economic enterprise than a social institution” (Walder 1986: 28). Through this socialisation, the Party and the state hoped to create a dedicated workforce that was inspired by political belief, with a productive ethic of socialism, that is, a morality of productivity. The Vietnamese revolutionary state attempted to create, in factories such as the March Eighth and in the collective living quarters of the workers, a bounded environment in which revolutionary disciplines and habits could be learned and enacted. As Salemkink says in reference to Foucault, Vietnam “conceives of its subjects through the prism of governmentality... simultaneously aiming at the well-being and the ‘improvement’ of its population by making its subjects into proper citizens of the state through various disciplining tactics” (Salemkink 2000:129).

Recruitment of Young Workers into the Factory

The first March Eighth women workers were young, most of them around twenty years old, relatively uneducated, and not yet married; many had had little experience outside the rural life of their home villages (*que huong* or *que*). These were all qualities that should have made them open to the reformed new lifestyles that the factory intended to promote. Other socialist regimes implemented similar policies of separating young people from their families and making them the focus of revolutionary training. In Cuba, a system of residential secondary and vocational schools was established in the 1970’s where students would work and study in rural areas. These schools were intended to “break students away from the influence of families with their pre-revolutionary values” (Smith and Padula 1996: 87). In Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, the lessons of Maoist China were also followed, choosing the rural young as the vanguard of a brutal

revolution. Shawcross writes of Khmer Rouge strategies: “Teen-agers were removed from their families for two or three weeks of intensive indoctrination...this was enough to engender in them a passionately fierce commitment to the destruction of the old society and a total rejection of religion and all family ties” (Shawcross 1986: 321). The young and poor in Cambodia were seen as malleable and most able to reject old ways and learn new ways (Hinton 1998; Marston 1994). The original March Eighth workers were also not so different from the industrial populations now found in export processing zones across Southeast Asia, and across the developing world: young, single, female, and far from home. The revolutionary aspirations of the Communist Party for the March Eighth factory, and for its model *khu tap the*, were pursued through the same demographic group as the economic ones of global capital, although in this case what the Party sought to create the conditions for was not maximum efficiency in the production of goods, but in the production of socialist good.

To guarantee their political bona fides, the workers were recruited from their *que* (home villages) into the factory via either their local Communist Party or Youth Union (the Party-dominated national youth organisation), or most commonly, from the Volunteer Youth Brigades (*Thanh Nien Xung Phong*). These Youth Brigades served an auxiliary military role in the then-escalating American War, including dangerous assignments transporting materiel up and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and suffered high casualty rates. Turner quotes estimates that between 70 to 80 percent of the *Thanh Nien Xung Phong* were women (Turner 1998: 21). Most of the original March Eighth workers came from poor farming families, although their organisational connections were in some cases a product of a revolutionary family past. This was particularly true among early recruits. Later there was widespread pressure to join the Party, the Youth Union, or the Youth Brigades, and eventually joining local militia and self-defence forces was obligatory, with women also permitted to join the army from 1969 (Taylor 1999: 117). In the late 1950's and early 1960's, though, when many of the future March Eighth workers became politically involved in the countryside, they were often fulfilling the example set by their fathers and mothers in the war against the French. This excellent class and political background made these young women attractive to factory planners.

In other cases, though, young women were volunteered for the Youth Brigade by fathers who were protecting only sons against military conscription. In an interview in

her flat in the collective living quarters of the factory, Tinh, a worker in the thread spinning (*soi*) section, told me about joining the Youth Brigade:

My *que* is in Nam Ha, now Nam Dinh province¹. My mother is dead but my father and brother and sisters still live there. My father is 73 years old and lives with my older brother. My family had seven of us, one brother and six sisters. They all have families. One sister married a husband in Ha Bac [a neighbouring province] and the rest of them are farmers, like my parents were. I entered the *Thanh Nien Xung Phong* in 1972. At that time the commune took me in place of my brother. I was still pretty small, and my father had to persuade them. I was only seventeen years old, but because my older sister had just gone to marry her husband, I was the only one in the family who was big enough. Because my family had enough (*du*) girls, my father said “stop” and asked to defer my brother and send a girl in his place. For a boy to go was unlucky in case he dies. That year there were a lot of deaths and then if a boy dies in the family you lose the bloodline. But if a daughter dies then she just dies herself. So I went instead of my brother, and the commune agreed.

Some of the young women who had served in the Youth Brigades had travelled with the army, like Tinh, who worked as a porter on the Red River near Hanoi. She was then sent to be an army cook nearer the front lines in the South, from which posting only fifteen of one hundred women in her brigade survived.

Others of the original workers had kin connections to urban cadre who arranged their recruitment. Bac Thuy, for example, a 58-year old retired worker from the weaving (*det*) section, told me: “I first came here to work in 1960. I had a cousin working in the Politics Ministry. He brought some of his relatives here to work. I lived in the village at that time. He said they were going to build a factory here and it was suitable (*phu hop*) for girls so he brought me here.” Bac Tam, from Ha Tinh province, says she was also told that textile factory work was “suitable for women”. Tam came from a revolutionary family, and her father had been killed in the French War. In 1949, when she was twelve years old, Tam joined her commune’s branch of the Young Pioneers (*Thanh Nien Tien Phong*), a socialist organisation that prepared children to later join the Youth Union. She met her husband in the Young Pioneers when she was fifteen years old, and later followed him to Hanoi. She told me:

I joined the *Thanh Nien Tien Phong* so that when I was bigger I could be mobilised to do political activities. There wasn’t yet liberation, during the War of

¹ Nam Dinh is a new province made with redrawn borders.

Resistance. I was admitted to the Youth Union in 1954, when I was seventeen years old. I didn't join the *Thanh Nien Xung Phong*, though, I stayed at home doing Youth Union activities and working in the fields. I studied at the village school during the War of Resistance and then I quit and started a family [got married], when I was eighteen. In that backward [*lac hau*] time, in the countryside, eighteen was late to start a family, not like now. My husband had come to work here in Hanoi from 1954, in the *Thanh Nien Xung Phong*, and I came here [to Hanoi] and I applied at the Labour Bureau for any job. They gave me a job in the Hanoi Construction Company. Later the factory began to be built and they recruited people. They took only distinguished workers. My former company allowed the better workers to leave and join the factory so I went. In this way the factory recruited people. It wasn't done in a natural way, I mean they didn't recruit workers by chance. Then I was sent to Nam Dinh factory for skills training. I studied on the spinning thread machines. I was in the first class the March Eighth factory recruited to study in Nam Dinh, in 1961, and after that we came back here as the first trained workers.

The men who came to work on construction, and later become a small minority of workers in the factory, were recruited primarily either from the army or from the Nam Dinh textile factory. One now retired male worker, Muong, had already been wounded in the war against the French. With three fingers lost on one hand, he was classified as a wounded veteran and given a state job at a silk factory in Nam Dinh, where he met his wife, who had also been sent to Nam Dinh. They lived in a collective living quarters (*khu tap the*) in Nam Dinh and then moved to Hanoi to help build the March Eighth factory, when they would already have become accustomed to the expectations of life in a factory *khu*. Muong then went to work in the dyeing section of March Eighth, and later one of his sons also worked in that section. Muong, now a frail seventy eight years old, still sees himself as a revolutionary patriot and is active in the local mass organisations.

The factory history claims that an effort was made to recruit some workers who were not from peasant families, using the example of a 1962 visit to the factory construction site from Le Duan, General Secretary of the Party:

The General Secretary taught: 'Our youth, including the re-educated children of bourgeoisie, all will grow up within the new system, absorbing the revolutionary knowledge, so that's why we need to involve them in the workforce, using the work to educate them, and train them to become good textile factory workers of the future. You should not have bias about their class origin.'...[By] 1963, the majority of workers were young women, healthy, enthusiastic, knowledgeable. Of them, there were people who were soldiers and

volunteer youth; distinguished workers from the factory construction who were recruited to become production workers; there were some students; petty traders and artisan workers from Hanoi. Among them were children from bourgeoisie families who had been re-educated (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 13-14).

None of the original workers I talked to came from anything other than a sterling revolutionary or ideal class background, and the stories they tell suggest that any recruitment by the children of bourgeoisie families would have been token. For the March Eighth factory, the priority was to start with sympathetic young people and turn them into dedicated cadre.

Building a New World

In these early days, most of the workers were living in temporary bamboo housing while the first of the concrete apartment buildings were built in the *khu*. These concrete blocks were designed according to Chinese models for collective living, with communal toilets and kitchens and public dining halls. The *khu* rooms were designed to be dormitory housing for single women to share, with four to six women in each room. (As the women workers began to marry, the small dormitory rooms became one-room family flats, as I discuss in the next section.) The *khu* now has ten of these buildings, which are four story apartment blocks with ten small rooms per floor, with an open hallway running across the front of each floor and the shared kitchen and bathroom space at the end of each hallway.

Chi Tam describes the site of the factory when she first saw it in 1960:

At that time, there was a graveyard here. When I moved here there were only a few buildings made of straw very far down there [points in the direction of the factory] and up here [in what is now the *khu tap the*] still was an empty field, all uncultivated and unclaimed land. The fields spread from here to the factory, and there in the cemetery there weren't any houses at all. If you stood on Dong Mac city gate [north of the factory site] you could see the empty road, often flooded with water. If you stood at the top of Cau Den gate [east of the site] you could see this area, the fields completely flooded and white with water, and spinach (*rau muong*) growing wild. If you wanted to pick it you had to use a boat. Not like today, now it's so crowded with people you don't have room to put down your foot! From here all the way down to Mai Dong village you couldn't see any houses on the road from the factory to the village. If you went down that road by

bicycle in the afternoon you could feel the wind blowing and everywhere you saw water and no houses.

The factory had begun to be built. When I came there were just some concrete pillars in the middle of the fields, and the construction site was very disorderly. When I returned from Nam Dinh to the factory site in the beginning of 1962, they had one small building in which the workers could have training, and they continued to build from there. When I moved here I lived in a straw house over there, with fifteen people living in it, men in one house and women in the other. Most had twenty people in one straw house. By 1963, they had three of the big buildings [the permanent apartment blocks of the *khu tap the*] here, A1, A2, and A3, and I moved here.

The official history of the factory also describes the transformation in the area by 1963: “The previously uncultivated areas of land, before sad and empty, now became lively and bustling, crowded with people, an urgent stream of vehicles plying between them, with the camp shacks and warehouses on the flat expanse springing up next to each other” (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 8).

The communal kitchens and dining rooms in the *khu* community were intended to promote communal spirit and egalitarian behaviour. While most of the workers were still single women living dormitory style, they say collective dining was quite successful. Although there were shortages of some key commodities in the wartime economy, the factory had access to a relatively higher standard of food than the women had experienced in the countryside. One of the mass mobilisation efforts on the construction site was land and animal cultivation for workers’ consumption, so that the workers supplemented their collective diet with communally raised livestock and kitchen gardens. Workers even brought extra supplies from their rations out to their relatives in the countryside when they went to visit, helping to support rural relatives suffering the shortages under agricultural collectivisation and also raising their prestige as privileged urban workers. The factory history lauds this provisioning movement:

With the spirit of improving the material and spiritual life of the cadre and workers, the Director of the factory and the Labour Union organised workers to work extra on factory land in leisure time, to improve life by their own efforts. So in 1964, the factory had a collective animal husbandry camp with 240 cows, 230 pigs, and more than 200 chickens, ducks, and geese. Cadre and workers after production hours participated in raising fruit and vegetables...the products of this additional production were added to the meals in the collective dining room, so raising the nutrition content, actually guaranteeing the health of the cadre and workers (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 19).

Husbands and Marriage

Not just the physical and architectural arrangements of the *khu* promoted new ways of life. Another way in which the original March Eighth workers were encouraged to enact proper socialist roles related to marriage. The Party supported free choice in marriage to support the liberation of women and the effort to reform what were viewed as feudalistic marriage practices. By moving to the city to take their jobs in the factory, women workers gained not only considerable prestige in their home villages, they achieved a measure of independence from the traditional demands of rural family life. This included the opportunity to choose their own husbands, for the most part, without acceding to traditionally arranged marriages. Although arranged marriages were technically outlawed under the 1959 marriage law, they were still commonplace in the countryside. For the March Eighth workers, the state, via the Trade Union and the factory Party cells, had nominal authority over the marriage choices of workers, as all marriages needed to be officially approved. The main interest of the state was in the political compatibility of the workers, whereas families were more concerned with economic and social status (cf. Belanger and Hong 2001). Pre-revolutionary marriages were seen as relationships between families, whereas the socialist state promoted the relationship between individuals. The de facto result of shifting the authority for approving marriages from the family was to give women much more freedom in making such choices themselves. By marrying with greater reference to their own desires, the young March Eighth workers were thus also a vanguard of this new socialist policy on women's emancipation. Chi Tinh, who met her husband in the army, told me, "We just decided to get married ourselves, not according to our families' decision, because our families were all far away. We suited each other, so we got married."

The status of March Eighth workers as state employees and their access to Hanoi residence permission (*ho khau*), which was transferable to their husbands, made them especially marriageable. As Tam told me, "When we got married we were given a family registration for the wife and husband, and later the children. To change registration from the *que* to Hanoi was a victory (*chien thanh*)."

Some women told me that they knew their future husband from their home village (*que*) but they had been separated during their respective military service. In each case, the husband made a

special effort to find and claim his sweetheart when he discovered she had been promoted to Hanoi. More than one woman told me that her husband had previously said that “she was too poor to marry”, but that this changed after she gained her March Eighth job, with her housing and other benefits, and residence rights in the capital. Other women, defying parental pressure, married men who were not from their *que*, who were strangers, some of whom were even from other regions of Vietnam and therefore deeply distasteful to their new in-laws. Regional rivalries and suspicions are a historical and ongoing feature of Vietnamese society (Taylor 1998), emphasised rather than created by the American War, and traditional preference for local endogamy is strong (Luong 1992: 229; Kleinen 1999: 37). Endogamous preferences are expressed in the aphorism “Better to marry a village dog than a noble outsider” (*lay cho trong lang hon lay nguoi sang thien ha*). According to a study of marriage in Hanoi, women who married during the socialist era, if they did not have completely arranged marriages, still usually accepted suitors who had been encouraged by their parents (Belanger and Hong 2001). But, as in the case of Tinh quoted above, I found several exceptions to this among the women workers.

This impression that March Eighth women had been relatively independent in choosing husbands without much parental involvement was confirmed for me by stories told to me by cadre who tried to assist them. As they described it, as part of their pastoral duties, cadre from the factory Trade Union or the *khu* Women’s Union were sometimes involved in trying to persuade workers’ families to accept their daughter’s marriage choices. Dau, a retired Trade Union official from the early days in the factory, described to me how he travelled across the Northern provinces, surreptitiously visiting families who had threatened to disown their daughters for marrying outsiders (*nguoi ngoai*). Dau told me that he assumed disguises and identities and pretended to be variously a failed suitor of the worker, a friend of the fiancée, or a manager in the factory. Although Dau’s efforts may have been exceptional, they reflected the caretaking role that the mass organisations, and the factory itself, assumed over the young workers. Chanh, a retired woman worker from one of the weaving sections (*det*) of the factory who had been a Trade Union cell leader and is now active in the Women’s Union of the *phuong*, told me:

It was different at that time. If any worker's family was in trouble, I went to visit and encourage them. If there were any couples in trouble, I went to talk to make them understand. It was very happy at that time, not like now (*khong nhu bay gio*). The Trade Union was full of love then. When anyone was in difficulties, we ourselves came to visit them and encouraged each other. Now each person minds their own business. Life in my time was very hard but if any household had trouble, we would come to visit, if we were able to help, we would; if not, we would go to visit very frequently. Now I know that they can't behave as we did in the old times. We worked without pay, the salary was limited. After finishing two shifts, we still went to visit them.

Also replacing the family in the role of wedding planner, the Trade Union or local Party cells in the *khu* were responsible for arranging the wedding ceremonies. These were resolutely secular and simple, in accordance with state policy on religious reform, as I shall describe in an upcoming section.

This new independence meant that the husbands of women workers came to live with them, departing from Vietnamese customary arrangements in which women went to live with their husbands' families and came under the domestic supervision of their mother-in-law. These arrangements inevitably defined and reflected kinship and gender relationships. Kleinen, for example, writes that "in the literature on Vietnamese kinship, the patrilocal residence emerges as the main structural element of social relations" (Kleinen 1999: 148). The *khu* was not only uxorilocal by contrast, but was characterised by the decreased influence of the parental generation. Thus another radical transformation in this community, which suited the aims of the Party to create a new way of life, was the absence of mothers-in-law from the homes of the women workers. In practice, many of the husbands of workers were absent for long periods during the war, either serving in the army or in state employment elsewhere in the north. This rendered the relationships between their parents and their wives even more tenuous, as women talk about visiting their own families in the *que* when possible but less frequently visiting their in-laws in the countryside. The state intended domestic arrangements without in-laws to enable women to enact new roles at home according to socialist egalitarian principles, including a more equitable division of domestic labour between husband and wife.

Reforming the Family and New Family Culture

The Party sought to reinforce this sense of building a new society, inherent in the relocation of the workers and the design of the *khu*, in the political campaigns and mass mobilisations in the factory and the *khu*. The Vietnamese state clearly identified the family as the nexus of social relations and the site of social reproduction².

The political campaigns established the pattern of extreme state involvement in the personal and domestic life of the March Eighth workers and the politicisation of many kinds of social behaviour. The mass organisations and the Party structure in the factory and the *khu* assumed a role of promoting, monitoring and enforcing these codes of behaviour. The attempts to encourage new ways of family behaviour was part of the overall state and Party intentions to create socialist workers and promote “New Family Culture” (*gia dinh van hoa moi*). New Family Culture was expected to eradicate the inegalitarian social relations of feudalism and, roughly, Confucianism, to liberate women and give them equality with men while retaining some important feminine virtues, to eliminate superstition (*me tin di doan*) and promote secular scientism, build communal spirit, and create the conditions for good socialist workers to be raised within good socialist families. As in the recruitment of young people for the factory and the reform of marriage laws, in its attempts to refashion the family the Vietnamese Communist Party was following revolutionary practice. In Cuba, for example, “the revolution was deeply ambivalent about the family, particularly in terms of its role in raising the island’s children, Cuba’s future citizens. The family’s role was welcome, as long as it conformed to the revolutionary agenda of unswerving loyalty to the state, the promotion of more ‘equal’ sex roles, significant parental involvement in children’s lives, and parental willingness to let the state take the lead in determining the appropriate activities and destinies of Cuban children...The state attempted to replace many of the functions of the family” (Smith and Padula 1996: 165).

The communal design of the living quarters and the public attention to domestic roles were all part of the Vietnamese socialist state’s attempt to replace the function of

² Marxist ethnographers have made the same observations. In *Coal is Our Life*, for example, Dennis describes a quite rigid system of social relationships in the 1960’s in Ashton, a mining town in northern England. In Dennis’ description of Ashton, almost every man is a miner, and gender roles are fixed, with ideologies of mother- and fatherhood to perpetuate them. “The function of the family is as a mechanism for perpetuating the social structure, not only in terms of biological reproduction, but in terms of the production of the social personalities required by the community” (Dennis 1969: 43).

the family in socialising its workers. This was reinforced by the mass mobilisations and political education campaigns that were carried out in the *khu* and the factory, promoting egalitarian and communal values as well as productive ones. From the establishment of the factory in the early 1960's until reunification in 1975, these campaigns attracted many workers to join the Party and the mass organisations and received enthusiastic support from at least some of the workers. The excitement of the war effort and the independence of their new living arrangements were inspiring to many of the women workers at that time.

The Role of the Mass Organisations and the Political Campaigns

The official history notes that the Trade Union and the Youth Union were established in the factory by 1963, before the factory had officially opened, with the Trade Union boasting more than 2000 members. According to the history, "The Trade Union focused on education, encouraging and guiding the workers and officials to strengthen the patriotic competition movements" (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 17). These movements included "Highest Quality, Saving Much," (*chat luong cao, tiet kiem nhieu*) and the "Three Improvements" (*3 cai tien*) movements, promoting improvements in work style, attitude, and quality of work (*le loi, tac phong, chat luong cong viec*). Similarly, says the history, "The Youth Union of the factory, with 1354 members, the majority of whom were young women, played the role of the vanguard of the production front and launched competition movements to exceed the targets of the 1963 plan" (*ibid.*: 17). In 1964, Ho Chi Minh launched the national movement "One person works for two" and at the factory, this became the competition movement "Each person works for two to achieve three high points to finish the construction and installation production plan" (*Moi nguoi lam viec bang hai gianh ba diem cao de hoan thanh ke hoach xay lap va san xuat*) (*ibid.*: 19).

These competition movements were the public expression of the recurrent efforts by the Party to mould worker behaviour into the socialist ideal. The movements were promoted in meetings and broadcast on the building site's loudspeaker system, which was one of the first pieces of equipment installed in the site. Later, as the *khu tap the* began to be constructed building by building, new movements would also be promoted through the neighbourhood loudspeaker system and the local Party and mass

organisation cells of the *phuong*. In these early days, when the *khu* housing was reserved exclusively for March Eighth workers and cadre, all the mass mobilisations in the factory were echoed in the political education in the community.

A system of wall newspapers was established in the factory, and enthusiastic cadre, especially Youth Union members, wrote revolutionary poems to be posted on the factory walls. According to the factory history, revolutionary spirit was raised through:

the culture and sports movement in the factory. The mass movement of singing started the artistic aspirations of the workers, as did music concert evenings... The machinery cells sections and administrative offices sections had movements of writing wall newspapers. In the whole factory there were usually 65 wall signs or bulletins with poems, songs, simple humour, natural but full of revolutionary emotion and optimistic spirit and love for life, and also simple and healthy like the soul of the worker (ibid.: 20).

The factory and the *khu tap the* became a sort of political testing ground, as well, with new movements often launched there. For example, the factory history notes,

The construction of the March Eighth Company continued in 1962 with one new strength. The Central Party Committee in Hanoi chose the construction site to be one of several places to experimentally undertake the movement 'Raising high the consciousness of responsibility; strengthening the management of economy; strengthening the finances; fighting embezzlement, waste and bureaucratic commandism.' (*Nang cao y thuc trach nhien, tang cuong quan ly kinh te, tai chinh, chong tham o, lang phi, quan lieu*) This was called for short the movement 'Build Three Things, Fight Three Things' " (*3 xay 3 chong*) (ibid.: 12).

Other examples of mass mobilisation campaigns of the time include the movement of the "three virtues for women" (in the house, in production, and in the war and in serving the war: *phong trao 3 dam dang cua chi em phu nu*) and the "three readies" movement of the Youth Union: "Ready to go anywhere, ready to do anything, and ready to join the army when the country calls" (*San sang di bat cu dau; San sang lam bat cu viec gi; San sang nhap ngu khi to quoc key goi*).

Enthusiasm and Pleasure

These days are recalled in a revolutionary poem written by Bac Nhu, one of the original women workers who is now retired from the factory and serves as a Women's

Union official in the *khu*. In the poem, she describes taking her turn in volunteering to tend the factory's cows in the nearby fields:

I am the March Eighth girl
I don't weave fabric but I herd the cows
I am not big
Running after the herd of cows is so hard I sweat
The days of going up the hill
My back is bending, my stomach is churning
And my knee is split in half.
Because the day that the cows ran away and got lost
Was raining and slippery
Going up the hill I kept falling down
Cold days and summer days,
To grow the cows fat is what I do.
Although it's difficult I still love the life
Because I listen to the Party's voice and respond to the words of loving Uncle Ho
Herd the cows in order to have lots of meat
To serve the third [night] shift is what I wish
I am relaxed inside
I can hear in the wind in the fields the sound of the comb in the weaving rooms
far away.

Bac Nhu recited this poem for me one day when we were sitting in her front room, having tea with two other women, both Women's Union officials and nearby neighbours of Bac Nhu's. All three of the women were over fifty and had been workers in the factory during the early days. We were talking about the *phuong* Women's Union and how membership was falling, especially among young women. Bac Nhu rattled off this poem; I stopped her afterward and said wait, please, let me write it down (we recorded it later, at the time conversation continued). She told me that she recited this poem to show me how strong the revolutionary spirit was in the past. I was struck by how quickly she recalled this thirty year old poem. I was also struck by the general hilarity it produced among all the women who were with us that afternoon, including Bac Nhu herself. This is not an unusual response to the left-over language of the socialist mobilisations, although some of the same language is still used unironically, in meetings for example. Having read enough Vietnamese newspapers and official texts, I was unintentionally steeped in this vocabulary, and my own use of formal political expressions could produce gales of laughter as well. As well as the obvious irony of a foreigner being conversant with archaic phrases of a particular politics, in the *khu*,

among the women workers, laughter also seemed to express discomfort in reflecting too much on the contrast between the revolutionary fervour of the past and the political ambivalence of the present. In recounting these times, the dedication of the workers often surprises themselves in retrospect. “But, we were young then, and it was not like now” (*nhung tre lam va khong nhu bay gio*), Bac Nhu told me. Although Bac Nhu only attended school in her home village until she was ten and speaks disparagingly of herself as barely educated, I discovered later that she had composed many of these poems and remembers several of them. They are written according to a kind of classical Vietnamese tone pattern that is tricky to write, and many other women workers say they did not participate in the wall newspaper movement because they were not educated enough to write poetry. Bac Nhu explained her compositional ability as a result of her passionate belief in the righteousness of the cause. She said, “In the old days, I wrote poems wherever I went. Unprofessional poems. I didn’t have any knowledge about writing poems or much education. I didn’t know about the rules for writing poems, I followed my inspiration³.” Nhu’s experiences echo Chen’s (1999) description of the aesthetic pleasure of playing and performing revolutionary roles in China.

Chi Tam, also a Party member, described her enthusiasm for political organisation in the early days of the factory:

They brought me back early from my skills training in Nam Dinh for political training in my duty cell. Here they already had the mass organisations established. The factory was being built and we were trainee workers in a practice phase. We were considered like students but the mass organisations were filled enough already, the Women’s Workers Group [*Phu Nu Cong*, the factory equivalent of *Hoi Phu Nu*, the Women’s Union]. The Youth Union was very strong. They did activities like the movements to build the factory, to do socialist labour [volunteer community service work]. For example, when we worked, we worked shifts to practice, so we worked morning and afternoon shifts in a row, morning from 6 am to 2 p.m., and then afternoon from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m. Then we joined the movement of the Youth Union to perform socialist labour like dig bunkers, build at the construction site, or when our shifts were

³ Writing poetry was a marker of real activist spirit, and such examples as Ho Chi Minh’s poems are well known. Turner quotes one from wartime that could also have been written by a textile worker:

Sewing machines move quickly.

The forest echoes with the bird’s songs.

Our resentment will be changed into silk.

The distant sound of guns harmonise

With the rhythm of the sewing machines.

We are determined to kill the enemy (quoted in Turner 1998: 148).

Cf. Malarney 2001a: 102-4 for a discussion of revolutionary poetry.

over to work extra (*lam them*), outside of hours, but without any extra to strengthen us, no extra pay, for example. Our spirit was very excited, we all completely did not rest, no one shirked or quit. We planted trees around the factory, entrusted to each member to plant some trees which they would guarantee to protect the life of and ensure would live. We went to study while singing revolutionary songs. Generally these activities were after hours, but we were still very excited, no one dared to be absent. Relations between cadre and workers were equal (*binh dang*) then. They were normal (*binh thuong*). There was nothing like a mandarin style or attitude. That came later. Now there are some people like that, but only a few. Mostly between cadre and workers there has been harmony, not distance. It depends on the character of each person.

Another example cited as proof of revolutionary fervour in Vietnam was the willingness of activists to “write in blood” (*chich mau viet*: to draw blood to write). The factory history, for example, in describing the evacuation of the factory in 1972, reports that:

Most of the Party and Youth Union members voluntarily asked for permission to stay and fight and some drew blood to write a letter to the Party Committee of the Factory to ask for this permission. It was a respected revolutionary spirit and the deep and beautiful sentiment of the workers with their whole lives tied to the factory (*Cong Ty Det* 8-3 1995: 47).

Turner, however, suggests that “writing in blood” was less a real activity than a conceptual one. She notes that it is mentioned by veterans who she suspects of presenting manufactured rather than genuine memoir: “these carefully crafted accounts often drew from a common reservoir of experience and myth. For example, several women recalled that they had pricked their fingers to draw blood to use as ink when they wrote letters to local authorities, begging them to overlook the fact that they were not yet old enough to serve in the youth corps” (Turner 1998: 11). I occasionally felt during an interview that I was hearing this kind of testimonial, although none of the older workers I interviewed mentioned writing in blood, and most of those I asked about it either shrugged or laughed off the question, much as they looked embarrassed when Bac Nhu recited her poems. Bac Chanh was one of the workers who responded, telling me: “I heard that people did that, in the Youth Union, I think.”

The mass organisations and management of the factory were also responsible for protecting public morals and enforcing the rather chaste attitudes of Vietnamese communism. “In the family ideology propounded by the government, the Communist

Party, and the Women's Union, not only premarital sexual relations and adultery, but also all forms of lewd or 'loose' behaviour appear to be severely frowned on" (Gough 1978: 89). Male workers accused of seducing unmarried women workers, or married workers of either sex suspected of having an affair, were brought before their local work cells and neighbourhood block units for self-criticism and scolding. At this point before official population limits were legislated, women workers were still discouraged from having children too soon, as it would interfere with the production process, especially since so many men were away fighting the war. One large-scale campaign that promoted this, for example, was the "Three Delays" (*ba khoan*) for women campaign: to delay falling in love, to delay getting married, and delay having children. As workers and Trade Union officials explained to me, in an integrated system of surveillance and enforcement, a woman worker's Trade Union cell would grant her a brief leave if her husband had a visiting pass from the army; the Women's Union would supply her with condoms; the management board of the *khu* would give them a private room for the few days of her husband's visit; and the Trade Union cell would check later that she was not pregnant, and if she was, give her two days leave and official permission to have an abortion.

Communal Life

State intervention extended beyond the immediate family to the relationships between families and neighbours in the new community. An example of the state language of reform of domestic and neighbourhood life can be seen in a directive from the Hanoi Communist Party from 1964 that issued guidelines for the "Five Goods" mass movement campaign. The campaign

aimed at achieving 'Five Goods for Neighbourhoods, Five Goods for Families, Five Goods for Collective Living Quarters (*Khu Tap The's*)' to enhance the public revolutionary spirit, develop a solid base among the local population, create a new lifestyle, combat against old-time bad habits, develop new personalities and lives in line with socialism and the city's characteristics as the nation's centre of politics and culture (Hanoi 1964a).

The "new lifestyle" that was to be created by this campaign listed the following criteria for the public to meet: "Going to school and meetings punctually; neat, hygienic

and orderly lifestyle at home; clean and neat clothes when outdoors; keeping public places orderly and clean.” For youth (*thanh nien*), there were additional criteria: “Having a good attitude, respecting the elderly and women, and being helpful to children.” Hygiene targets were: “Eat clean, live clean, and drink clean. In the short term, eliminate rubbish and flies, have cleanliness indoors, on the street and in all public places.” For children,

Two characteristics should be especially encouraged: honesty and courage. Education should follow Uncle Ho’s teachings. Five targets should be accomplished: Study and work hard to help the family. Good behaviour, discipline, and order (no gathering around foreign visitors and accidents on the street, etc.) Neat and clean clothes when outdoors and at school. No kidding around on the streets (no stone throwing, tree climbing, swimming in deep lakes or ponds). No bullying or taking other children’s money, no noise, no insulting and no fighting (ibid.: 1964a).

Directives like this one were disseminated and promoted through the various levels of the Party, mass organisations, and local government bodies until they reached individual workers in the factory and residents in the *khu*. In the early days, the *phuong* Women’s Union was particularly strong in the *khu* and the Trade Union, along with the Youth Union, was powerful in the factory. Women workers heard the content of such directives repeatedly on the morning and evening loudspeaker announcements, and attended meetings regularly of their units in the factory, and block cells in the *khu*, where team leaders would expound the details of the movements and encourage discussion about how the objectives could be fulfilled.

An example of how such dissemination was accomplished can be seen in a 1964 report from another *khu tap the*, near to the March Eighth *khu*. This report summarises the results of all the mass organisations and the People’s Committee’s efforts to comply with the “Building democratic, harmonious families” movement. It begins by listing the “bad habits and practices existing from the old regime,” including:

Some people had a selfish living style and did not care about their neighbourhood.

Wasteful and unplanned spending were rather widespread among women, who usually kept the family budget. Some women spent too much on eating, clothing for themselves, or spent too much at the beginning of the month and

ended up having no ration tickets and money later on. Very few people had the habit of saving food and money.

Tidiness and hygiene were not yet a habit of families.

Family relationships lacked democracy and equality, many husbands beat and scolded their wives like under feudalism, and left all the housework to the wife (Hanoi 1964b).

In response, says the report:

First, a meeting was held for women in our unit. We mobilised all women to attend the meeting, in which they were informed about the purpose and content of the movement and why it was beneficial to their lives. After discussion, in general the women agreed that it was necessary to launch the movement. However, some were still concerned about how to implement it in reality given their current constraints, for example, how to keep the house tidy in a small space... We then carried out a lot of activities, such as:

Organise seminars on 'Women and self-help, independence, and savings to build the country'; 'Friendship, love, building democratic, happy and harmonious families,' "Child education in the family," "Child psychology and physiology." Besides this we also introduced examples of revolutionary women, for example, History of Nguyen Thi Minh Khai [heroine for whom the March Eighth street is named] so as to promote patriotism and love for the new era of women.

Women cadres lead the movement by example, so they tried to keep their houses neat and clean and all had a budget and household savings book. Each cadre was in charge of assisting several women. For example, we showed Chi Hoa and Chi Thanh how to calculate the monthly incomes of the family, with constant expenditures on rice, coal, salt, fish sauce, electricity, water, house rent... then determined a certain amount of savings depending on the financial conditions of each family. What remained would be for food and was divided evenly for each day in the month. Based on this calculation, the women knew how much they could spend to buy food when going to the market everyday. This was a simple way of planning the family budget and was applied by a lot of women. Another example was helping Chi Hien and Chi Sinh formulate a work division schedule for the family, in which each member (father, mother, children) would be responsible for some housework, the whole family would review the work completed by each member after dinner and set the schedule for the next day... We also guided Chi Hanh and Chi Lan how to prepare nutrition rich food for babies in the most economical manner (ibid.).

Carrying on in this vein, the report details the other household management skills that have been promoted by the Women's Union cadre. It also addresses the problem of family harmony.

We paid much attention to the conciliation of family disagreements. For example, Chi Sinh's husband often beat his children; Thanh's was a bad budget planner while her husband was very mean, they often quarrelled and wanted to divorce; Chi Loan demanded too much money from her husband for an expensive dress and did not behave properly towards her mother-in-law... In such cases, we came to talk to family members, found out their problems, gave them advice and helped them solve disagreements (ibid.).

By the time I read this report, I had spent enough time in the *khu* to recognise this image of a little delegation from the *phuong* Women's Union visiting Chi Loan to scold her for demanding too much money from her husband for an expensive dress. It is like other delegations that I observed to persuade women to use birth control and not divorce their husbands, as I will describe later. It is also like stories that March Eighth workers and cadre told me of the past as part of their descriptions of the mechanics of socialist education. It is this intersection of what in the pre-revolutionary village *que* would be possibly malicious neighbourhood gossip with what in the *khu* becomes the object of state policy that informs the kind of collective political values that the state aimed to create. What to the recipients of these visits may have seemed like state intervention, was embraced as cooperation by the most politically engaged members of the community.

I came across another mid-60's reference to the heroic role of informer in another wall poem by Bac Nhu, about a workman in the engine section, who is sitting in the steam furnace area while drinking a cup of milk on the night shift. The workman had stolen the cup from the communal kitchens. Nhu told me this poem when I asked her if she had written any about working in the factory:

I am a glass cup.
My body is pure, clean, beautiful like a virgin girl.
My hometown is in Nghe An, far away.
I came here to make friends with the factory.
Working three shifts is a hard life but I share it
Serving night and day as production doesn't stop.
I pity you because you work hard day and night
I, the cup, am clean and pure and full of fresh milk,
You, young Ly from the steam room, deserve to be laughed at.
Seeing me, you acted completely uninterested,
But after drinking, you took me
And put me immediately in your pocket and slowly walked out.

At night you brought me to your house in Mai Dong.
Lucky that old Mr Su, a neighbour, immediately realised,
And brought me back to the kitchen
To continue my enthusiastic and continuous mission.
I advise you, Ly, you should contribute, like me,
Make sacrifices without hesitation.
Why did you take me?
Here people felt the shortage without me.
Keep me here to serve everyone in common
Building and strengthening the system every day, better and better.

By involving the mass organisations and neighbourhood associations with the mission of surveillance and enforcement of state policy, the Communist Party hoped to integrate expectations of good behaviour in the *khu tap the*'s into all levels of social interaction. Neighbours were friends and intimates, but they were also informers and enforcers. They could and did report family details to local officials, or repeated them themselves in cell block or work unit meetings. Married couples having sexual problems, husbands having affairs, children misbehaving, could all be discussed in public meetings and receive official and unofficial visits from cadre and neighbours.

Revolutionary Religious and Ritual Practice

As recent anthropological investigations in northern Vietnam have documented, the socialist state after independence also attempted to reform and regulate all forms of ritual and religious activity, as part of the socialist project to establish a new social order constituted by new socialist people. According to this political taxonomy of religious practice, behaviour classed as superstitious (*me tin di doan* or *me tin*) was banned outright. This included any attempts to challenge scientific causality by reference to a spiritual realm, such as calling on ghosts or the spirits of ancestors (*goi ma* or *goi hon*), fortune telling, or establishing the auspiciousness of certain dates. Traditional forms of astrology, based on the lunar calendar, were discouraged by the aggressive promotion of the solar calendar, which was associated with a socialist scientism that could counter backward (*lac hau*) and unscientific beliefs. As mentioned above, other rituals, such as weddings and funerals, were reformed to eliminate feudal, inegalitarian, and wasteful elements, such as symbols of extreme gender differentiation or ritual feasting (Malarney 1993, 1996a, 2001a).

The government and the Party established control over the structures of the country's main organised religions, Buddhism (nominally the majority religion) and Catholicism (estimated at 10-15% of the population, concentrated in the South and some centres remaining in the North), and attempted to extend some control over the Protestant churches in mainly ethnic minority areas. The state established the Vietnam Buddhist Church (VBC) as the official national Buddhist body, and after reunification in 1975 incorporated the southern Buddhist church into the VBC. The government also subsumed the Catholic hierarchy within state power, limiting the size of seminaries and congregations, politically vetting clergy applicants and attempting to replace Vatican authority with national autonomy, particularly in the appointment of church leaders. One southern Catholic group has also been outlawed, the Roman Catholic Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix (CMC). Members of the southern dissident United Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) and Catholic, especially CMC, leaders and their followers have served long jail sentences on various charges of subversion and treason. Ethnic minority Protestants were also the target of state harassment and suppression. Various spirit cults, many of them characterised by possession rituals and ecstatic performance, which had flourished across the Red River delta and throughout the poor rural provinces of the North, were smothered into quiescence or practised furtively (cf. Norton 2000a). Village communal houses (*dinh*), where the village deity was honoured, were destroyed or desecrated. Also subject to violently coercive state control were messianic movements and the millenarian evangelism of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects (in the south). As I describe below, the religious control exercised and adopted in the *khu* was not nearly so violent or coercive, but took place concurrently. Although I suggest throughout this thesis that the women in the *khu* cooperated enthusiastically with some aspects of revolutionary state policy, including some elements of religious reform, I hope that my analysis does not eclipse the circumstances elsewhere in which people faced starker choices and less possibility for negotiation. Rather, the enforcement of state power was experienced along a continuum, and the relative peacefulness with which women in the *khu* experienced control over their religious and ritual practice was at some level informed by the relative violence by which others experienced it.

As detailed by Malarney (1993, 1996a, 2001a) and others (cf. Luong 1992, 1993; Kleinen 1999; Norton 2000a), religious reform was unevenly enforced across the country, and ranged from the kind of brutal suppression on the margins as outlined

above, to public education and political campaigns for the masses. According to Malarney, “The Party insightfully realised that many of the inequalities of the colonial social order were publicly rendered and reproduced in rituals and feasts. Revolutionary ritual reform aimed at completely eliminating public rituals...while simultaneously purging specific inegalitarian elements of domestic rituals such as weddings and funerals” (Malarney 1993: 280). Large scale village festivals (*le hoi*) were to be eliminated while weddings and funerals were simplified and refashioned. The Party’s educational attempt to persuade people of the righteousness of religious reform included parables about shamans and faith healers who confessed to greed, fraud and fakery; political meetings that explained Party directives on the new models of ritual; and emulation campaigns against superstitious practices. Through persuasion and reason, the Party hoped to produce the new socialist person, freed of backward, feudal faith in the spiritual world (*the gioi khac*, the “other world”), and embracing the progressive egalitarianism that this freedom granted them.

As with the other aspects of developing New Family Culture in the March Eighth factory and its *khu*, the religious reform movement was extensively promoted and enforced in the process of dissemination of political campaigns, in which the March Eighth workers were informed of state policy in Trade Union, Women’s Union, residential cell block and work cell meetings. However, several areas of confusion arose surrounding the policy on religion, one of which centred around the wall altar (*ban tho*), a family shrine to the ancestors traditionally hung in a Vietnamese house and representing the most common and quotidian expression of ancestor worship and patriliney. There are three kinds of wall altars that people may have in their houses; the most common is *ban tho (than) tho cong*, a general domestic gods altar. Usually only in the house of the oldest son, or whoever plays that ritual role (the husband of oldest daughter if there are no sons in family, for example), is the *ban tho to tien*, specifically to the ancestors of that patrilineage. In special cases, such as an unhappy spirit haunting a house, one may put up an altar for that person, such as *ban tho cau* (for an uncle) or *ban tho co* (for an aunt). On the altar, which usually looks like a small table or ledge hanging from the wall, may be placed photographs of the dead, candles, flowers, and offerings of fruit or incense. Offerings are usually placed on the first and fifteenth day of each lunar month, with Tet (New Year, the first day of the first month) being the most important day in the lunar calendar to make offerings and remember the ancestors.

In official revolutionary Party policy, the wall altar was not superstitious in and of itself. According to Malarney, "...paying respects to the deceased in simple family ancestral rites and the public veneration of the war dead were allowed to remain. These rites were construed as the respectful and affective commemoration of those who had come before and given much. They were not devoted to contacting or manipulating the soul in order to produce tangible results for the living" (Malarney 1996a: 544). Women in the factory and the *khu* were told that they could pray to the ancestors, essentially to thank them for paving the way towards the glorious socialist future, but could not beseech their help, which would betray a superstitious belief in the power of the dead to influence the living.

According to my informants, this distinction was difficult for them to make. They identified the secularising trend in state intervention in previously private rituals, such as weddings and funerals, and they said that they understood that superstition was bad (*me tin khong tot*). Although they were told repeatedly that "religion" (*ton giao*) was acceptable, and even that freedom of religion was guaranteed in the Vietnamese constitution⁴, they interpreted "religion" as the highest and most formal kind of devotion and practice, not usually related to their own experiences. Very few women in the *khu* will now describe themselves, or their family, as having ever been "religious" in this sense of the word (the exceptions being Catholics and the occasional child of deeply Buddhist parents). What they identify with is often translated as "popular religion" (*tin nguong dan gian*) or "custom" (*phong tục*). This admixture included ancestor worship and various elements of what they call Daoism (*dao lao*), as well as fortune-telling and astrology and the whole range of beliefs and practices that were publicly condemned as superstitious and backward in Party propaganda. As a result, when the young workers first moved to the factory and started work on its construction, most of them refrained from placing wall altars in their temporary housing, even those who were not moved into the *khu* apartment blocks for several years. Once moved into their permanent flats, however, most families placed altars, and in the flats that were shared by more than one family, each family had their own.

⁴ The Vietnamese government repeatedly makes this point to human rights organisations and the international community in defense of documented violations of international conventions on religious freedom. Suppression of religious freedom in Vietnam is a recurring topic on the international human rights agenda (cf. Amnesty International 1999; Human Rights Watch 1995: 11-13).

During the American War and the years before *doi moi*, both of the Buddhist pagodas (*chua*) near to the *khu*, Chua Quynh and Chua Phuc Khanh (usually called by its local name of Mo Tau, or Mo), were closed to public worshippers. The desacralising of public spaces of worship was another key element of socialist policy on religion⁵. (Malarney 1993: 289) Chua Quynh is on the edge of the *khu*, and just a few hundred metres behind the last row of large apartment blocks, although it is technically across the *phuong* Quynh Mai border in the neighbouring *phuong* Quynh Loi. I believe that the boundaries of the *khu* were established precisely in order to exclude existing sacred space from the extremely politicised, secular space of the worker's community. This geographical point was made to me in official meetings in the *phuong* headquarters, and included in all of the many official introductions I received when beginning my fieldwork in the *khu*, which consisted of proud statistical recitations such as "*Phuong* Quynh Mai has 18,000 residents, strict adherence to family planning and the two-child policy by all residents, fifty four registered heroin addicts, two prostitutes, no pagoda" (from an interview in the *phuong* People's Committee offices with the Deputy President of the People's Committee).

Before the war against the French, Chua Quynh had been a large and well-known pagoda, with a much venerated head monk who died in 1925. His replacement, now quite feeble, was still head monk at the time of my fieldwork. During the war, this head monk had been moved away to a different pagoda but Chua Quynh had maintained young monks and a handful of nuns who attended them, without adherents. Although many pagodas in the North were ransacked or destroyed during the land reform and collectivisation campaigns in the countryside, the Chua Quynh building suffered no physical damage, probably due to its officially recognised status as a historical site (*di tích lịch sử*), which is proclaimed on a plaque on the main gate. These plaques appear at various sites around Vietnam, especially places with a religious association. Malarney notes one pagoda in his fieldsite that was also protected due to similar *di tích lịch sử* status (Malarney 1993: 296).

Chua Mo is a little further than Chua Quynh, across the canal bridge from the *khu* and down the road towards the factory itself, a few minutes walk from the main *khu*

⁵ In the countryside, this policy focused especially on the *dinh*, sacred village communal houses that in the past were the ritual centre of male village hierarchy and power. There were no *dinh*'s in *phuong* Quynh Mai or the *khu tap the*.

buildings. The pagoda's architecture is described by its monk as "Southern" or "Saigon" style, with a striking carved wooden façade and roof. It was completely emptied of religious personnel in the early days of socialism and remained so until the late 1980's. According to Chua Mo's junior monk, "The government policy until that time was not to develop Buddhism. There was lots of disagreement about religion and so there was nothing here until then." The main pagoda building itself had been damaged in the war against the French and the Buddha statue was removed and stored in the *dinh* down the street. During the period of high socialism, the pagoda was used first as a kindergarten and later, as the cooperative movement expanded, as a rice storage warehouse for a nearby cooperative. This was not an uncommon fate for pagodas in the North, in a deliberate administrative attempt to convert non-productive ritual space into practical secular space.

As Malarney documents, however, some of the new state policy on religion had elements that were more enthusiastically received. One state-led change in ritual practice that apparently received widespread support in the *khu* was in the performance of weddings, of which there were many in the early days of the factory. I have already mentioned how moving to Hanoi from the *que*, along with state policy on women's liberation and independence, gave young women workers more freedom in choosing husbands than most women in the countryside.

Many women describe their weddings at that time as free from the interference of family pressures. "The agenda to reform marriage and the marriage ceremony in revolutionary Vietnam was predicated on an attempt to diminish the role of the family in arranging and conducting the marriage ceremony while simultaneously strengthening the role of the bride and groom in the ceremony...The feudal marriage system was considered to be arbitrary and authoritarian in that the desires of children were subjugated to the designs of their parents, and the desires and aspirations of women were suppressed by the will of men" (Malarney 1993: 309-317). In the *khu*, the mass organisations and cell blocks took responsibility for organising weddings according to the new guidelines, which called for simplicity and modesty. "Even when you got married, you didn't worship," I was told by Bac Chanh, a fifty-seven year old *phuong* Women's Union official, describing her own wedding in 1964. The betrothal ceremony (*an hoi*), which traditionally had involved elaborate prestations from the groom's family to the bride's, was either reduced considerably, to giving a little betel nut and areca, or

some cigarettes, or in some cases eliminated altogether. Brides in the *khu* did not wear traditional dress (*ao dai*), and usually did not change from their everyday clothes at all. Bac Thuy, one of the original workers mentioned above, was married in 1964. She said:

Here we didn't hold a feast, people just came down to the collective dining hall and carried out the wedding. The betrothal had no betel-box carrying like now [and in the past]. There was nothing between the families, only coming to discuss the time of the wedding. They only brought cigarettes and betel nuts and called that a betrothal (*an hoi*). The wedding was simple (*don gian*). The marriage was registered in the factory, we just went to the administrative department of the factory to get a certificate.

Productivity and Production in the Factory

With political activity as a priority, productivity in the factory was only one concern of management. During the period of high socialism, around 80% of the factory's output was consumed domestically, much of it by the army, with the rest used in trade with Vietnam's communist allies. The factory machinery was relatively new and still serviced by the Chinese experts. Some cadre and workers, such as Tam quoted above, were sent to Nam Dinh for skills training, or to southern China. Hanh, for example, who works in the power section, was sent to China in 1967 when she was sixteen years old to study machine repair for eight months and then came to work in the factory in 1968; her father was the president of her rural commune and she became a Party member at March Eighth.

A wave of newly trained workers were encouraged by the socialist mobilisations to contribute their ideas for boosting production, submitting opinions (*y kien*) and initiatives (*sang kien*). National socialist competition movements, like the movement "Build Three Things, Fight Three Things", were pursued in the factory by many of the workers. March Eighth workers designed some small innovations in production that garnered them national labour awards. The factory won a Third Order of Production, a high ranking among factories, and a First Order of Emulation for overfulfilling its production targets. As Woodside (1976) points out in his comparison of Vietnamese with Chinese communism, the Vietnamese revolutionary state conflated political and productive accomplishments, such as in the campaign "Red and Expert". In Mao's

China, the tension between “redness” and “expertness” was played out in the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and the rejection of many forms of education and intellectual labour in favour of revolutionary manual labour and political education only. Gittings (1999: 37) gives the example of how industrial images in poster campaigns showed workers studying Mao’s philosophy or copying slogans, rather than actually working; it was considered reactionary to suggest that any education beyond Mao’s Thought was needed to increase production. In Vietnam, by contrast, expertise was valued for its contribution to the production effort. In the March Eighth factory, the “Red and Expert” campaign encouraged the promotion of Party members to technical skills training courses and higher level production jobs, but even in these early days, non-Party members with sufficient technical skills or aptitude could be promoted. Campaigns were intended to promote productivity, to address the problem of socialism identified by Chayanov: “ ‘By what means is the individual worker to be driven to labour so that he does not consider as drudgery the input expected of him under the production plan and really carries it out in practice?’ ” (quoted in Evans 1990: 14).

Training was once seen as an unparalleled opportunity for advancement into and within the factory. All workers entering the factory in the early days trained from six months up to two years in their production section. In the early days, this included political education as well as basic skills training. Workers were expected to be familiar with the work of more than their own section and were intended to be transferable between sections. This training period was lower-paid than normal salary, but included the same subsidies and benefits as regular work.

This attitude towards training in the early days established a system that was still in use during my fieldwork but its functioning now illustrates starkly the gulf between the present and the early experiences of workers in the factory. Whereas previously trainees were granted full work benefits and the security of lifetime employment, they are now used as cheap labour without long term guarantee of further employment.

In the late eighties, in order to cut down the swollen labour rolls, the factory encouraged older workers to resign with full pensions and land use rights of their *khu* apartments. Their children, who had until then been encouraged to look forward to jobs in the factory, were no longer offered jobs when they came of age. After this period of retrenchment that cut several thousand jobs in the factory, new hiring standards were established that resemble those of international capital. Rather than offer the lifetime

employment that March Eighth workers once took for granted, the factory now hires young workers on one-year contracts. Using the pre-existing training system, the factory demands that new workers train for six months to a year without pay, while using them in production alongside paid workers as part of their “training”. In the sewing section, the “trainees” are responsible for sewing all of the factory uniforms, which the factory then distributes to workers. One study of the Vietnamese textile and garment sector points out the irony of these long training periods in state owned enterprises, since women are chosen for these jobs precisely because they are believed to have a natural aptitude and dexterity for this kind of work⁶ (Tran 1999: 148).

These temporary workers at March Eighth now experience what Walder described in the equivalent post-reform period in China. Walder gave this description of the disadvantages for temporary labour: “Job tenure is insecure, and full state insurance and other benefits of state employment are largely denied. Only a minority of temporary workers have been able to attain permanent status in cities. Pensions are usually unavailable...Accident insurance, hospitalisation, and paid sick leave coverage varies widely and appears to be available in some form to most temporaries [but] the extent of coverage is not always the same as that of permanent workers. Temporaries usually enjoy the use of the enterprise meal hall and medical clinic while they are employed but are not allowed to take advantage of enterprise apartments, nurseries, and daycare centres” (Walder 1986: 54). As Woo also writes of workers in southern China: “As temporary or contract workers, these women are not accorded many of the benefits normally guaranteed by state enterprises, and their employers often ignore central guidelines on sex discrimination and labour protection of women workers” (Woo 1994: 288).

Without full-time employment, the March Eighth temporary workers, if they have come in from the countryside, cannot be granted permanent Hanoi residence

⁶ Ong (1990), among others, analyses this assumption in detail. The most surprising version I have heard of it personally came from Jill Ker Conway, a well-known feminist historian and former president of Smith, a prestigious American women’s college. Conway served on the board of the Nike Corporation and came to visit Vietnam during the controversy about unfair labour practices in Nike subcontracting factories there. Meeting with NGOs and researchers in Hanoi, Conway expressed her personal concern, “as a feminist”, for the plight of the young women Nike factory workers, whom she described as the most vulnerable group in society. When I asked why then Nike continued to target this group for employment, she answered “You have to hire women for these jobs. They’ve got those nimble fingers. Men can’t even operate those machines.” When I responded that many studies had suggested that women’s superior aptitude for apparel production is a myth, and one perpetuated by gender bias, Conway nodded at me dismissively and said, “Well, don’t believe everything you read.”

permission (*ho khau*). They are given temporary residence registration for the duration of their contracts, renewable year to year. This temporary registration is non-transferrable, so they cannot marry men from their home villages and bring them to Hanoi legally. On the other hand, they are unlikely to meet Hanoi men on their own and are not very marketable in the urban marriage economy. Additionally, they are not allocated *khu* housing, and so have to spend part of their small salaries to rent rooms in local houses, usually sharing with three or four other workers. These young women workers are usually from the countryside because factory managers discovered that Hanoi women were less willing to do factory labour. Quy, the shift boss from the spinning section, told me: “The factory now only wants to hire girls from the countryside. The girls from the city don’t like it and don’t work hard, and often quit in the first year. Those country girls are used to hard work and don’t complain.”

These temporary workers during the time of my fieldwork were bitter about their diminished status by comparison to the full-time workers and felt that their situation was unfair. They resented the circumstances that made it very difficult for them to meet men and get married, which was their stated priority in life, and their inadequate salaries prevented them from enjoying many of the city pleasures they saw around them: shopping, cruising, eating treats. Still, none of them I knew wanted to move back to their village. Unlike Ong, who writes of the “trauma of industrial labour for village women” (Ong 1987: 7), if I were making an E.P. Thompson-style (1991 [1967]) work discipline assessment of their attitude towards labour I would concur with such recent ethnographic work as Parry (1999) that suggests that what industrial workers experience, particularly in state owned enterprise is no more intensive, or even less so, than their pre-industrial experience. Or, as Wolf writes: “[Factory] literature often errs in making the argument that factory work is worse and marginalising for women in comparison with the past...the pre-industrial work life of women was also hard and regulated by time discipline” (Wolf 1992: 134-5). Since the factory’s early days until now, women workers at March Eighth who grew up in peasant families say they always found factory work less onerous than farm labour.

“The rain of bombs and the typhoons of bullets”: The American War on the Homefront

The biggest problem with factory production during the early days of the factory was the wave of American bombing campaigns in the North. As a producer of industrial

goods, particularly military uniforms, the factory was a target although not a high priority one. Once, very early on in my fieldwork, I was cutting across the yard from one section building to another with Chi Thanh, the shift boss in the thread spinning section whom I described in the Preface. She pointed to me where the new spinning section office was being constructed behind the main building. "There, that was where an American bomb fell. There was a big hole before now." Not yet knowing much of the factory's history, nor frankly much of the War's, I was startled. What I knew of destruction in Hanoi was the "Christmas bombing" of 1972, which sparked outrage in the U.S., and famous photos of the bombed Bach Mai hospital. I exclaimed, naively, "Bombed the factory? Why? Was it a mistake?" In one of the few times that direct reference was made to my being American, Chi Thanh laughed and said "No mistake. You bombed us many times."

Besides living with the uncertainty and danger of intermittent bombing, the workers also twice experienced the total disruption of evacuation because of concerted attacks, in 1965 not long after the factory was officially opened, and 1972, during the Christmas bombing. When evacuated, the various production sections were dispersed to five different outlying areas of Hanoi, from where, in a prodigious feat of organisation, coordinated production continued to function somewhat, with thread rushed across town from one site to the weaving machines in another site. The factory history describes the first evacuation in 1965:

The whole country became a battlefield, and fighting against the America aggressors to save the country became the sacred task of each patriot. The Ministry of Light Industry instructed the March Eighth factory to evacuate some sections of workers and equipment to some places around Hanoi with the task to ensure continuous production in any situation, to meet the needs of the market and the battlefield, and protect production with a victorious result...With hands and primitive and mechanical transportation means, the cadre and workers moved more than 3000 tonnes of machinery and equipment to new places from 10 to 50 kilometres far from the factory and transported more than 2000 tonnes of raw materials to secure areas hundreds of kilometres from the factory and transported 2730 workers with 966 small children to the new production settings...The cadre and workers of the factory defined three targets to be reached: "To strengthen production; to protect production; to fight and serve the battle and organise life well." (*Day manh san xuat; bao ve san xuat; chien dau, phuc vu chien dau va to chuc tot doi song*)...In the years of the rain of bombs and the typhoons of bullets, the March Eighth factory on the production front still achieved many distinguished achievements (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 33).

Children were evacuated to the countryside, to stay with their grandparents in the countryside or in public childcare centres that were set up in the suburbs. Some women did not see their children for weeks on end. Mothers whose *que* was close enough to reach in a day's bicycle ride waited eagerly for a two day holiday, so they could ride all day to visit their children for an evening and ride back the next day.

Self-defence brigades were organised in the factory, made up almost entirely of women workers. They trained with carbines (*sung truong*), heavy machine guns (*sung dai lien*), and automatic rifles (*trung lien*). They were trained to shoot in front of aeroplanes. They helped to build trenches and bomb shelters and organise air raid alarms. During air raids they stayed above ground, some deploying on roofs of the factory buildings to try to shoot down American planes. They helped to put out fires started by the bombing, clear rubble and excavate collapsed buildings and shelters, and organise ambulances to take the wounded to hospital. The Youth Union was particularly active in self-defence work and Youth Union members tended to volunteer for the hardest tasks.

The greatest ambition of women in the self-defence brigades was to shoot down an American plane and capture a pilot. They were inspired by the example of the famous Nguyen Thi Kim Lai, a peasant woman and head of a militia unit, who was photographed leading a captured American pilot at gunpoint. Kim Lai was an emulation heroine and model fighter⁷. Thu, for example, who served in the self-defence brigade, told me: "I wanted to have a pilot." According to the factory history, a woman in the self-defence brigade, Luu Thi Xuan, "contributed" (*gop*) to shooting down an American "jet plane" (*phan luc My*) (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 36). The self-defence brigade team on duty successfully shot down and recovered a plane in August 1968, but it was a pilotless reconnaissance drone. Although none of the workers I interviewed were on duty when the plane was shot down, they knew the story and described how

⁷ The photograph of the seventeen-year-old Nguyen Thi Kim Lai with her captive pilot, Captain William Robinson, is discussed by both Turner (1998: 6; 175) and Taylor (1999: 109-110) and also reproduced in a collection of North Vietnamese war photography (Niven 2002: 50), shown as it appeared in a Vietnamese magazine and on a 1967 stamp, above the slogan "2000 American aeroplanes shot down already in the North" (*2000 may bay my bi ban roi tren mien bac*).

disappointed the brigade was to find no pilot. Thu told me: “*Khong nguoi lai!* (No person driving!)”⁸

One campaign urging workers to join the self-defence forces and to think of their own work as part of the battle had the slogan: “Be firm with the shuttle [on the loom], be firm with the gun, ready for battle” (*vung tay thoi; chac tay sung; san sang chien dau*), echoing the national campaign for all industrial workers: “One hand on the hammer, one hand on the gun.” Women in particular were to support the war effort through the Women’s Union’s “Three Duties” campaign, which encouraged them to: replace men in productive work so that husbands and sons could fight; care for their children and raise them as revolutionaries; and protect their homes from invasion or bombing (cf. Luong 1992: 202; Gammeltoft 2001: 272). Most of the male workers in the factory had joined the army and left the factory by 1967. A group of one hundred women workers from the factory were organised into the “8/3 Company” and volunteered to go south, where most of them were killed (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 33; Turner 1998: 8). With many of the more highly trained men gone, more women were promoted to management positions within the factory.

The factory and the *khu* were hit several times, badly in 1967 and 1972. Son, a male engineer who worked in the machine repair section, described this period in 1967:

We had to evacuate the machines from the factory, to three or four places. We workers took them apart and re-assembled them. The big machines had to be taken apart and loaded into trucks. What couldn’t be taken apart was hidden, to save it from the bombs. But more than ten of the big weaving machines were destroyed by bombs and set on fire. We had to rush to extinguish the fire. When normal times came, we brought the machines back and re-assembled them here.

The big *khu* blocks were also seen by workers as potentially attractive targets and dangerous to stay in, in case of collapse. Building A1 was bombed and partially destroyed, with five people killed. After that, workers who had already been moved into the *khu* blocks from the temporary housing in some cases decided the bamboo huts were safer. Bac Hai, for example, told me: “My family stayed in a house with a bamboo roof because in the big house we were afraid of bombs.” Later, in 1972, Building A5 was

⁸ This expression was also used as a joke during the war-time shortages for a dish without meat, for example, *pho khong nguoi lai*, noodle soup with no man in it.

bombed and completely destroyed, with nine people killed and scores wounded. A few days later, the factory was hit. The factory history gives this account:

At 1:07 p.m., December 28, many groups of American F4 bombers and F111s continuously conducted four waves of bombings, about 100 bombs fell onto the factory area and seriously damaged the weaving, thread, and power generating sections and the dining hall, the raw materials warehouse, the finished products warehouse, and the auto garage, and destroyed entirely the ventilation system so that the toxic air leaked out.

Putting their hate into their guns, the self-defence forces from the battlefield bravely fired in coordination with the artillery forces to keep away the aircraft of the aggressors from the sky. Immediately after the bombing stopped, the self-defence and firefighting and excavation forces entered the smoke and fire to rescue the raw materials and the machinery... In the afternoon and evening of December 28, hundreds of cadre and workers of the factory returned from the evacuation sites and went back to the factory to take part in repairing the machinery and equipment. By 4:00 am on December 29, the fire was put out, many machines and equipment had been dug out of the collapsed building. By December 31, more than 200 textile machines were restored and continued production. In the destruction and with chaos, stones, bricks, steel, metal, one could hear the noisy sound of the machines and the shuttles, and it gave the signal of the wonderful vitality of the workers of the factory (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 40).

Although a recent history of women's participation in the American War by Turner (1998) states that women's contribution to the war is never recognised or discussed in North Vietnam, in fact women workers were happy to tell me about their war experiences and expressed their pride in their contribution to "waging war on the home front" and helping to defend the factory. The American War was popularly supported in the North and despite the hardships imposed by shortages, evacuations, fear and loss, women workers were inspired both by patriotism and revolutionary spirit⁹. Tam told me, "I tell my children the story of the past so they know what kind of mother they have who could endure like that."

Men in the *khu* also cite women's strength and endurance as a fundamental element in the success of the war and an admirable part of the factory's history. One sixty-three year old man, Ong Minh, a retired teacher whose wife had worked in the

⁹ Cf. Kleinen for another account that challenges the perception of the war as a time only of misery. Of the northern village he studied, he writes: "The years of collectivisation that coincided with the early phase of the war is still remembered by many villages as relatively secure and happy. Social security was ensured for most people, while solidarity was given to outsiders who took shelter in the village during American bombing campaigns" (Kleinen 1999: 131).

spinning section since the factory's founding, told me about the days during the war when both of their sons were evacuated to the countryside, one to the paternal grandparents and one to the maternal, while Minh was evacuated to Ha Bac province and his wife was still at the factory. Minh's wife's *que* was more than one hundred kilometres from Hanoi and she would bicycle back and forth sometimes at night to see her son and bring sugar and rice from her rations to her parents. Minh complained about the burden of political education his wife laboured under but praised her accomplishments:

She was the highest rank in the "Best Worker" competition awards throughout her work life. At that time I didn't understand why the system of studying was so awful. In one day in the factory she worked shifts, then began studying, studying politics, studying military training. When I had leave and came back here I felt my wife studied an awful amount. I felt the strength of women is great. Even on Tet she had to work in the factory. I don't know how she had the strength. Even now I can't explain it.

Another time, talking about the war, Ong Minh also told me, making an oblique reference to my nationality:

Women suffer more than us men, especially in our country, where there are mothers who had to become the mothers of martyrs. It is very hard for them. If you compare Vietnamese women with American women, you see that Vietnamese women suffer 10,000 times more than American women.

Conclusion: Nostalgia

Ong Minh's account of war-time endeavours highlights one of the themes that is common to the unified account of the revolutionary past: enthusiastic achievement in the face of adversity for the sake of the greater good. His observations of the impact of such commitment on the individual and the family is echoed in Hershatter's (2000) study of Chinese women labour models. Hershatter notes that women who were active in campaigns and organising suffered domestic difficulties with unsympathetic or hostile husbands and the unhappiness of having children raised by others, in one case a mother who missed her daughter's wedding when she was out of town at a meeting. But Hershatter finds that even so, labour heroines "without apparent ambivalence" recall

campaign time as the happiest of their lives, when they pursued their labour and their campaigning with zeal, in which there were “possibilities for recognition and glory” (Hershatter 2000: 92-93).

In Walder’s 1986 study of social relations in Chinese state owned industry before economic reforms, he identified a split in the workers between what he calls the activists and the regular workers. The activists are those who are not yet Party members but ally themselves with the Party and actively promote Party campaigns, while the regular workers, who the activists call “the peasants,” resent the toadying and special status of the activists. In the relationship between the activists, Party members, and factory management, Walder finds the “organised dependence” that fosters what he calls a neo-traditional authority in state-owned factories. According to Walder, social relations in these centres of communist ideological production are a modern mirror of pre-socialist feudal countryside relations, with clients, patrons, and a web of obligation that maintains order and productivity (Walder 1986: 166-74). Although I found some similarities between Walder’s factory workers and the March Eighth ones, Walder’s work is inevitably shaped by the position of his informants, former workers who had left the mainland for Hongkong, essentially escapees from the factory system. One can hear in the voices of Walder’s informants the grumbling of those who were disenfranchised in the cliques and factions that prevailed in factories. My informants were the opposite, for the most part. Many of them were activists and Party members. They were women who had been successful in their involvement in the factory and viewed its patronage, at least in the past, as a positive virtue. As I hope I have shown in this chapter, through their engagement and participation in socialist campaigns and mobilisations, their pursuit of labour awards and wartime glory, their exploration of new roles for women in marriage and work, these March Eighth factory women felt themselves to enact and express political power through exemplary action.

This involvement in the political life of the factory and the *khu* reflected the socialist state’s aspirations to achieve what Malarney (1996a) has called “state functionalism” in Vietnam. As Malarney describes it in relation to attempts to reform ritual and religious practice, the Vietnamese socialist state tried to remake society by remaking people, to achieve new political forms through new kinds of actions. Evans (1990), in his work on the revolutionary state in Laos, points to the problem of this moral imperative in the socialist context. He quotes a Laos prime minister’s speech

explaining that socialism must create “a new socialist man” and lamenting that that “we are building socialism with the participation of men left by history” (Evans 1990: 1). In the following chapters, I will suggest that the Party’s attempts have failed to entirely reform domestic and personal behaviour. In Chapter Four, for example, on the promotion of heroic historical narrative, I will show how stories in the *khu* about Ho Chi Minh and virtuous behaviour may illustrate Malarney’s analysis of the limits of state functionalism.

The *khu* and the factory represented an attempt to build socialism by remaking their workers through surveillance, propaganda, architecture, and social pressure into new socialist women with New Family Culture and a new spirit of communalism and collectivity. For the workers I knew, in one version of their own stories, in their imagined history of their own socialist participation, this project succeeded. It is only in the present that it has failed.

In the present, as I will show in more detail in the later chapters, the older women workers of March Eighth have suffered in the new areas of economic and social competition that have accompanied *doi moi*, economic opening. No amount of official discourse has managed to eradicate the pervasive sense that these women workers have of being left behind by the positive aspects of development. As they struggle to provide opportunities for their children to advance into the middle classes through educational success or entrepreneurial skills, they are torn between abandoning Party ideals that would reject such class aspirations, and rejecting the materialist values that devalue their own histories. “We were young then, and it was not like now”, as Bac Nhu told me, suggests a pervasive socialist nostalgia that airbrushes negative experiences out of the history of the March Eighth workers. This invoking of history begins to explain the ways in which these women actively represent and reproduce their role in the construction of Vietnamese socialism. In this, they are tapping into a national reservoir of memory and nostalgia, which I will discuss more in Chapter Four. As the historian Giebel notes: “In Vietnamese, ‘nho’ means ‘to remember’ but also ‘to miss’ a person. It is evidence of the extraordinary role that idealised pasts play in the construction of Vietnamese presents” (Giebel 1996: 337). In constructing their presents in the post-reform era, the March Eighth workers feel themselves to have been left behind by history, straddling the boundary between the past and the present, and so they recall an idealised version of the

time when they were central to the concerns of the state, and their actions were both moral and powerful.

CHAPTER THREE

Burned by the Fire: Divergences with State Narrative and Nostalgia in Stories of the Past

The Factory and Khu Today

Even now, with Vietnam's system of state owned enterprise crumbling in the face of market competition and trade reforms, the March Eighth Textile Company is held up as an important historical locus. For example, a magazine article from 1998 about the problems of exports in the textile sector begins: "At the end of the street which bears the name of national liberation heroine and patriot Nguyen Thi Minh Khai is the sign: March Eighth Textile Company. Is it a coincidence? The March Eighth Textile Company, established by the Vietnam Women's Union in 1960, mobilised its total capital from individual Vietnamese women around the country. To be worthy of the fine tradition of Vietnamese women heroes, with steadfastness, faithfulness and endurance, the March Eighth Textile Company contributed remarkably to the process of constructing socialism in the North, and liberation in the South in the 1960's" (*Cong Ty Det 8-3 Vuot Kho, Di Len* 1998: 18-19).

During my fieldwork, I interviewed an embassy official from a European country who was trying to arrange a low-interest loan project to provide textile equipment to the March Eighth factory, a standard kind of bilateral overseas development aid. This particular project, though, had been bogged down in bureaucratic obstacles for several years, far beyond even the usual delays in dispersing aid in Vietnam. "I've never seen a project like this," the bemused diplomat told me. "Everyone needs to approve every word of it, at every level, and everyone is terrified of getting it wrong. My contacts at the Central Bank say it's just too political, this factory."

What did it mean in the past for the women workers at March Eighth that the factory was "too political"? And what did it mean for them in the late 1990's, when I did my fieldwork? As I suggested in the previous chapter, the political history of the March Eighth factory, in its role as the vanguard of socialist development, shaped the experiences of its early workers in their work in the factory and in domestic lives in the *khu tap the*. In this chapter, I examine more closely the kinds of historical evidence I

used in the previous chapter to tell this story of the early days of the factory, and begin to consider the way that the narratives of the workers I talked to reflect their concerns with the present, and to examine the “problem” of nostalgia in the narratives I recounted in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I also consider how the women workers diverged from state aspirations in the past, and how this has changed and not changed in the ethnographic present. I consider attitudes towards religious and ritual practice, one particularly contested area of social practice that was the object of the campaigns. I conclude that workers draw nostalgically on pre-revolutionary idealised virtues of *tinham*, as well as revolutionary virtue, in criticising the present.

Problems with New Family Culture: Children, Food

In describing to me their experience in the early days of the factory, older women workers often said that they have happy memories of the excitement of initially moving to the *khu* and working in the factory. When they became wives and mothers, however, their expectations of domestic life sometimes began to diverge from the Party’s. The introduction of husbands, and by extension, families, into the dormitory style life of the *khu* is recalled in some way as a kind of Eden-like fall from grace by many women cadre and workers. A former Trade Union official in the factory, who had some responsibility for allocating housing in the early days of the community, admitted to me that the housing policy was initially muddled on the subject of husbands. Husbands in the early days of the factory could not live in the same room with their wives, since their wives were sharing rooms with other, single women. At the same time, many husbands were sent off either to fight in the war or work on the war effort elsewhere in the country, with the *khu* planners arranging temporary quarters for conjugal visits, as mentioned previously. All these marriages, and conjugal visits, soon began producing babies, and there was another stir of concern over where to put them. Factory daycare (*nha tre*) was established, and at first most babies were placed in daycare whenever the mothers worked their shifts, so that the factory *nha tre* was twenty-four hours a day, to accommodate mothers on night shifts. Then the *nha tre* began keeping the children all week, to facilitate their mothers working double shifts and attending after-work meetings and campaigns. Thus some of the now adult children of workers were brought up collectively on the factory grounds, with their mothers visiting them once a week.

This ostensibly allowed the factory also to inculcate children with socialist values from early on. This was expressed as explicit state policy, for example by the then chairwoman of the Central Committee for Mother and Infant Welfare stating “We want to mould new, socialist men and women, and we must start in the cradle” (quoted in Gammeltoft n.d.: 2).

The official history notes the importance of childcare in the factory:

The main labour forces of the factory were women. In order to allow the women to be relaxed during production, the leaders of the factory tried their best to take care of the education of children of workers. The factory organised a children’s daycare, to raise 220 small children; 3 pre-school classes, raising 140 children; and one kindergarten teaching 100 children. The teachers and baby-sitters with love for children and conscience of the educators took care of the children with all their heart so that the mothers could produce calmly (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 19).

The *nha tre* is also memorialised in one of Bac Nhu’s revolutionary poems, also recalled from memory spontaneously, during a discussion about childcare in the early days of the factory. Nhu’s sons lived in the factory daycare centre while Nhu worked at the factory and carried out her Youth Union activities:

My child has many mothers
They are the teachers of the kindergarten
Of the March Eighth Textile Company
During this last year
My child got diarrhoea
But the teacher took care
With food, with injections of medicine
Of the North, South, West and East
The teachers still took pains
Loved and took care of the child
Oh love for the teachers!
Like a gentle mother
Who helps the child’s mother
To be more diligent
To finish the task
The child’s mother can’t be ungrateful
For the teacher’s merit
So the mothers make use of every hour
To serve the production
The whole year she didn’t lose any
Sick leave for her child

That is thanks to the teachers.
The love of the teachers
Has evoked in the mother's heart
And many other mothers' hearts
The teachers are the melodies
Singing in the spring
The children are the buds on the tree
Young green of the country.
There are many hopes
Of the country's future
The children are the tomorrow
Of the whole nation's hopes.

Children of factory workers were often separated from their parents, from the first days of factory construction and socialist mobilisations, through the war. The current director of the *nha tre* in the *khu* worked in the factory *nha tre* for nine years (from 1963 to 72), during all of which time children stayed in the housing all week. "After the war they stopped that," she told me. As described in the previous chapter, other children were sent to the countryside to stay with grandparents, especially during periods of American bombing. When I asked workers about their experiences of motherhood during the war, they said they "missed" (*nho*) their children. Being away from children was always cited as one of the hardships of the early days in the factory.

Communal dining, as mentioned above, which was enforced through rations and the absence of cooking facilities in the temporary housing, was another source of dissatisfaction in the *khu*, since commensality within families is a key element in rural Vietnamese life. The specificity of food in Vietnamese notions of home and family is reflected in the vehemence with which women recall their early days of struggling to cook separately for their families. Small communal kitchens, in fact just an open space with charcoal burners, had been built at the end of each corridor of the permanent *khu* blocks, to be shared by the occupants of each of the ten one-room flats. Even these were only for the use of married women, while single women were still expected to eat in the communal dining halls. In the dining halls, communal behaviour was further encouraged by serving food to groups. One now retired worker described it to me when I asked her what she thought of the food:

The matter was not like or dislike. You **had** (*phai*) to eat in the canteen. Not a portion per person but they gave one pot of rice, or of soup, to every six persons. Every six persons made up a table. So you had to divide it up yourselves.

Nhu, who was a cook in the communal kitchens and prided herself on the tasty food she cooked, said: “In the old days you were forced to eat and drink this or that, so sometimes you had to eat what you didn’t like. There were many times that workers had to eat things that didn’t taste as good as what I made, that had to be disinfected.” She also suggested that food quality and quantity suffered because other cooks were corrupt: “Things the kitchen bought weren’t equal to the amount they charged, because people gained a little from the things they had bought.”

In the newly built *khu* buildings, the kitchen space on every floor was next to the communal bathrooms. In the first buildings, several floors, accommodating hundreds of people, were served by only one set of toilets on the ground floor. Later buildings were considerably improved by building toilets on each floor, but even these were to be shared among ten or twelve families. Complaints about responsibility for cleaning the public kitchens and toilets created and continues to create dissension between neighbours on the same floor, and the toilets figure largely in general criticisms of life in the *khu*, past and present. As Bac Nhu told me about life in the *khu* during the 1970’s:

Each building only had a public toilet on the first floor, very dirty, and in bad condition. When we went to the toilet, we had to bring two conical hats (*non*), one to put on your head to block leaks, and one to hold in front of you to cover yourself. Now it’s better, there’s one for men and one for women on each floor.

And as in many other apartments in the *khu*, in Chi Tinh’s house, on the second floor of A6 building, Chi Tinh’s family used the kitchen space at the end of the hallway but kept a bucket in her house so her family could urinate in private.

Since the construction of the *khu* buildings proceeded slowly, and was still continuing into the early 1980’s, for many years there were not enough flats for all the workers in the factory. Many families in the *khu* shared rooms with other families. Rooms that averaged twenty square metres in size accommodated up to three families, each with one sleeping platform that would house the parents and children, with their few possessions stored under the bed. Bac Chanh, a former weaving section employee

and Trade Union activist, complained to me about the cramped space in the flat in Building A4 that she shared with another family from 1966 to 1970:

The bed had to be placed high off the ground so that we could put pots and cooking things under it. At that time I tried to get pregnant again since the factory had a regulation that only a couple with three children could have a flat, even when you had two children you couldn't have one flat. That was the reason why I tried to get pregnant.

Family housing in Vietnamese villages can be quite cramped, and children often sleep with their parents until they are between seven and nine years old. Vietnamese expectations of privacy and personal space are very different from mine, for example, and there is a public aspect to many kinds of behaviour and experience, which may be participated in or discussed among almost anyone, on subjects such as child raising, the family finances, and family relationships. Many details of a family's life may be public knowledge, and as I have already suggested, the state in Vietnam, and especially in the *khu*, took an active role in trying to publicise and influence certain kinds of family activity. Despite all this state intrusion and neighbourly exchange, however, the ways that the women in the *khu* talked about their experiences of sharing rooms with other families suggested that the boundaries of family intimacy had been disrupted by enforced cohabitation with other families. Even during the height of revolutionary fervour and the massive upheavals of the war, women expressed discontent with these living arrangements. Women say they strung up curtains and tried to rig up partitions to separate the spaces of the room, and each kept a rice pot and a few utensils to feed their family separately from that of their room-mates, thus countering state aspirations for communal living. As they describe it, in order to maintain interior boundaries, women treated these "neighbours" like strangers, interacting with them as little as possible and forming closer relationships with women who lived on the same floor, but not in the same room. One aspect of treating housemates like strangers was a kind of deliberate refusal to know about them, so that women will now happily tell gossipy stories from the past about people who lived down the hall, but not about people who lived in the same room. Similarly, former neighbours often keep in touch even after they have moved buildings or even moved out of the *khu*, while no one I spoke to had ever kept in touch with a family with whom they had shared a room for several years.

Problems with New Family Culture: Gender Roles and Division of Labour

Although the equality of women was a professed value of the Vietnamese revolutionary state, this did not include a radical rethinking of a pre-existing gender division of labour in industrial production. The gender differentiation in the allocation of jobs in the factory has remained much unchanged in the years since its establishment, as has the salary differential that accompanies it. As the workers told me, textile and garment labour is seen as naturally women's work, "suitable" for women. Women have always done most of the production jobs in the factory, but men are assigned to jobs that are seen as heavy, dangerous, or highly skilled (and better paid). In the shopfloor jobs, men comprise about three per cent of the workforce, including heavy lifting and loading jobs in the packing and sewing sections and most of the jobs in the dyeing section, which managers and workers believe to be dangerously toxic. Industrial textile production in capitalist contexts often imposes the same division of labour on dyeing work, as Mills (1999) in her work on Thailand and Wolf (1992) in Indonesia have described. Men also run the power plant sections and most of the engineers in each section are men. At the time of my fieldwork, while worker salaries for women averaged 450,000 VND a month (about \$30), men averaged 600,000 (about \$45).

In management, many of the lower level jobs are held by women, at the level of shift boss and production leader, jobs that retain a direct production component. Of the white collar jobs, though, including section heads and their deputies and the vast management structure that is housed in its own nearby building, the majority are held by men. The very top of the pyramid, the General Director of the factory, has traditionally been a woman, with four male deputies, but during the time of my research the current director was replaced by a younger male director, recruited from the Nam Dinh factory. The historical inequality in the allocation of management jobs to men is usually attributed to a pre-socialist gender inequality of educational access, although now after forty years of successfully egalitarian socialist educational policy this is an unconvincing argument. The persistence of this inequality is more a reflection of access to political patronage, which is still clearly dominated by men.

In the last chapter, I showed how there is interestingly contradictory evidence in the stories that workers tell of the recruitment policies, inconsistent with socialist policy

that recruitment, like all political action, be impersonal and egalitarian. These examples suggest that, to get a job at the factory, women had to have political connections or accomplishments, or had to be disposable because they were girls. As I recounted, Thuy had a cousin working in the central government, and Tam says recruitment wasn't done "in a natural way" and that "they didn't recruit the workers by chance". Even more contradictory is Tinh's story of her father saying he had "enough girls" (*du con gai*) and convincing the local officials to send Tinh to war, and eventually to factory work, instead of her brother. The agreement of commune officials to send girls instead of boys for public recruitment contradicted state efforts to eliminate gender hierarchies and eradicate traditional son preference (*tu tuong trong nam coi nhe nu*). These contradictions persist throughout the history of the March Eighth factory in the official and unofficial views of the roles and importance of women workers, including persistent gender division of labour in the factory and the household, as I will consider in later chapters.

Problems with Reform: Superstition and Religion

One large area of anxiety and tension with state policy in the past was the restrictions on ritual and religion. As I describe in more detail in Chapter Six, people in the *khu* seemed for the most part quite comfortable in talking about their religious and customary practices now, and were eager to accompany me to the local pagodas, teach me how to pray and light incense, and take me to visit their favourite fortune-tellers. On the annual Women's Union excursion, paid for by public contributions, I accompanied Women's Union officials and active members on a day-long tour of several well-known Buddhist pagodas in the countryside. A bus was rented for the occasion and it was a merry outing. Most of the women prayed at each pagoda, and some of them took particular interest in whether I was praying, as well, encouraging me to do so at each statue.

In talking about religion, spirits, and superstition in the past, however, my informants' manner was sometimes quite different. The discussion of this issue is one of the most sensitive that I dealt with during my fieldwork, and most of the historical description I have from the period of high socialism that I describe in the previous chapter is bashful, halting, and highly suggestive. When I describe the rise of religious

and ritual activity in the present, in Chapter Six, I show how people talk quite freely about spiritual matters in the present, in contrast to their reticence about the past.

Ong Minh, for example, described how he and his wife, one of the original workers in the factory, were confused about whether it was permissible for them to pray to the ancestors when they got married:

At that time, I was very childish, not like youth nowadays, we were shy, not bold like youth now. When we came to the bride's house, my wife's junior uncle told us to come to the altar to pray and give praise to the ancestors. But we didn't come to the altar. The person in charge of the ceremony said to postpone the praying until the official wedding. Then at the official wedding there was no praying. I was too shy to ask.

This discomfort was also present among younger people in the *khu* who did not experience directly the height of the socialist campaigns. One younger worker, Chi Tam, in her thirties, has a wall altar but it is empty, she says because her mother-in-law, Huong, is Catholic (*cong giao*). Since Tam's husband is the oldest son, Tam's wall altar should honour his ancestors, but Huong disapproves. Huong came to live with Tam and her husband just a few years ago after retiring from Nam Dinh textile factory and attends the Ham Long church, one of the three largest Catholic churches in Hanoi. Huong raised all of her children to be Catholic but much to her distress none are practising, including Tam's husband, who told me he "can't remember the prayers at all any more." During the state subsidy time, "there were no conditions for them to go to church," said Tam, so none of them went.

My mother-in-law said I should go and believe, and I answered that I only believe in her religion incompletely so I shouldn't. And I said to my mother-in-law that when you die I will light incense for you. She said nothing. [Laughed nervously]

In the previous chapter, I mentioned how domestic wall altars were usually placed by families, although according to socialist doctrine they were to honour the ancestors only, not imply that the actions of the dead could affect the living. In the factory, on the other hand, wall altars to the land gods (*tho dia*) were explicitly banned. Altars in offices are intended to placate the dead, in general, and the specific guardians of the land on which the building is constructed. With all of the political attention

focused on the March Eighth factory, and its prominent exemplary role in socialist industrialisation, the factory sections were not able to establish wall altars. Many workers, particularly women, were uncomfortable with this policy and express this discomfort either directly or obliquely when talking about the early days in the factory. A Trade Union official in the B Weaving (*Det B*) section confided to me that in the past, she told the workers in her unit that they could not have an altar because the cotton they worked with was too flammable. “The women wanted wall altars very much but they couldn’t have one because of the ‘no fires’ order. Even when the men wanted to smoke, they had to go outside. Fire was prohibited then.” Despite all of the public education campaigns about superstition, this official told me she had to give a more plausible explanation to the workers in her section about why they could not have a wall altar, citing the “ ‘no fires’ order”. This sense of confusion about the intention of the campaign against superstition, and the religious suppression, was sometimes evident in the troubled way that people talked to me about this aspect of their past.

Part of the existential anxiety in the *khu* and the factory was generated by the specific spiritual history of the area itself. The vast tract of swampy land that was drained and dredged to make the construction site had previously been used as one of the city’s public cemeteries. Rather than try to ignore this potentially uncomfortable bit of history, the Party explicitly informed all residents of this fact, in order to incorporate this example of rational, anti-superstitious pragmatism into the process of political education for newly arriving workers. The official history of the factory calmly records this description of the original factory site:

The state decided to build the factory in an area on the south side of Hanoi. This area lay outside the city, close to the countryside, with the advantage of a supply of waste water to serve production activities. At the time, the area was still uncultivated, thick grass and reeds with some swampy ponds and marsh, and a philanthropic [public] cemetery; a place for grazing water buffalo and cows for the shepherds of the neighbouring villages...it was a beauty spot, still deserted, separate from the centre of the city. (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 6).

Although the city was supposed to have issued a call for all relatives to reclaim their dead from the site before it was converted, most of the bodies once buried there were believed to have remained. This is in part because many of those buried in urban

public cemeteries were unclaimed bodies, a dangerous category of dead. Party ideology stressed the spiritually inert nature of the land, insisting it could be physically transformed from cemetery to factory, and homes, without cosmological implications. The implacable materialism of this position functioned only at abstract policy level. The actual people who lived and worked on the land, both cadre and workers, found official policy harder to reconcile with their pre-existing belief in the agency of the dead. As Jing describes in China where resettled villagers had to live on streets built over tombs, geomancy demands that the world of the dead and the world of the living be kept separate. Jing quotes an old man saying “ ‘The houses of the dead and the houses of the living are terrifyingly close’ ” (Jing 1996: 81). In an example of how fear about unsettled dead affects narrative practice, Jing describes how the Kong villagers, when resettled from their old villages, were able to retrieve the bones from the tombs of immediate ancestors (parents, grandparents), but these were in many cases not re-buried properly according to geomancy principles, and the tombs of earlier generations had to be abandoned. Jing notes that these villagers, in telling their stories of the past, “rarely volunteered any information about what had happened to their ancestors’ tombs” (ibid.: 79).

One now retired March Eighth worker, who had been active in the political movements in the factory, deployed the language of political campaigns to insist repeatedly that she is not superstitious, and even placed the wall altar in her house particularly high up, where she cannot reach it, so that only her husband and sons can light incense on it. She rarely goes to the pagoda, and mocks her neighbours’ belief in spirit causality. “I think every family has their dead. So if there were spirits, then every family would be helped by their own ancestral spirits and wouldn’t have to work hard. Because I have such thoughts, I must say I am not superstitious (*khong me tin*).” Contradicting her politically correct scepticism, however, she also was persuaded to establish a wall altar because of the land’s history. Deferring responsibility for the decision, she suggests that she was influenced by other “people”: “In the past, this house had been a cemetery with many tombs in it, many dead. People advised us to have a wall altar because of this. Since we lived here, if we hadn’t prayed and made offerings, the evil sprits would have disturbed us. So we have had an altar for several years.”

Bac Thuy is the worker mentioned in the previous chapter who was recruited for the factory through a cadre cousin who told her work at the factory was “suitable for

girls". Thuy came to help build the factory in 1960 and worked there until retirement, actively participating in the mass organisations and mobilisation campaigns and continuing as a mid-level Women's Union official in the *phuong*. She moved to Hanoi from rural Dong Anh province. The youngest of five daughters, Thuy was encouraged by her family to leave the *que* in order to reduce inheritance pressure on the family's small land holdings¹. When Bac Thuy arrived at the construction site, she said, it did not look very different from the countryside. She tried to reconcile the anti-superstition campaigns that had been propagated through the Young Pioneers movement in the *que* and that were part of daily political education on the factory site, with the general anxiety about spiritual pollution that was repeatedly expressed in the community.

The factory had been a cemetery. When I came to the factory, there were all tombs. Sometimes when I dug dirt, I had to carry a pile of small earthenware coffins. In the kitchens of the collective dining halls, the cooking girls sometimes said that rice that had been left from the previous day was broken the next morning, as if being played with by ghosts. They would say there were many tombs in that place and so they were very fearful, or maybe it was because of their imagination. Sometimes at night I was a little scared when somebody would cry nearby, but it was only other people. I was very bold, myself. During the wartime, there were many casualties in Building A5 [which was bombed twice], but I slept there for a time. Other families evacuated and there were only a few of us remaining. I often got up at nights looking out of the window to see if any of those ghosts were there.

That Bac Thuy, a model worker and dedicated cadre, was unable to banish thoughts of ghosts from her experience of living in the *khu*, indicated that socialist education had failed to eradicate this basic belief. In an essay on life in the United States, the Chinese anthropologist Fei Xiaotong wrote that he "felt a little sorry for people raised in a world without ghosts" (Fei 1989: 178). Fei described ghosts as part of history and tradition, reminding the world that past, present and future are intertwined and "everything new is born out of that which is old" (ibid.: 176). Although women workers in the March Eighth *khu* left behind some of their ghosts, in order to embrace

¹ This is a classic problem of partible land inheritance and what happens when there are no sons. The ritual effect in Bac Thuy's family was to attribute ancestral responsibility to her second sister, since her oldest sister married an oldest son and had to take responsibility for his family rites. Like many older workers, Bac Thuy returns regularly to the *que* for death anniversary rituals, usually held at the oldest son's house but in her case at her second sister's.

new ideas not based on village tradition, they also brought some with them, rendering incomplete the socialist attempt to create a complete new environment.

Enforcement and Surveillance

As I have proposed, a sense of state power in the socialist era was experienced and expressed through the actions of the women workers in the factory and in their domestic life in the *khu*. As I have just shown in relation to religious and other practices, there were limits to the extent to which women felt they made choices about adherence to state policy in the past. Through their participation in the mechanisms of state power, for example in their adherence to policies, performance of surveillance activities, or enactment of state campaigns, women negotiated their relative distance from the fire of state power. In this section, I show how women could suffer from being rather too close to the demands of the state, and consider the implications of these local mechanisms of state power.

For example, just as marriages were subject to state arrangements during the high socialist period, divorces were similarly arbitrated by local officials, and socialist policies encouraging the strength of the family persistently discouraged divorce. This was still true during the time of my fieldwork and I saw several examples of how women were affected by it. To get permission for a divorce, a couple still has to receive permission from the *phuong* Reconciliation Committee, which will try repeatedly to facilitate a compromise before a divorce will be granted. Gough (1978) describes the process she observed in North Vietnam in the 1970's: "Women's Union leaders select a 'reconciliation group' of three to five local men and women who are respected by the people, to arbitrate the dispute" (Gough 1978: 90). In one case that Bac Nhu attended in her volunteer role on the Reconciliation Committee, a woman who had long suffered terrible beatings from her husband finally requested a divorce after he had doused her with fuel oil and threatened to light a match. The Reconciliation Committee recommended that her husband stop visiting his mistress, at least in public in the "tea shop" (a place of ill repute) where she worked, and spend more time at home with his wife and children. Several months later, Bac Nhu told me that the woman had requested a divorce again after another severe beating, and that this time it would probably be granted, although it would be referred up to the district level magistrate first. For all

women who want a divorce or are experiencing domestic violence, this requirement that they engage with the *phuong* Reconciliation Committee means that the process of separating from a husband can be very slow. Even couples who separate informally, without seeking a legal divorce, will be visited by local officials and encouraged to reconcile.

The whole apparatus of enforcement of Vietnam's current two-child policy and family planning in the *phuong* is also still based on this system. A pregnant woman who has disobeyed her Women's Union directives, neglected her birth control, and refuses to abort a third child will lose her job if she works in the factory, and may be evicted if she persists in having the child. To dissuade her, her neighbours and cell block members are expected to visit her regularly to pressure her. Through such well-organised tactics, this *phuong* has one of the best rates of compliance with the two-child policy of any ward in Hanoi. Once, I was taken into one of the apartment blocks I had not visited before, to drink tea with a friend of Chi Binh's, the worker I had been visiting. Chi Binh's friend is a Women's Union member, but not an official. While we were there, our hostess, talking about her own two daughters, was reminded of her neighbour down the hall, who also had two daughters and was causing consternation on the floor by recently hinting that she might try again for a son. Evidently her husband was threatening to leave her for bearing only daughters. "Come and speak to her and tell her not to get pregnant again," said my hostess to me. "Why me?" I asked, more or less. "Tell her it's not modern (*khong hien dai*) to need a son," I was told. These kinds of relationships between neighbours help explain why family planning, despite being in principle voluntary, is widely adhered to. "The economic and normative disincentives to 'excessive' childbearing are often overwhelming. The power of the Vietnamese family planning policy therefore seems to lie more in subtle manipulation of personal motivations and desire than in the use of brute or direct force" (Gammeltoft 2000: 14).

Despite seeing this process in action myself in the present, I found workers to be circumspect about referring directly to the historic surveillance element of neighbourliness in the *khu*, although references to it slipped out occasionally. I think that women in the *khu* were uncomfortable in retrospect about some of the ways in which gossip had become in the past a commentary on political correctness rather than morality, which is how they intended it. I think many of my informants enjoyed gossiping less when they worried about its implications, but this did not have an

appreciable effect on how much they did it. In fact, although the men I talked to often said that gossiping is a defining characteristic of women, I did not see that men were any less inclined to indulge in it, and I would say that it is rather a defining characteristic of people in the *khu*. This avid interest in the behaviour of neighbours and colleagues did have a dark side of jealousy and implied comparison, which is reflected in a Vietnamese joke:

Three men find a magic lamp, rub it, and a genie appears. "I am the genie of the lamp," says the genie, "Each of you has one wish, and whatever you wish will be granted."

The American man says, "I wish I had a million dollars." The genie waves his hand, and the man has a million dollars, he buys a big car, a big house, and he's happy.

The Russian man says, "I wish I lived in a perfect socialist state." [The joke is apparently of pre-perestroika vintage.] The genie waves his hand, and the Russian gets his wish—equal distribution of wealth, to each according to his needs. The Russian man is happy.

The Vietnamese man looks at these two, and thinks and thinks for a long time. Finally, he says, "I wish my neighbour's pig was dead"².

Why is this joke funny to my Vietnamese friends who told it to me? Besides containing a dated and now ironic reference to the days when the Soviet Union was Vietnam's patron and role model in the quest to build a perfect socialist state, the joke captures certain immediately recognisable tensions in Vietnamese social relations, between inside and outside (*noi* and *ngoài*), self and other, envy and intimacy. Relations of neighbourliness are much valorised in the Vietnamese construction of the nostalgic countryside past, in which geographical proximity and economic interdependence strengthened the bonds of obligation and support between families in small, insular villages. As the joke reveals, however, within this memory of exchange and esteem lurks more complex relations of difference and suspicion. These relations also hampered the concerted socialist effort to remake the social and political persons of the *khu* community into perfect socialist workers.

² I re-told this joke to people in the *khu* on a couple of occasions. Some had heard it before, some had not, but all laughed. One responded with an even darker version, in which a genie says to a Vietnamese man: "You have one wish, but whatever you wish for, your neighbour will get two." The man thinks: "I want a motorbike. But then my neighbour will get two! I want a son. But then my neighbour will get two!" Finally, after much thought, he says to the genie, "Ok, poke my eye out."

The subtle pressures about following rules can be seen in Bac Chanh's reluctance to complain about a mistake in her housing allocation in 1966, although she expounded to me about it at length, and in recalled detail, more than thirty years later. The flats in the *khu* blocks were less valuable the higher the floor they were on, so that ground level flats were most prized and the fourth story flats were the least valued. (This is still the case.) Flats were allocated according to a system of points (*diem*) that were assigned to families for various factors, many of them political. Chanh explained to me what happened when she was allocated her third floor flat:

There was priority given, for example to families of wounded veterans or martyrs (*liet sĩ*)³. My family should have been on the second floor but I hadn't known to meet the head of the living quarter to talk about that. People with fewer points (*diem*) than my family turned out to live on the second floor, and my family stayed on the third floor. The Trade Union man came to me at work and asked for my sympathy (*tin h cam*). He told me that my family should have stayed on the first floor, but there already was one woman who was a section director, one working in the Trade Union, one wounded veteran, and a mad woman living on the first floor so he asked me for sympathy to stay on the second floor. I said to him that my flat was on the third floor. Why so? I didn't know anything, I was only given a decision saying that I was allocated a flat on the third floor. He said he would ask the director why. But I was afraid of causing trouble so I said no. It would be trouble if this story led to meetings and so on.

A particularly stark version of the social relations promoted by socialism in a *khu tap the* can be found in Paradise of the Blind, a novel (banned in Vietnam) by dissident writer Duong Thu Huong (1994). The narrator, a young woman named Hang, is taken by her mother to visit her uncle and his family. While Hang's mother is making a reasonable living by selling food in the market, her brother Chinh and his wife are impoverished low level government cadre. They scorn Hang's mother's "capitalist" trading but eagerly accept her gifts of food, as they are barely surviving on state subsidies. When Hang and her mother visit them in their *khu tap the*, "Communal Residence K," they find Chinh, his wife and two sons sitting down to a meagre meal.

³ Families who had suffered the loss of a husband, father or son in the war received preferential treatment in hospitals, school and especially university admission, government jobs and Party admission (Malarney 2001b: 54). For examples of how the *diem* system was manipulated by individuals and led to division and exploitation within families, cf. Bradley (2001). Bradley cites an example of one family cynically using their brother's war dead status for gain, and of another taking in a veteran brother only for his ration book.

[My mother] had bought everything needed for a magnificent Tet banquet: pork pates, meat, lard, sticky rice, dried green mung beans, peanuts, bamboo shoots, vermicelli, rice-flour pancakes wrappers, pork rind... 'Here are some gifts for Tuan and Thu,' said [my mother], opening the hamper. Aunt Chinh immediately rushed to close the door and draw the curtains over the window... My mother spread out the groceries. It was a feast for at least eight people. Her sister-in-law's eyes widened against her pale face. Her gaze was meek, vacillating. Uncle Chinh wheeled around, 'This isn't necessary, really, why all this waste?' But his voice was unconvincing and toneless, directed at no one in particular.

The two boys let out a squeal; they had never seen such opulence. Aunt Chinh busied herself stashing the provisions out of sight, in the cupboard, on the buffet. I could hear the clatter of dishes in the other room; no doubt the anarchy caused by the subversive, unplanned invasion of our provisions. The clock at the neighbours chimed seven o'clock. Uncle Chinh announced, 'Come now, Thanh, give the children something to eat.'

'Coming,' she called, reappearing with a plate of pate sliced thin as cat's tongue. She gestured to the closed windows, 'So they won't see.' I suddenly understood why, when I brought out the gifts, she had shot me the anxious look of a shoplifter. This was the way they lived here, vigilant, spying on each other, each keeping watch over his neighbour. One mouthful too many, and the others might turn you in as a potential threat to the collective (Huong 1994: 120).

In Bac Nhu's poem about the cup in the previous chapter, old Mr Su, who returns the stolen cup (and perhaps denounces young Ly's theft), shows the proper communal spirit, while Uncle Chinh and his family are the selfish hoarders lambasted by Communist Party directives. The women I knew in the *khu* had had experiences that fell on either side of this continuum. Sometimes they were informers, in which case they tell their stories heroically. Older cadre, like Bac Nhu, *phuong* officials, and former Trade Union officials, tend to emphasise what they see as the positive ways in which their intimacy with the workers allowed them to regulate all aspects of their behaviour, like the Trade Union official who proudly told me that he had denounced a male factory manager who was having an adulterous affair with a younger woman worker, which led to the worker losing her job and the manager being reprimanded, an outcome that even the official said was "not equal".

The Crisis of the Collective Spirit

Public support in the *khu* for mass movements and political campaigns began to erode seriously after reunification with the South in 1975. The economic conditions that

affected the March Eighth workers worsened after the end of the American War, with the economic difficulties that accompanied reunification. Vietnam's already uneasy relationship with China exploded over Vietnam's 1979 invasion of Cambodia. All of the Chinese engineers and textile experts who were still assisting at the March Eighth factory left. Technical staff conferred about how to adapt machines to process Russian instead of Chinese cotton. A competition movement was initiated in the factory to find ways to locally produce components for the Chinese machines. The only successful result of that competition movement came from a cell group in the weaving section that devised a way to reproduce the wooden shuttles on the weaving machines. All the existing Chinese shuttles were detached and triumphantly shipped back to Beijing in a gesture of defiance, still proudly recalled in both the official history of the factory and the stories of workers.

Trade with and aid from China ended, "estimated at 38 per cent of all foreign aid to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1977" (Beresford 1989: 184), and threw Vietnam into a more dependent relationship with the Soviet Union. The Vietnamese state set overambitious production goals, such as those established in the Second Five Year Plan (1976-80), that collectivised agriculture and crumbling industrial infrastructure were less and less able to meet. There was widespread over-reporting of production output and a precipitous drop in worker morale. Verdery describes this problem generally for production in a socialist system of centralised planning, with a shortage economy resulting from managers padding their budgets and hoarding materials, and a management focus on procurement, in order to have enough materials to meet production targets, rather than a capitalist concern with sales (Verdery 1996: 21). The quality of the fabric produced at the factory was said to have fallen to the point that it barely held together. "You could stick your finger right through it, and it would tear to pieces," one worker told me. Even so, as the only commodity to which the workers had access, the fabric was also a tempting target for theft and resale on the black market. This apparently further limited output, both from petty pilfering by workers and larger-scale fraud by managers. This period may have most closely resembled Verdery's descriptions of the structural inefficiencies of socialist industrial production in Eastern Europe, part of which she attributes to the kind of campaigns that once inspired workers in the March Eighth factory: "Workers participated disdainfully...in Party-organised production rituals, such as work-unit competitions, voluntary workdays, and production

campaigns; they resented these coerced expressions of their supposed commitment to a wonderful socialism” (ibid.: 23). Verdery describes what she identifies as resistance in socialist factories as “internal sabotage” and “an oppositional cult of nonwork” (ibid.). Fforde calls it “systematic noncompliance” (Fforde 1989: 5). One worker told me the problem was that socialist policy “*danh trong, bo doi*” (beat the drum, then throw away the stick), an expression that means to stop halfway and not finish through, used to refer to policies that were announced but not enforced. A similar expression is quoted by Yan by Chinese villagers dissatisfied by the dissemination of state campaigns, “ ‘The scriptures [state policies] were good, but the monks [the cadres at lower levels] are reciting them wrongly’ ” (Yan 1995: 236). During this period in the March Eighth factory, Party enrolment began to fall off as well as participation in the mass organisations.

During this time after reunification but while a war economy was still imposed, many workers at March Eighth began to work outside the factory in part-time and casual labour (*lam them*, literally to “work extra”) to supplement their meagre rations. This was a widespread problem in state owned enterprises, as described by economist Beresford: “Falling grain output and state difficulties in mobilising the marketed surplus created problems for urban workers forcing them to turn to the free market for food supplies. High prices prevailing in the free market rendered urban wages and salaries utterly inadequate to sustain a minimum standard of living, and so the phenomena of ‘moonlighting’, taking extra jobs, diversion of state property into the free market... became commonplace...these factors had enormous implications for industrial labour productivity as workers devoted their time and energy to the more lucrative free market activities. As labour productivity fell, output of key industrial products suffered, worsening the shortages” (Beresford 1989: 183). March Eighth workers did such outside labour as tailoring, cooking snacks and soups for sale in street stalls, setting up small, mobile tea stands, and trading in rationed goods and food on the black market. Since only state-sanctioned commerce was allowed, these activities were semi-clandestine and small scale. Besides taking time away from their shifts to “work extra”, workers at this time also had to dedicate large parts of their days to standing in queues to trade their ration tickets for rice, cooking oil, charcoal, meat, vegetables, salt, monosodium glutamate (MSG) and other staples.

The details of life in the “state subsidy time” (*thoi gian bao cap*) were described to me by several of the workers I interviewed. In response to my questions, one even wrote for me a one page essay about what she remembered about ration coupons, listing the different products and describing the coupons for each. Another, when we were talking about the rationing coupons, told me: “Go and look in the History Museum, they have some there.”

Nostalgia

Near the end of the time of my fieldwork in Hanoi, I asked a Vietnamese friend for help in reviewing some of my research. I wanted to clarify some points in my translations of the formal, life history interviews I had conducted. As we reviewed bits of taped interviews, we listened to Bac Chanh describing her life during the period of *thoi gian bao cap*. At that time, as Chanh explained, food and most subsistence requirements were only available with ration coupons, and there were always day-long queues in shops. Chanh suggested that state subsidy era continued the shortages suffered in wartime, without the political justification of the war. Nevertheless, in her interview, Chanh fondly remembered the camaraderie of the state subsidy time, as she described neighbours taking turns to save each other’s place in queues and sharing special treats when they came along. She described her work in the Trade Union, which was partially responsible for the distribution of certain consumer items within work groups, such as bicycles, bicycle parts, and fabric: “I classified goods and distributed an assigned quantity to the groups. Cigarettes were also distributed according to the number of men. I only announced that there were goods and then distributed them and didn’t do anything more. It was very strict at that time. If you violated the system, you would be disciplined. You wouldn’t think about benefiting from some other woman’s portions. If you needed something and that was in your share, you could have it. You shouldn’t violate it. It was incorruptible like that in those days.” I asked her why. “There was no rich and no poor then,” said Chanh in the interview. “Everyone was equal.”

My friend who was helping me with the translation stopped the tape at this point, rewound it, and listened again. She told me she found this reminiscence oddly cheerful, and asked me if I thought it was strange. No, I replied, it was nothing unusual, that many of the workers I interviewed had told me similar stories. My friend said she

was surprised to hear anything good about the miserable *thoi gian bao cap*; her parents had told her stories of extreme food shortages, discomfort and suffering, and she had never heard anyone speak positively about it. The March Eighth workers also told me those stories of discomfort and suffering, and all of the negative views of and divergences from the narrative of patriotism, heroism, and socialism, as described above. However, these accounts were interspersed with a strong element of nostalgia.

This recurrent element of nostalgia in workers' accounts, as well as their complaints about contemporary life, reminded me how relatively privileged the March Eighth workers had been during the state socialist era, and illustrated how dramatically the workers perceived their drop in status and importance since *doi moi*. This nostalgia seemed to me strongest when workers compared their past experiences with the present. With the dismantling of many aspects of the state socialist system, many of the workers' advantages in the socialist economy became disadvantages in the market economy. While they may have benefited in some ways from new social opportunities, the women workers I knew were often quite anxious about their precarious position in the new economy, and they expressed this in part through positive recollections of what they chose to remember as a more egalitarian past.

Conclusion: Relations of Sympathy and Expressions of Nostalgia

Workers who resent their fallen economic and social status are likely to use their commentary on others to comment on the social changes of modern life rather than expressing past resentments. When complaining, or gossiping, about neighbours in the present, they often held up an historic ideal of neighbourliness and social relations, to suggest that relations were better "in the old days" (*ngay xưa*). This is most often expressed in the idiom of *tin h cam*.

North Vietnamese social relations are often defined by the boundaries of *tin h cam*, which is glossed as "sympathy" or "sentimental relations." To have or show *tin h cam* is a kind of performative social virtue, expressed through, for example, attendance at weddings, sickbeds and, particularly, funerals; meeting certain kinds of obligations in gift-giving; hospitality; and exhibiting friendly and non-hierarchical behaviour, such as sharing a cup of tea or a cigarette with a poorer or lower-status person. Thus in Bac Chanh's recollection of her housing problems of more than thirty years ago, she tells of

the Trade Union official appealing not to any abstract socialist virtue, but to traditional Vietnamese *tin h cam* in seeking her acceptance of the situation.

Women in the *khu* talk about neighbourly *tin h cam* quite a bit and believe that it is especially important to maintain it in the close quarters in which they live. They also say that since everyone in the *khu* is far from home (from their *que*), they must remember the Vietnamese proverb: *Ban anh em xa mua lang gieng gan*, roughly, “Sell faraway relatives for nearby neighbours.” *Tin h cam* is also associated with traditional, countryside values, with proper relations between people, which can include within families, although I am interested here primarily in its use in public, social contexts. It is a cliché that foreign visitors immediately recognise, since we are often told that “Vietnamese people are very poor, but have a lot of *tin h cam*.” (*Nguoi Viet Nam ngheo lam, nhung ma rat tin h cam*). (But, as I show in the next chapter, *tin h cam* can have negative aspects of obligation as well as positive ones of cooperation. Also see Chapter Five for a further discussion of neighbourly *tin h cam* relations in the present.)

One example that I witnessed myself of people in the *khu* deploying critical nostalgia was the comparison of the recurrent water shortages suffered in the housing blocks to the shortages of the *thoi gian bao cap*. There is a constantly irritating water shortage due to the design of the *khu* buildings, which require that water be pumped up to each of the four floors in turn, which is done sometimes twice but usually only once a day. Families usually can’t store enough water to get comfortably through the day’s cooking and washing⁴. Women workers do much of their bathing at the factory, where there are better washing facilities, before their shift starts or sometimes during breaks, depending on the workload in their section. The water on each floor in the *khu* is pumped according to a fixed schedule and there is a scrum around the tank on each floor as it is pumped. The family member responsible for fetching the water ration, usually the mother if she is not working a shift at the factory, jostles for position in the crowd, chatting with the neighbours gathered around, but in an uneasy fashion, keeping an eye on the water tank. It is not a good natured crowd. When the water is pumped, there is a quarrelling rush to obtain as much as possible. Older workers, complaining during these early morning water fights, said to me that even day-long queues for food during the *thoi*

⁴ One of the men I knew in the *khu* is a water engineer in the factory. He told me bitterly, “This [water systems] is my speciality, and I know it’s possible to change the water system in this house, but they don’t.”

gian bao cap had more *tin h cam* than this disorderly rush. They cite this as an example of moral decay, saying that neighbours used to share and help each other when there was little to go around, but with contemporary prosperity and disparity, people are “spoiled” like children (*chieu*) and less generous. On this subject, Ong Muong, a long-time activist and veteran whose hand was badly wounded in the war against the French, told me,

There are many changes in relations between people from that period to this. In the *thoi gian bao cap*, *tin h cam* was very good, people were very close with each other, kind and cooperative. I don’t know why it changed so much. Maybe because of their poverty and difficulties, people relied mutually on each other to protect and assist each other.

I accept that there is a vested interest of workers to describe to me, the foreigner, perhaps even the American, that their pasts were heroic and positive. However, I found nostalgia in the March Eighth *khu* too consistent and too pervasive to be explained only by my own presence. Complaining about the morning water fight by comparing it to an idealised past is just one example of how often, and in how many diverse and informal circumstances, people expressed a dissatisfaction with the present through a nostalgic recollection of the past.

This nostalgia also demonstrates some divergence between the official Party approved history and the popularly recalled version of collective, cooperative effort for the sake of the common good, outlined in the previous chapter. Ong Muong, for example, recalls that during the *thoi gian bao cap*, neighbour women would ask him to take their ration coupons and pick up their goods at the shops, because his wounded veteran status gave him preference to go first in line. Similarly, Bac Chanh had the Trade Union official appealing to her *tin h cam* in not making a fuss over the mistake in her housing allocation. These were small and personal manipulations of the supposedly impersonal and abstract state system, according to a pre-revolutionary morality of sympathy and sentiment. In these examples, credit for this supposedly better, more moral past is not necessarily given to the proper application of the socialist theories that were studied over and over again in extensive ideology sessions at the factory, nor to the more assertive social surveillance by colleagues and neighbours which flourished under high socialism. Rather, it is the traditional, Vietnamese virtues of *tin h cam* and proper neighbourliness which are lauded.

However, as I showed in the previous chapter, there is also genuine enthusiasm for aspects of the revolutionary past and continuing appreciation of some of its values. Revolutionary virtue was by no means entirely elided with pre-revolutionary ideology. As I have mentioned, workers still endorse such socialist values as freedom of marriage choices, more autonomy for women, less hierarchical relationships and belief in patriotic duty. This chapter has begun to show how workers deploy multiple aspects and attitudes of the past to criticise both the past and the present. In the following chapter, I expand upon how workers use the remembered virtuous past to criticise the present.

CHAPTER FOUR

“The Great President Ho Chi Minh Lives Forever In the Deeds of All of Us”:

Using the Past, Looking at the Present

Many of the concerns of the March Eighth workers about the past and the present can be seen to coalesce in one important story that workers tell of the past, that of the Inaugural Day of the factory, when President Ho Chi Minh himself came to open the factory. This chapter discusses this visit as an extended example of the ways described in the previous chapter that March Eighth workers deploy history and narrative in order to comment on their dissatisfaction with morality and power relations in the present.

Ho Chi Minh, leader of Vietnam’s revolutionary war against the French and the first President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, officially opened the March Eighth Textile Company on March Eighth, nineteen sixty something. According to the official history of the factory and the state news agency, which recorded the event in photographs and newspaper articles, the year was 1965. According to workers at the factory who say they saw or even met Ho on his visit, the year was 1963, or 4, or, as one told me, “around then, speaking generally” (*quang day, noi chung*).

The official history of the March Eighth factory gives this description of the day of Ho’s visit:

The whole production line was officially brought into production on the afternoon of March 8, 1965, before the opening ceremony. Although President Ho was very busy, on behalf of the Central Committee of the Party and the Government, he visited the factory and afterwards the living conditions and production areas. Uncle Ho, thousands of times loved and respected, gave a friendly speech to the cadre and workers of the factory.

He said: ‘The March Eighth factory is born as the result of sweat and blood of numerous soldiers and people who perished in the struggle for independence and freedom. Moreover the factory bears the name of Women’s Day, so each worker should work as hard as possible to deserve that great honour and responsibility. The workers and staff should try to overcome limitations in organisation, work and life, and should develop the spirit of ownership, good management, and good production to make many products

with high quality to meet the needs of the people and the army for fabric, and in this way to contribute concretely to building socialism and the struggle for peace and reunification of the country as well as try their best to learn techniques to catch up to the textile technology level of the world.'

He also spoke affectionately with the Chinese experts and told the Vietnamese cadre and workers to work closely in solidarity with the Chinese advisers and try to learn from these experts.

More than three thousand cadre and workers listened to Ho with great emotion and remembered the warm instructions of the Father of the Nation and promised that they would sacrifice themselves to respond to the leader's deep concern and vast love. This afternoon went forever into the history of the March Eighth factory as an incident that inaugurated a new development stage and left unforgettable impressions in the minds and emotions of the different generations of workers and cadre of the factory (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 25).

When I read this official account, I had already heard from March Eighth workers other stories of Ho's visit to the factory. I first learned of the visit when it was mentioned in passing by Dau, an elderly male cadre. Dau from 1965-75 was secretary of the Trade Union for the power plant section of the factory, and married a worker in the spinning section. Dau is the Trade Union official mentioned in Chapter Two who was so dedicated to his duties that he traveled around the North visiting families of women workers. Now retired, Dau and his wife lived with their two sons, their sons' wives and their four grandchildren in a decaying one-room flat in the *khu*. After Dau's father died fighting the French in the war for Independence, Dau joined the army himself and fought until 1954, when his mother and two sisters were killed in an attack on their village. Markers of Dau's revolutionary history were on display around his flat: a commendation from the army, various award certificates, a membership medal from the Veteran's Association. Both of Dau's sons also worked at March Eighth, another symbol of Dau's commitment to the ideals of the factory.

On the day of this conversation, Dau's wife and daughter-in-law had left us in charge of the grandchildren while they went to the market. Dau and I sat on the bed platform, while the children played noisily around the room. The youngest, a four year old girl, crawled over to where Dau sat and sprawled herself contentedly across his lap. Dau was complaining to me about corruption among officials, and the social problems that he blamed on the newly open market economy. "The ethics (*dao ly*) of cadre are decreasing," he told me. "You can see it in how the relationship between

husband and wife has changed.” At this point, Dau reached down and laid his hands over his granddaughter’s ears. “Now it’s very normal for them to have affairs outside of marriage,” he told me in a stage whisper. He said this could be seen in the increase in cafes and karaoke bars, both associated with prostitution. He said that these days, old men would seek young companionship in public places and neglect or even divorce their aging wives. He told me that these cafes and bars were full of “men with locked briefcases”, signifying that they were high level cadre. Then he told me, “It’s the sugar-coated bullet (*vien dan boc duong*), just like Uncle Ho said in his speech at the factory.”

I had to stop Dau at this point to ask him to spell out “*vien dan boc duong*”. At the time, I had no idea what it meant. After that, as is the way of these things, I heard it all the time. “Beware the sugar-coated bullet” is a warning, often attributed to Ho (and in China to Mao), of corruption and ideological drift from socialism, usually referring to materialism or sympathy with market economic principles. I asked Dau what it meant, and he said “Bac Ho meant, it is something that can kill you, but without hurting you.” And Uncle Ho said this, I asked? Yes, he told me, “when Bac Ho came to visit the factory, I was assigned to protect him. Now we have lost many cadre to that sugar bullet. Cadre even get divorced. Their moral (*dao duc*) level has been degraded.”

As I found in my fieldwork at the March Eighth factory and the *khu*, Dau’s invocation of Ho’s visit is only one of what the official history calls the “unforgettable impressions” left in the minds of at least some of the workers and cadre present on that day. As I have described, some now retired from factory work, others nearing retirement, many of these older cadre and workers are still active in the political life of the *khu* and are dissatisfied with the political and social changes that have accompanied economic reform. Dau mentioned Ho’s visit to me in order to complain about the deterioration in virtue that he blames on the market economy, a deterioration from past ideals of socialist morality. In this chapter, I explore further how the Vietnamese Communist Party and the state promoted socialist ideals in the factory and the *khu* community, through campaigns of political socialisation, and a morality of productivity in the factory, using Ho Chi Minh as a model of virtue. Further along, I hope to show that the various stories of Uncle Ho’s visit are one way that life-long March Eighth workers assess their own role in the history of

Vietnamese communism, express anxiety about their current relationship to state power and social success, and criticise post-reform morality. Through this analysis, I would like to suggest that these individual narratives also illustrate the complex ways in which these workers responded to state campaigns, including the attempt to create an official unified history of the Party, the state, and the workers. Finally, at the end of this chapter, I compare the Party's approach to the construction of this revolutionary historical narrative to Malarney's (1996a) description of the construction of revolutionary ritual practice in Vietnam in order to consider what he calls "the limits of 'state functionalism'" in creating and controlling values and meaning.

Political Action in the Past

Despite various divergences and differences of emphasis in the official and personal narratives of the visit, that President Ho Chi Minh himself came to open the factory is irrefutably both a marker and a reflection of the historical importance of the March Eighth Textile Company to Vietnamese communism, as I have described in preceding chapters. Also as I have described, the attempts to encourage new ways of family behaviour were part of the overall state and Party intentions to create diligent socialist workers and promote New Family Culture. The communal design of the living quarters and the public attention to domestic roles were all part of this attempt. The mass mobilisations and political education campaigns that were carried out in the *khu* and the factory promoted egalitarian and communal values as well as productive ones. From the establishment of the factory in the early 1960's until reunification in 1975, these campaigns attracted many workers to join the Party and the mass organisations and received enthusiastic support from many of the workers I knew.

The enthusiasm of those days is reflected in yet another revolutionary poem written in the early 1960's by Bac Nhu, which she recited when I asked her about early days in the factory. In the poem, Nhu imagines a dialogue between herself, cooking in the communal kitchens, and a young male worker who watches her.

I am the cooking girl
Rice and corn I cook skillfully, you eat and eat them but can't get enough

Pickled beansprouts eaten with stewed fish
Fruit, cucumber, you eat and are still hungry for more.
Fried beef guts, starfruit salad, and spring rolls,
Sweet and sour fried pork followed by a bowl of vegetable soup.

Dear cooking girl in the green shirt
There are many other dishes but I must stop eating for a moment.
While hating American aggressors
Do not forget to make sticky rice and sweet soup.
We are indirectly killing Americans so we should
Not forget our role to act positively.
In the future, the American aggressors will be reduced to ashes
And in this victory there will also be your contribution, my dear cooking girl.

Notably, in her poem, Nhu mixed the domestic vocabulary of food and cooking with the formal language of the socialist mobilisations. I will return briefly to this question of levels of language further along in the chapter in describing the way that workers tell their stories of Ho's visit.

For Nhu, composing this poem at the height of the war was a political action that earned her positive attention and contributed to her high status as a dedicated cadre. As I mentioned previously, when she recited this and other poems to me thirty years later during afternoons spent drinking tea or making sticky rice, the other older women who were with us would laugh and shake their heads affectionately at her, sometimes sucking their teeth in admiration at her memory and sometimes changing the subject quickly to gloss over such old-fashioned sentiments.

As I have described, by involving cadre and workers with the mission of surveillance and enforcement of state policy, the Communist Party integrated expectations of good behaviour in the *khu* into all levels of social and domestic life. Despite the many deviations from state-defined virtuous action that were apparently taking place during the mobilisations and are certainly evident now in the *khu*, the state was at least partly successful in establishing a public discourse that equated good behaviour with political action. In these ways, socialist political organisation, at the height of socialist mobilisations, at the most local level was created from below, by the workers who were the recipients, participants, and enactors of its campaigns and mobilisations. These workers once felt themselves to be at the centre of a kind of political power that they enacted and expressed through exemplary behaviour in their daily lives. Traces of this power remain for cadre and workers in the surveillance and

enforcement of some social policies, but without collective support the campaigns are seen to be more remote and ever more anachronistic by many of the people in the *khu*. In a downward spiral of influence and interest, without popular legitimacy for their campaigns, older workers and cadre are removed further and further from the concerns of state, and from their historical importance as the vanguard of the Revolution.

Morality and Economic Change

This loss of status and political power is exacerbated by the rise of a new kind of economic power. As the formerly valorised role of the industrial worker, and the good cadre, declines in cachet, it is replaced by public images of entrepreneurial wealth and display. During the dark days of the *thoi gian bao cap*, the state subsidies in the early 1980s, when there were severe food shortages and a strict rationing system, the rewards of corruption in the *khu* were measured in an extra kilo of meat or a new bicycle tire inner tube. Hinton describes a similar situation in a revolutionary Chinese village where the success of peasants could hardly be differentiated because there were too few consumer goods with which to do so (Hinton 1997: 23). The architecture of the March Eighth *khu* apartments and the very limited availability of consumer goods once enforced a fairly uniform design of domestic space. Now both the venality of bad cadre and the success of new entrepreneurs are visibly expressed throughout the *khu*. With a form of private property now available, wealthier families have been able to buy up larger spaces in the *khu* buildings or build new houses in the neighbourhood, which they fill with coveted electrical appliances and shiny leatherette furniture. On a smaller scale, workers with some access to outside income will spend money to improve their one-room flats by building small cooking spaces or bathrooms, in order to withdraw from the much-loathed communal kitchens and toilets.

Workers who have not improved their economic circumstances also suffer in the ritual economy of reciprocity and social obligation. As I have previously explained, and as anthropologists have documented, as part of its project to reform cultural practice, the Vietnamese revolutionary state regulated and simplified domestic and religious rituals, especially weddings and funerals, in order to reduce

status competition and eliminate wasteful and inequalitarian elements (cf. Malarney 1993, 2001a; Norton 2000a). This reform project is what Malarney describes as “state functionalism”, as I have previously described and will return to at the end of this chapter. Some of these once eliminated elements are selectively reappearing as families in the *khu* stage larger and more opulent wedding, funeral, and death anniversary feasts, therefore demanding larger and larger financial contributions from guests and setting the tone for ever more lavish displays from their friends and neighbours when their turn comes around.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the measures of morality is *tin h cam*. Both Vietnamese state ideology and popular perceptions, particularly among older people, agree that *tin h cam* relations are suffering in the era of *doi moi*. One problem of rising materialism and status competition is that people now are also weighed down by neighbourly obligation, which comes at a higher and higher price. One worker told me,

I’ve spent a lot on weddings, death anniversaries, and funerals. One month could have ten weddings! And some months none. There’s people laughing, people crying, when they’re sick or when they’re hurt, it’s the story of *tin h cam*! If we arrange birthdays for the kids, their little friends come, and if their friends invite them to their birthdays, they have to go.

At a wedding, guests pass envelopes of money to the couple to help off-set the cost of the wedding, which means that as weddings tend towards more food, more guests, and more luxury, the amount expected in the envelope is constantly rising. The principles of *tin h cam* reciprocity demand especially that one attend the weddings of children of one’s friends who have attended one’s own children’s weddings; this is accumulating and returning the “mouth debt”, where one has feasted at another’s expense. The women in the *khu* have begun to sometimes dread wedding invitations because they cannot be seen to refuse, because of the demands of *tin h cam*. When shopping in the market, women would sometimes calculate if they could be a bit extravagant in buying provisions for lunch depending on whether they had attended too many weddings recently, or how many invitations they expected or had received recently. This is compounded by the fact that weddings are seasonal, so there is a rush of them during auspicious months, and also guests usually receive an

invitation on very short notice, days or sometimes even hours before the event. Older people discuss the scandalous cost of weddings they have attended, but say they must plan the same for their own children, and say that because of *tin h cam*, the families whose weddings they attended will have to attend theirs. This kind of status competition in rituals was one of the targets of the socialist programme to reform traditional rituals in order to make them more egalitarian and communal, but since economic reform traditional elements have been reappearing, exacerbated by the growing wealth disparity within the *khu*.

Children's roles within the family are also shifting as they have become the focus of class aspiration for workers whose own ability to prosper in the market economy is limited. Although the factory was originally intended to employ the children of workers, many workers now say they do not want their children to work there. Most workers believe that education is the only hope for their children, but with market reforms, the school system has become another arena of economic demand. This focus on children is also seen to contribute to the moral decay of the post-reform era, as children are widely described as becoming less filial from being too regularly indulged. Children wriggle out of household chores by claiming that they have homework to do, or flaunt their book knowledge at a less educated parent, as when I heard a teen-aged son calling his mother "stupid as a cow" (*ngu nhu con bo*).

Just as Dau complained about the ethics of cadre when he told me about Ho, older people in the *khu* said they see a general breakdown in moral relations as a result of the rising materialism of the post-reform era. As I suggested in the last chapters, they describe an idealised past in which communal behaviour was valued. Ong Minh, a long term Party member, retired teacher and husband of a factory worker, told me:

Now sometimes I have students with better education levels, but in the past, if I compare virtue and ideology, there was something more interesting. That is that they were more modest. They aimed to have one common purpose, and now the aim is more individualistic. As for me, I still adore my motherland, but my little brother, who graduated from Teacher Training College in the math and physics department, says I should stop saying this because students now do not have a nationalist conception any more. But I still keep mine, and my son still has it. He went to France to study and he said they don't have

such beautiful sights like we do, he went only to study and didn't want to stay there. I like it that he has the same thinking as me. For Vietnamese people, anyone who has money is a rich person, this is the Vietnamese conception of wealth now in *doi moi*. My conception of wealth is that of inner beauty, the wealth of intelligence, the wealth of spirit. These are the riches money can't buy. In my *que*, no one has eliminated poverty or hunger. We must find a way to help them. Rich people are clever, but they don't help poor people. I am content with my life, just with enough to guarantee life for my children. In the morning I play badminton, in the afternoon I return home to help out with my family.

Muong, a retired worker and wounded war veteran, comparing the socialist past with the *doi moi* present, told me:

Now life's better so people just seek ways to make their living and are not concerned about each other like they used to be. People are not as good as they once were. Also there wasn't rich and poor, people didn't distinguish, but now rich people really look down on the poor. I'm not rich and I find the way rich people talk to me impossible to bear. They think they're so intelligent!

Minh and Muong's complaints about rich people are ones I heard often. Fencing with expensive ritual obligations, jostling for status and resources with their neighbours, and repelled and attracted by consumer desire and class aspiration, older workers in the *khu* measure this anxious present against their expressed imaginations of the socialist past and their continued endorsement of socialist virtues, such as loyalty and duty, egalitarianism, modesty, and the values of collective sentiment and action.

Memories and Moralities of Ho

These historical experiences and contemporary concerns coalesce in the symbol of Ho Chi Minh, both in the official deployment of him by the state and in the stories the workers tell of the day he came to open the factory. My intention here is initially to try to unpack the ways in which these workers use their narratives of the past to critique the present, and then to consider the implications of this criticism for a more general theory of the relationship between state power, public virtue, and historical narrative.

Ho Chi Minh remains a revered and heroic figure in contemporary North Vietnam. He founded the Vietnamese Communist Party and the League for the Independence of Vietnam (*Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi*), known as the Viet Minh, which fought a revolutionary war against French colonialism and Japanese occupation. Ho first declared Vietnamese Independence in Hanoi in 1945, although he then spent the next twenty-five years waging war, while building a socialist state in the North.

From the point of view of the Party that he founded, Ho combined the impeccable patriotic credentials of his anti-colonial leadership with his thorough commitment to socialism. As I have previously described, recorded history is intensely politicised in Vietnam. As Giebel points out, in Vietnamese communist historiography what he calls “the multiple histories of Vietnam’s recent past” are invariably united by the Party into a single narrative of the Revolution (Giebel 1996: 6). With the well-documented saintly past of Ho Chi Minh, the Party has been remarkably successful in promoting this single narrative, which Tai has called “a coherent master narrative centering on Ho” (Tai 1995: 274). Similarly, Benewick describes the iconography of Mao Zedong in the Cultural Revolution as a “totalising power. Consequently, there was no physical, let alone politically permissible, space to challenge Chairman Mao, thereby imparting meaning to the slogan ‘The whole country is red’ ” (Benewick 1999: 123).

Ho was a willing participant in creating the image of him that flourished in his lifetime and has flowered since his death in 1969¹. The pronoun in his nickname, *Bac* (senior uncle), emphasised his familial relationship with his followers, his accessible

¹ Of Ho’s death in September, 1969, the official history says “Facing this great loss and unlimited pain, the Party Committee of the factory opened the class for the Party members and the masses to study the sacred ‘Will and Testament’ of Uncle Ho and the important documents of the Central Committee of the Party about the history and work of Uncle Ho, and the factory organised visits for the cadre and workers to pay respects to Uncle Ho, opened a class to study the documents entitled ‘Anti-Individualism of Uncle Ho’ and began the preparation course for the candidates for the Party and accepted the ‘party members generation of Ho Chi Minh’ to bring sixty people from the masses into the Party” (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 28).

simplicity, and his reputed chastity, which suggested that he was married to the Revolution. He lived a simple and spartan life with no hint of material corruptibility, and apparently personified the virtues of the Revolution that he led. Similarly, Landsberger describes the image of Mao as a populist leader, who “remained united with the people, whether he inspected fields, shook hands with the peasants, sat down with them, and shared a cigarette with them; whether he was dressed in military uniform, discussing strategy with military leaders, inspected the rank-and-file, or mingled with contingents of Red Guards” (Landsberger 1996: 208).

Ho expressly promoted the creation of a system of “revolutionary ethics”, and in his 1947 pamphlet “Correcting the Way We Work” highlighted five cardinal virtues of benevolence, righteousness, knowledge, courage and incorruptibility (Malarney 2001a). Malarney observes that this reworking of the traditional five Neo-Confucian virtues (benevolence, knowledge, righteousness, ritual and sincerity) was aimed at channeling loyalties towards collective interests, and at the eradication of “individualism”. By the 1960s the Party’s list of virtues had been further refined to “Industry, thrift, incorruptibility and righteousness. Public spirit and impartiality”. Ho’s last work in 1969 was called “Raise Up Revolutionary Ethics, Eliminate Individualism,” and he himself summarised revolutionary ethics as being “not for the glory of individuals, but instead for the interests of the party, the people, and humanity” (ibid.: 80). The stress on eradicating individualism is echoed above, in the complaints of Ong Minh about the present.

Maintaining the official memory of Uncle Ho continues to be a priority for the Communist Party, which deploys the apparatus of state-controlled public discourse to do so. As his biographer Duiker writes, “Ho Chi Minh’s colleagues, many of whom are still in power in Hanoi today, have tirelessly drawn on his memory to sanctify the Communist model of national development” (Duiker 2000: 3). Portraits or busts of Ho are present in every official space, and his famous slogans are quoted on banners and display boards across the country. The state publishing houses produce voluminous copies of his memoirs, prison writings, collected speeches, and official biographies. Every visiting head of state is photographed laying a wreath at the entrance to Ho’s mausoleum in the centre of the political district. Academics in all subjects refer to the implications of Ho for their discipline, such as a study of primary schools titled “Ho Chi Minh’s Ideology and the Education of New Generations”, and

a paper in linguistics called “Initial study of President Ho Chi Minh’s Style of Writing Foreign Proper Nouns”, both presented at the First International Conference of Vietnamese Studies in Hanoi in 1998. High-level cadre are required to attend training in Ho Chi Minh Thought.

But it is not only in the official sphere that Ho’s memory is burnished. The state narrative of Ho’s exemplary life is a popularly successful construction. His reputation in the North has survived the growing distaste for politics and the political leadership that is flourishing in the post-reform market economy. As membership in the Party continues to fall, Ho worship grows. Incense is ceremoniously lit in front of his mausoleum, where the *hoi polloi* queue, often for hours, to briefly view his embalmed body, and where a vast sign declares “The Great President Ho Chi Minh Lives Forever in the Deeds of All of Us! (*Chu Tich Ho Chi Minh Vi Dai Song Mai Trong Su Nghiep Cua Chung Ta*)”. At a Southeast Asian regional football final in Hanoi in 1998 rabid national team supporters chanted “Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh” and waved pictures of Ho. Malarney (1996b), in an article about the religious implications of the cult of Ho, described how in the early 1990’s some of the villagers in his fieldsite tried to install Ho as the guardian spirit of the village. Portraits of Ho are common on family altars, the most sacred domestic space (cf. Kleinen 1999: 150). Similar adoration was once shown for Mao in China during the height of his cult, when he became identified with the Chinese cult of the Kitchen God (Xin 1995). “The presence of his official portrait in every home, often occupying the central place on the family altar and replacing the ancestor tablets as the principal object of worship, added to the already god-like stature of Mao” (Landsberger 1996: 208).

The handful of scurrilous details about his life that Western historians have used to suggest that Ho was in fact a real person with complexities and even flaws are widely unknown or discredited in North Vietnam. I looked to find a critical view of Ho in the memoirs of Vietnam’s best known dissident, Bui Tin, a former editor of the Army newspaper who defected to France from where he issued a bitter attack on the state of the Party. Tin wrote that Ho was a “human being, not a saint”, as evidenced by the fact that he was secretly married at least twice. But, wrote Tin, “To look back on Ho Chi Minh’s career is to realise that he was a sincere patriot who sacrificed his whole life to the pursuit of the Revolution. He played an enormous role in the struggle for independence. He was a symbol of heroism for the people in the North as

well as many in the South, including intellectuals, and faith in him created a basis for solidarity and our struggle against foreign aggression” (Tin 1995: 65).

Ho in the Factory and the Khu

I observed Ho Chi Minh veneration in the *khu* long before I knew he had been there himself. His portrait is on many family altars and I was told several fond jokes about him.

The following is an example of a casual conversation I had about Ho and how his image was received and disseminated in the *khu*. It occurred on National Day, September 2, 1998, the anniversary of Ho’s declaration of Vietnamese independence. Many families in the *khu* buildings hung out the national flag for the occasion. Since it was a holiday and no one had to go to work, the family I was visiting in the *khu* spent most of the day watching television. The mother in this family, Chi Loan, was a forty-year-old worker in the dyeing section of the factory, and was too young to have experienced the height of the socialist mobilisations. She herself was not a Party member and was not active in the mass organisations, and told me once that her husband, Anh Minh, had joined the Party recently only for the sake of the children. They were both extremely proud that their daughter Ha had been accepted to university, made possible by the extra tutoring that they paid for all through her secondary school and the political points (*diem*) gained by having a father in the Party. Now in her second year at a technical college, Ha had received a small scholarship, which her mother attributed to Party connections, although Ha told me it was because she was a good student and got good marks. Loan, Ha’s mother, complained to me often about problems in the factory and occasional lay-offs in her section, which was not faring well since that the state industrial system had become subject to some market competition. By comparison to many of the people with whom I spent time in the factory and the *khu*, Loan’s family is not very actively politically engaged.

On this National Day in 1998, one of the state television channels was showing hours of Ho Chi Minh-themed programming, all of which Loan, Ha and I watched without changing the channel. Dolled-up little girls with white gloves and lipstick, filmed in soft-focus against flowery backgrounds, sang “I love Uncle Ho” (*Em yeu Bac Ho*). A serious young man in a tuxedo played a musical salute on the

piano, interspersed with black and white footage of Ho's Independence Day speech and shots of Ho walking among crowds of people, besieged with flowers and children. Ha asked me if I knew who Ho Chi Minh was and when I said that I did, Ha reiterated his historical importance. "Bac Ho liberated Vietnam, and then after that he was the President," Ha told me seriously, in the phrases often used when describing Ho's contribution: "Bac Ho fought all his life for the independence and freedom of the country and people of Vietnam." Ha asked me if I had ever been to Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum. I said yes, many times, and she said she had, too. "I went many times. Bac Ho is very beautiful," she told me. She told me that on this National Day, some students from her university class who were from the countryside and had never been to the mausoleum were going for the first time. Bouncing up and down excitably on the wooden bench we sat on, Ha said it was great and interesting (*Rat tot! Hay lam!*) for her friends to go, but because they had never been before she felt pity for them (*cam thay thuong hai*).

After the conversation with Dau about the sugar-coated bullet and the decline in public virtue, I heard many more versions of Ho's inaugural visit to the factory. Later, when translating the official history, I found the story of the visit that begins this chapter. The personal versions have some key elaborations that do not appear in the official version.

One of the most enthusiastic versions came from Tam, a retired worker in her sixties who lives with her children and grandchildren in a crumbling *khu* flat, and whose recruitment story I told in Chapter Two. Tam tried to get all of her children jobs at the March Eighth factory but none of them came of age when the factory was hiring. One of her daughters works in a smaller state textile factory nearby and another works as an assistant in the state kindergarten in the *khu*. Tam's son said he had a hard time finding work and after a stint in the army and a brief career as a lorry driver, he had become a casual labourer and part-time motorbike taxi driver. In practice, this meant he rarely worked, and like many young men in the *khu* was supported by the women in his family, as I discuss further in Chapter Five. As I described before, Tam, like Dau, committed to the revolution at an early age, in her home village.

In the early days in the factory, Tam says she joined in the mass mobilisations with an enthusiasm that she seemed happy to tell me about. With other Youth Union

members she often worked two shifts in a row, sixteen hours, and then volunteered on “socialist labour” campaigns, such as digging bomb shelters and trenches, planting trees, and tending the livestock and gardens for the communal kitchens. Tam joined the self-defence forces of the factory and drilled with the handful of guns that the force possessed. She composed some slogans for the Youth Union bulletin board, but not, she told me, beautiful poems like Nhu. In a comment that I heard from many people, Tam told me it was very difficult then to join the Party, “not like now,” (*khong nhu bay gio*) and she told me that she cried when she was admitted in 1960.

This is Tam’s story of the day Ho Chi Minh came to the factory:

Uncle Ho arrived when we were just starting our shift. I was checking the machines to begin, when the cleaner ran in and called to me, ‘Hey, Tam, come and see! There is an old guy out there who is very beautiful.’ So I thought perhaps Uncle Ho had arrived already. I ran out and saw him and it was true that it was Uncle Ho. He went around the machines and asked about the best workers, that is, the labour heroes. Dinh Hong Nga had been awarded ‘excellent worker’ for the combing machines, so even when Uncle Ho was ready to leave he still asked about her, ‘Where is Dinh Hong Nga?’ He went to each shopfloor that had machines. He went very quickly in one round. That evening he went to visit the *khū tap the* and he cut the red ribbon to open the factory. The factory had not yet been opened, this was 1963. When he arrived at the *khū* he went directly to the kindergarten building, in the A1 Building, at the beginning of the *khū tap the* on the right. It was the kindergarten of the factory so they used one of the apartments and made one room for the small children—there was no kindergarten in the real sense yet. He went to the collective toilets and the dining room. Our leaders wanted him to go to some particular places but Uncle Ho refused, he didn’t want to. He went where he liked. First of all, he criticised the Party Secretary and the Director of the factory when they came to welcome him. He said, ‘Why are you dressed so beautifully?’ because that day the woman director, Le Thi Nha, was dressed in a white *ao dai* (traditional dress). And he asked the Party Secretary, ‘What do you do?’ and the Party Secretary answered, ‘I am Secretary of the Party’ and Uncle Ho said, ‘You are dressed very elegantly but you live in filth.’ Uncle Ho said this because when he went to the kindergarten and the toilet he found they were so dirty that he criticised them immediately. It was decided after he left that all the workers had to extract a lesson from his words and show improvement. They sent a person to clean every day for a little while, but they didn’t repair it. It’s still filthy, you can go and see for yourself.

Besides differing from the official version in the date of Ho’s visit, Tam is clearly telling a somewhat different story from the official one. While the official history says only in passing that Ho visited the “living conditions” of the workers,

Tam's version stresses Ho's interest in the details of the workers' lives and his concern for their comfort. When Tam told me that Ho criticised the factory leaders for the state of the toilets, she established an opposition between the venerable Uncle Ho, with his boundless compassion for the people, and the party functionaries who were insufficiently concerned with the workers. Tam links this neglect with the present state of the toilets, which she says are "still filthy" (and indeed they are). This opposition is further suggested by Ho's insistence on meeting the heroic workers, even calling for them by name, despite the leaders trying to steer his path, and also by Tam's description of the factory director as wearing an *ao dai*, since the archival photos of the day show that Le Thi Nha was simply dressed in a white blouse and kerchief (see photographs). By imagining the factory's leaders as over-dressed in the kind of finery criticised by the Party as wasteful and scorned by the pious Uncle Ho, Tam judges the moral leadership of the factory and finds it wanting. According to her other nostalgic stories of the glorious socialist past, however, Tam during this time identified herself with the values enacted in the political practice in the factory and the *khu*. Tam risked her life in the self-defence forces, climbing on top of buildings to shoot at enemy bombers while other workers dove underground into the safety of bomb shelters that Tam herself had helped dig. She left her children in factory child care late into the night while she pursued the political campaigns of the Party, and she raised her children to believe that working for the March Eighth factory expressed moral and political righteousness. Tam's competing views of moral leadership compare the present with this past. While Tam still enacts Ho's once noble poverty and community among the filthy toilets of the *khu*, less honourable cadre and workers around her are now dressing up, spending money, and swallowing the sugar-coated bullet.

Of the people who told me they remembered Ho's visit first-hand, some included Ho's insult to the director and most mentioned that Ho visited the kindergarten. I also realised in retrospect from these versions that when he said he was assigned to protect Ho on his visit, Dau had meant in his capacity as part of the self-defence force of the factory, some of whom lined up with their guns outside the main building to greet Ho. Thu, a woman worker who was in the self-defence force with Dau, told me about standing in this honour parade to wait for Ho. She said it was "like a festival day (*le hoi*)," and that "everyone was happy". She also told me that

everyone in the two rows of the self-defence forces were especially lucky because they each got to touch Ho's hand as he came among them to greet them.

Muong is the retired worker quoted above complaining about rich people. He lost most of one hand fighting against the French, and after he was wounded and demobilised, he worked at the Nam Dinh Textile factory. Later, he was transferred to Hanoi and the March Eighth factory. I asked Muong if he remembered the day Ho came to open the March Eighth factory and this was his answer:

In 1965, many people were transferred here from Nam Dinh. But I came in 1966, so I wasn't here when Bac Ho visited March Eighth. But Bac Ho visited Nam Dinh when I was there. He was there for a campaign to overcome the drought [in the province] and while he was there he took the opportunity to visit the Nam Dinh factory. Ho was wearing khaki brown trousers and a worn-out shirt and he looked very gentle. He looked like a *tien* (angel, spirit, Buddha's disciple). I feel closer to Ho than to my own grandfather. Ho said he was there because of the drought and so visited the factory, to visit the farming and working classes. He said a bit about industrial production. He had a very strong voice. I heard that here Uncle Ho also visited one of the apartment buildings. In colonial times, I had no idea what a President would be like, but I saw then how close Ho was to the people. He went to the kitchens and the toilets to see how the workers lived. At first, we didn't know who was coming, some said Pham Van Dong [then Prime Minister], some said General Giap, others just said someone from the centre. When the guard came in and said it was Bac Ho, everyone stood up and applauded. Ho said to us to beware the sugar-coated bullet (*viên đạn bọc đường*). He said that workers produce goods like farmers produce food. Industry and agriculture are like two legs for socialism to stand on and neither should be crippled. They need to be equally developed. We were very excited about hearing this speech.

There are obvious similarities in Muong's version of Ho's visit to the Nam Dinh factory and Tam's version of the visit to March Eighth. Ho's kitchens and toilet inspection in Nam Dinh expressed the same message of his immense sympathy for the workers, and his simple clothing, army trousers and a worn-out shirt, also emphasised his sincerity. The word *tien* that Muong used to describe Ho's appearance suggests immortality and beauty, with a strong connotation of religious power.

While the official version is much concerned with recording what Ho said, the personal narratives concentrate on what Ho did. Workers told me that even if they were not present for Ho's speech, they still discussed it in their cell meetings in the weeks afterward. Most of the workers say that even so they cannot remember

anything in the speech. One paused for a while when I asked him about it, and then said “it was about the role of women in production”, which is at least a very safe guess. Muong and Dau remember only key images from Ho’s speeches, of the sugar coated bullet and the twin legs of socialism, but these images are resonant in their own experiences, as one image is used to critique materialism and corruption, and the other to invoke a triumphal past. When he summoned for me the image of “the twin legs of socialism”, Muong even used his own war wounds as a kind of memory landscape, wagging his mangled hand at himself and me as he recalled the phrase “neither should be crippled”.

Their personal interest is also immediately evident in the informal rhythms and vocabulary of the language that the workers use to tell their stories, which contrast with the official discourse that they could deploy. As I mentioned earlier, all older workers at times lapsed into this almost archaic language of the mobilisations. This same formal language is still used in the meetings of the local Women’s Union and appears on posters and slogans around the *khu*. This is the style used in the official history in the official version of Ho’s visit, including phrases of his speech such as “born as the result of sweat and blood” (*ra doi la thanh qua doi bang mo hoi, xuong mau*) and “to overcome limitations” (*khac phuc nhung ton tai*) in “the struggle for independence and freedom” (*su nghiep dau tranh vi doc lap va thu do*). The workers’ stories of Ho, however, are told in demotic idiom, in the same domestic language they would use to describe something that happened to them in childhood. By extracting their stories of Ho from the thicket of official language, the workers can claim him as part of their own lived experience, and so separate his personal example from the bad examples they see around them now. But, in fact, by describing Ho’s visit as “like a festival day” (*le hoi*), Thu uses a word with particular resonance in official socialist policy, since festivals were one focus of anti-superstition campaigns and also seen by the Party as reproducing feudal values and inegalitarian social relations (cf. Malarney 2001a: 120). Thu’s comment suggests that the Party did not achieve a full repudiation of the happiness of feudal festivals, but was partly effective in making Ho’s visit into a kind of secular state ritual.

Memory and Forgetting

Besides what is there in the differences in personal narratives and the official one, I am also struck by what is not. Identifying ellipsis and absence in the telling of the Ho story reinforces the sense that workers are creating their own meanings when they talk about Uncle Ho. For example, one historical element that has completely vanished from people's accounts of the visit, but not from the official history, is the important Chinese influence on the early days of the factory. In the official photos of the inaugural ceremony, one can clearly see the huge banner behind Ho espousing Vietnam's friendship with China, written in Vietnamese script and Chinese characters, and a vast poster of Ho shaking hands with Mao towers above Ho's head. In the same way that the workers I interviewed said they remembered almost nothing about visitors other than Ho, none of them volunteered a mention of the Chinese presence in the factory and were not very interested when I asked them directly about it. I knew from other interviews and comments that the general impression of the Chinese experts was overwhelmingly negative. I was told that they were unfriendly and unsympathetic. This was obvious to the workers because the Chinese experts would not eat Vietnamese food; they brought their own cooks to make them food in their official hotel, and never ate at the canteens where Nhu cooked such fine revolutionary meals. The importance of commensality in Vietnam clearly predates socialist campaigns about collective eating, but the campaigns, and Uncle Ho himself in his speech at the opening ceremony, gave the workers the official language with which to criticise their Chinese comrades: "They had no solidarity (*su doan ket*) with the workers," I was told. Chinese architects were also implicated in the communal toilets fiasco. "It's a Chinese design. Who else would live like this?" workers said when complaining about the *khu* buildings. Nhu told me: "This building was built by the Chinese, so there was only one toilet." Chanh told me: "The Chinese were villainous (*doc ac*), building houses without kitchens, building only rooms for living in and public toilets."

Also vanishing, along with the Chinese, from narratives of the past are the stories of other leaders who visited the factory. After hearing some stories of Ho's visit, and finding in the official history the names of leaders who had visited over the years (including Party General Secretary Le Duan, as I mentioned previously), I began to ask who remembered anything of those visits. Almost no one did.

Conversations tended to go like this one, with Bac Thu, who told me how exciting it was to hold Uncle Ho's hand as she stood with the self-defence forces:

MR: Besides Uncle Ho, do you remember if there were other leaders who visited the factory?

Thu: [Long pause. Pours more tea.] There was also Pham Van Dong. He came by car. I don't remember if Vo Nguyen Giap visited, only Comrade Pham Van Dong because he came during my shift.

MR: Do you remember what Pham Van Dong said?

Thu: No.

MR: Was it interesting (*hay*)?

Thu: *Khong hay lam*. (Not very). [Laughs.]

Bac Hoe, a retired male cadre, told me about hearing Ho's speech at the factory.

When I asked him if other leaders came, he also paused to think before answering.

Yes, other leaders came, Pham Van Dong, and...[long pause]...and some foreigners came. When foreigners came they were accompanied by the [Vietnamese] Prime Minister or Vice Prime Minister, so that must have been some other leaders. Sihanouk came, and Chou En Lai came, accompanied by the comparable Vietnamese authority. Probably many more but I can't remember. I never had any personal contact with any of them, I would just go to the meeting room to hear about their speech. Usually their speech was about praising the production spirit of the workers.

Hoe could only work out by deduction that leaders had come, because foreign leaders had come and so must have been accompanied. Similarly, Bac Son, another retired worker, who had fought in the Army in the South and then been a secretary in the Youth Union in the factory, also remembered Ho's visit, and told me that he tried to follow Ho around the factory on his tour. Otherwise, though, he only remembered the visits of exotic foreigners. When I visited him, he showed me a picture of himself with Chinese experts who had come to train technical workers at March Eighth. After Son told me of Ho's visit, I asked him: "Do you remember if there was anyone else notable who came to the factory?" Son replied confidently: "There were many!" "Who?" I asked. He replied, "Prince Sihanouk [of Cambodia] and Monique [his wife]." Here the women in the room, Son's wife, also a retired worker, and Bac Nhu, who was visiting for tea, chimed in. "*Dep qua!* (She was very beautiful)" "...and some leaders, I don't know," continued Son.

Another ellipsis was in the division between people who wanted to tell me Uncle Ho stories and those who did not. The detailed, hardly prompted stories I have recounted here were all told to me by the most extremely disillusioned of the original workers; the ones who were most dedicated in the past and are least rewarded in the present. The more economically successful cadre and workers, all of whom have almost certainly become so because of practices of which Uncle Ho would not approve, were often much less interested in talking to me about Ho's visit, although not necessarily about the past in other ways. Nhu, for example, author of the revolutionary poem above, recited for me many of her poems. At least one of them (that begins "I am the March Eighth girl", quoted in Chapter Two) mentions "the loving Uncle Ho". When I asked her about Uncle Ho's visit, though, the usually voluble Nhu, with her sharp memory for her own verse, gave me a brief and lukewarm answer. Our conversation went like this:

MR: Do you remember when Uncle Ho visited the factory?

Nhu: In '63, '64 or so.

MR: Did you meet (*gap*) him?

Nhu: No.

MR: Did you see him?

Nhu: I was working.

MR: You were working in a workshop that he visited?

Nhu: No, he didn't visit every workshop.

MR: Did you hear what Ho said to workers when he was here?

Nhu: No, I forget. It was a long time ago so I have forgotten.

As I have described, Nhu is still a Women's Union official in the *khu* and active in many campaigns. Meanwhile, she has also built a successful business selling sticky rice in the main market, and has access to the protection and sponsorship of the local administration through the Women's Union. Her business has paid for her to rebuild her house, supported her two sons to study and coddled a fat grandson who Nhu admits is the epitome of a spoiled child.

It is not unheard of, of course, for the popular perception of leaders to diverge from state narratives, particularly in the creation of heroes. The modern Vietnamese state uses Ho as a symbol of the Party's pre-eminence, while ordinary people in their admiration and recollection of Ho can separate him from present political concerns and can even employ him to criticise the current state of the Party or government, or

venerate him as a supernatural agent despite the rigorous secularisation of socialist scientism. Similarly, in an article on perceptions of Gandhi in Gorakhpur in the 1920's, Amin (1988) discusses the idea of the "Mahatma", the deification of Gandhi in popular imagination. In Amin's example, the nationalist elites who led the independence movement criticised the "mythopoeic imagination of the childlike peasant" for deifying the rigorously secular Gandhi and were particularly disturbed to see his name used to justify anti-Muslim activities (Amin 1988: 291). Amin also points out differences between newspaper accounts of Gandhi's speeches in the district and what the villagers selectively retained of them. He analyses the "polysemic nature of the Mahatma myth and rumours", which represent a broad response from people to cultural and political events and express their concerns about moral judgments and actions (ibid.: 294).

Closer to Vietnam, Evans (1998) also documents the political cult in Laos of Kaysone Phomvihane, the founder of the Laos Communist Party. Kaysone's cult promoted after his death in 1975 was modeled neither on a Stalinist embodiment of a totalitarian system, nor appealing to a Confucian system of ancestor cults, since Laos' Theravada Buddhism saves divine status for royalty. Instead, the state has used secular routes, such as museums, memorials, and publications, to try to legitimate Kaysone's nationalist past, even trying to create for him an avuncular image drawing on Ho Chi Minh's model (Evans 1998: 37). As historian Miller has suggested, even the Southern Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem used a Ho Chi Minh-like model of revolutionary virtue in his official biographies (Miller n.d.).

To say that the masses do not unreservedly or unquestioningly embrace all aspects of state leadership cults is not a revelation. What is interesting to me in this case is the specific divergences raised in the March Eighth Ho narratives. Why were some formerly dedicated cadre like Nhu less interested in telling me about Uncle Ho than others? Why did the Chinese presence vanish from the narratives of Ho's visit and of the founding days of the factory?

Conclusion: The Limits of State Functionalism and Unified Narrative

To return to how I began this chapter, I wonder whether in the answer to these questions is also the answer to why getting the year right is less important to the

workers than getting across the significance of the visit. The official narrative is concerned with communicating an official unified history, in which Ho's visit is seamlessly integrated into a general story of the triumph of socialist industrial development. The personal narratives represent the way that economic changes and the decreasing importance of socialist campaigns have uncoupled once dedicated cadre and workers from their identification with the political concerns of the Party and state, but not with the values that they profess to represent.

The personal narratives of Uncle Ho's visit can be analysed, at least analogously, in light of Malarney's (1996a) work on state functionalism in Vietnam. As I described in Chapter One, Malarney describes how state reform of ritual in Thinh Liet commune eliminated inegalitarian elements and symbols, shortening and simplifying funerals and weddings. Malarney names this attempt to control ritual meaning and practice as "state functionalism". After *doi moi*, some inegalitarian elements reappeared in rituals, but pre-revolutionary rituals were not revived wholesale, and rituals became a key focus for discussion about moral action. While debating the proper methods of conducting funerals, for example, people in Thinh Liet would express concerns about waste and status in the language of ideological state discourse. State functionalism failed to establish hegemonic meanings for ritual symbolism, but did succeed in introducing new meanings into public discourse. Thus state functionalism failed to completely reform the practice of rituals, but did incorporate official values into the realm of meaning and interpretations associated with them (Malarney 1996a). Or, as Evans suggests for the failure of Laotian socialism, attempts "are unlikely to produce 'socialist men' if only because socialisation is a problematic process: it cannot be totally closed because there is always some lack of fit between individuals and social institutions. Disjunctions between individuals and institutions and among different institutions are the spaces in which social change can develop or evolve into serious contradictions" (Evans 1990: 209).

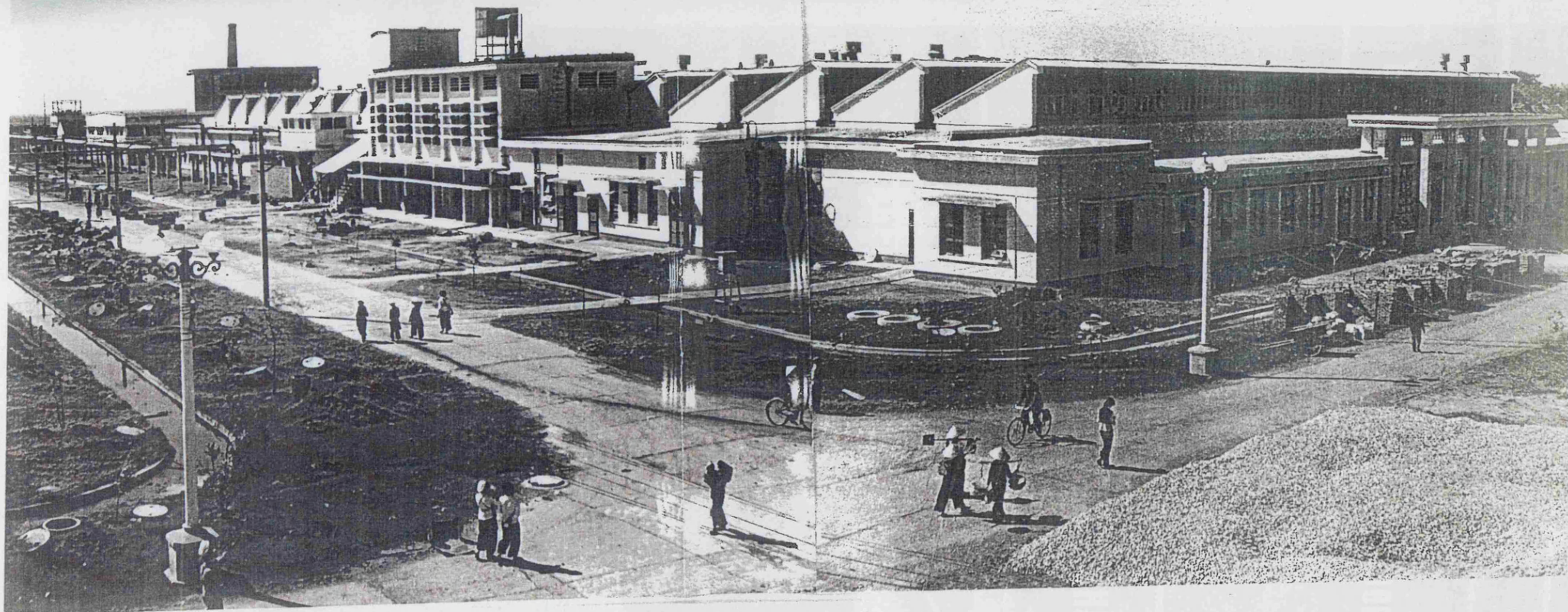
Malarney (2001b) offers another example of how to look at social practice in relation to state policy in his analysis of two kinds of rituals honoring war dead. As he explains, all soldiers who died fighting for the revolution (either in the war for independence from France or the American War) are officially classified as "martyrs" (*liet sĩ*) by the state. Martyrs, whose bodies were usually not returned for burial in

their home villages, were given official, secular state funerals with public rituals to give honor to the dead for sacrificing their lives for the revolution, and annual ceremonies commemorate their sacrifice. They are thus “reborn into the pantheon of heroes who had suffered and died to protect and liberate the motherland,” one community of remembrance (Malarney 2001b: 72). Families are honored by this official remembrance and do not resist it. However, families then conducted their own private rituals, around the family altar to the ancestors, intended to propitiate the unhappy ghost of the soldier so that it could go in peace to the other world (*the gioi khac*). In this way, the soldier would be reborn into the other world with the souls of other dead ancestors, another community of remembrance. Malarney concludes that these two communities of remembrance are not incommensurable, but complementary. He describes the relationship between them as an “interlocking web of these two communities” (Malarney 2001b: 73).

In a parallel way, one element that I have considered in this chapter is state functionalism in the construction of history and narrative. In the propagation of the image of the virtuous Uncle Ho and the creation of a public discourse of revolutionary virtue, the Vietnamese state intended to communicate a monolithic set of meanings and values to be derived from Ho’s life and words; the version of Ho’s visit in the official history is just one small manifestation of this attempt. But, as in the religious rituals that Malarney described, unexpected elements and symbols emerge in the way workers talk, and do not talk, about Uncle Ho, and in the ways that in their narratives they reshape the lessons of the past. We have seen some of the ways in which people in their actions enacted elements of the New Family Culture campaigns: by living frugally; dedicating their children to the factory; and composing revolutionary poetry. These same workers, or other workers, also rejected elements of the campaigns: by having affairs; staging wasteful rituals; preferring private toilets. Similarly, in their narratives, some workers eliminated elements of the unified history that the state promoted, for example in rejecting or subverting the contribution of the despised Chinese. Others, perhaps reluctant to reflect on the ways their current sugar bullet type practices have diverged from their professed revolutionary ideals, expressed no interest in Ho’s visit, preferring to leave Ho’s model of virtue ossified in the past rather than bring it living into the present. On the other hand, when workers chose to tell me enthusiastic stories about the significance of Ho’s visit, they

accepted some state symbolism of Ho's revolutionary simplicity, egalitarianism, thrift, and moral purity. State functionalism seemed at least partly successful in circulating these definitions of virtue into public and political discourse. This is a limit of state functionalism: as with religious rituals, the state fostered in the *khu* the recognition of equality and communality as important values; as with religious rituals, the state was unable to control the interpretation and deployment of these values, so that moral judgment may even be turned against the state or its officials. Rather than deriving from these definitions a personal narrative that dovetailed with the concerns of the state, these workers could use these state-mandated symbols to generate their own meaningful response to their current circumstances and to lament that "people are not as good as they once were".

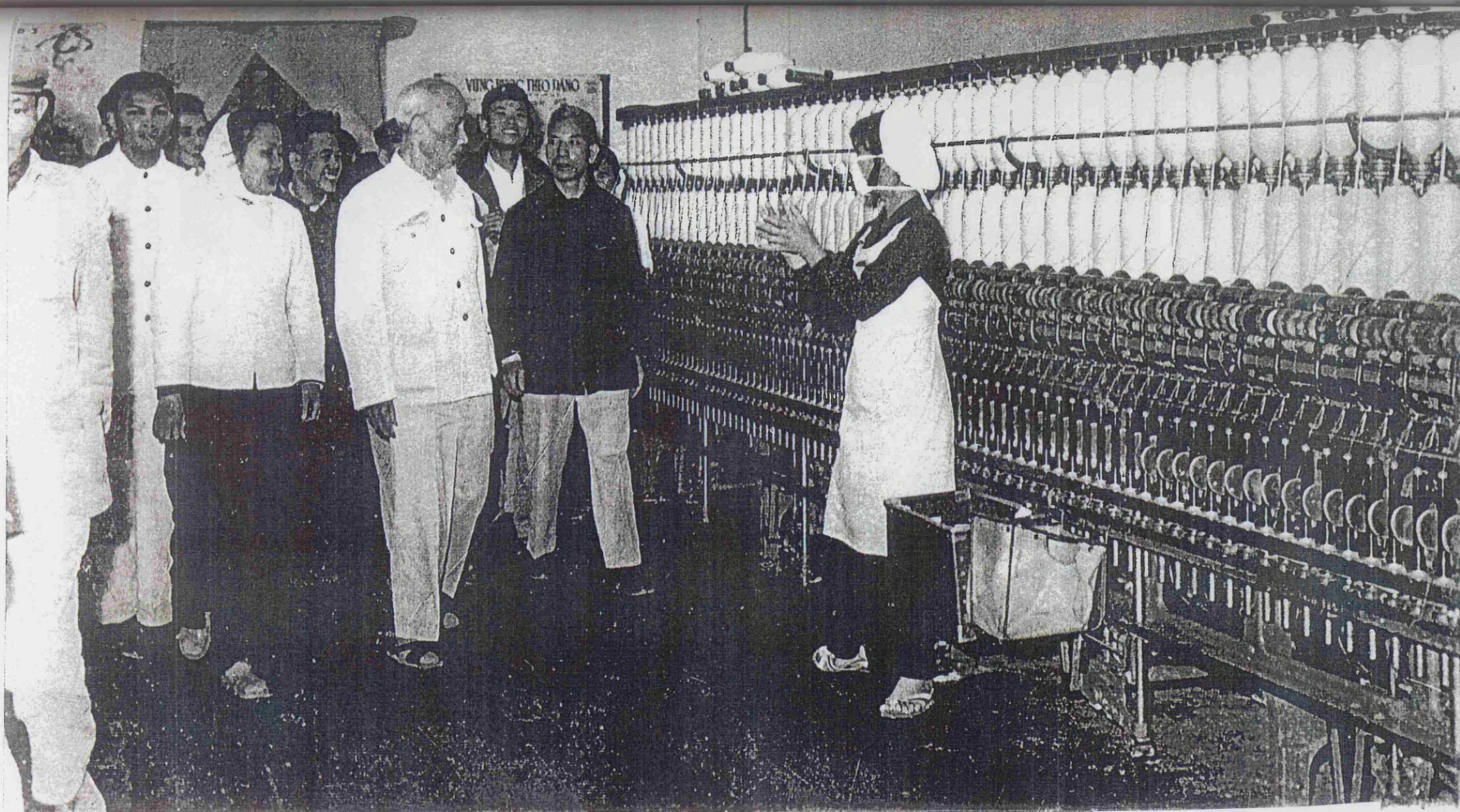
Photographs



Panorama of the exterior of the main building of the March Eighth Textile Factory.
Along the left side of the photograph can be seen a row of individual bomb shelters, with
open lids. Vietnam News Agency (VNA), 1965



Ho Chi Minh opens the March Eighth Factory on March 8, 1965. Behind him, the banners translate as: "Long Live Firm Friendship between Vietnam and China" And "Enthusiastically Hailing the Inauguration of the Textile Factory 8-3". VNA, 1965



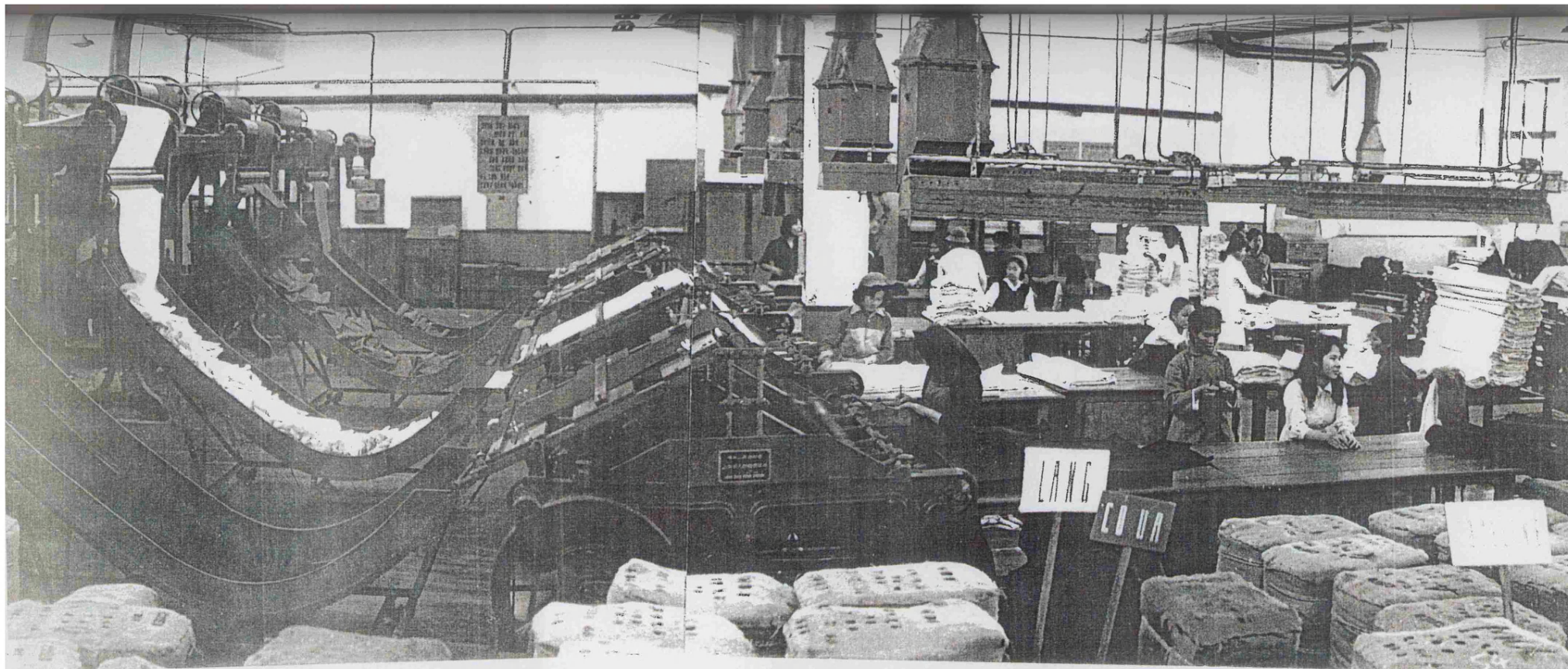
Ho Chi Minh tours the spinning section of the factory. Next to him, On his right, is factory director Le Thi Nha, in black trousers and white kerchief. VNA, 1965



Labour hero Dinh Hong Nga and her sister (Vietnam News Agency caption does not specify which is which). One holds a wooden shuttle that was the target of a later state campaign for self-sufficiency against Chinese equipment. Behind them, the poster reads: "Learn from all the comrade excellent workers". VNA, 1965



A labour hero at work in the thread spinning section. VNA, 1965



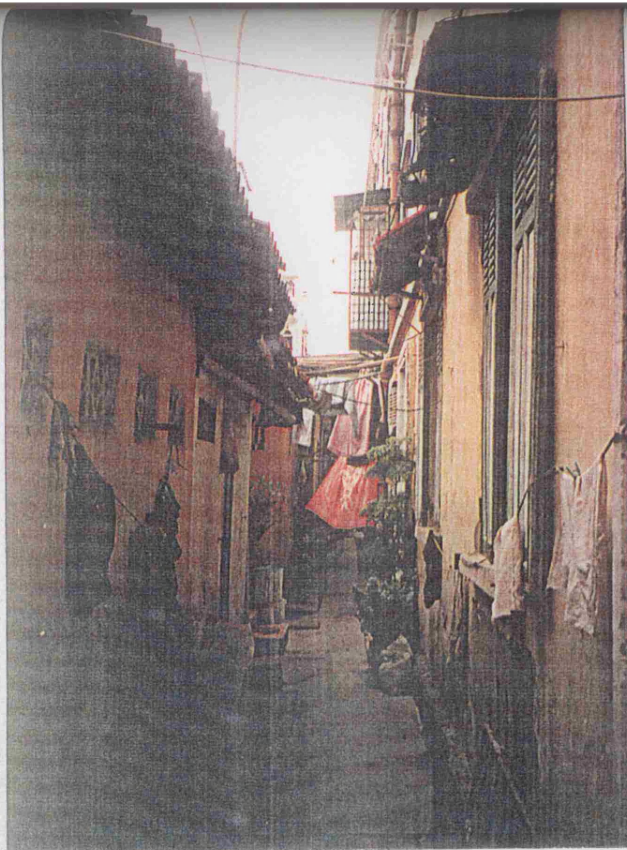
Panorama of the folding and packing room. Workers now use the curved bottom of the folding machines, shown in the left of the photograph, as a place to nap after lunch.
VNA, 1965



Two girls wearing *ao dai* in a *khu* apartment. 1999



Incense burning in front of Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum. Tet 1999.



Alleyway between *khu* buildings. 1999



Exterior of *khu* Building A5. 1999



Incense burning at Chua Quynh pagoda on Tet. 1999



National flags flying in *khu* Building D5 on National Day. 1998

PART TWO: THE PRESENT

CHAPTER FIVE

Far From the Fire: Building Democratic, Happy and Harmonious Families

Housing in the March Eighth Khu

If Ho Chi Minh was disappointed with the state of the communal toilets and living areas in 1965, he would be even more critical of the physical state of the *khu tap* the apartments today, which present a vivid picture of decline. In this chapter I will consider how the residents have responded to this physical decline, as well as to their own diminished political and economic importance in the post-*doi moi* world, and show how in the new market economy, many of them have drifted away from concerns of state power, national narratives and collective morality, and towards a more atomised and localised concern with family and individual success.

Whereas the *khu tap* the apartments were once seen as modern and desirable residences, their poor upkeep, continued decay, and the availability of alternative private property around Hanoi has made them seem extremely disadvantageous since *doi moi*. The following is an excerpt from the book Shelter and Living in Hanoi, a Vietnamese academic work published in English by the Foreign Languages Publishing House (I have left in the translation errors):

Apartment building area of Eighth March Textile Factory: Separation, Stagnation and Backwardness

Opposite to dynamic changes in various fronts as in the case of Nguyen Cong Tru apartment building area, another apartment building area in Hanoi is rumpling overcrowded, segregated and pauperised socially. Apartment building area of 8th March knitting plant located in Quynh Mai ward, Hai Ba Trung district is an example of such cases.

During the period of the central planning economy, Quynh Mai was a rather typical ward in Hanoi concerning accommodation types and population. The ward is adjacent to some big plants... 15 four or five-storey buildings managed by the March 8th knitting corporation.

Given the transition to a market economy, serious reduction in production of knitting plants, residents have been facing numerous difficulties.

The March 8th plant was built in early 1960's with financial assistance from Chinese government was the pride of the whole Vietnamese light industry. At the highest point, the plant employed up to 8000 workers in the 1970s and 1980s making garments to export to former Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. Since the 1990's up to now production has cut down and fell into stagnation... From being a residence for knitting workers with an intermediate living standard, it's now an area of poor and lowest income population of the City. A female knitting worker has an

average monthly salary of almost 300,000 VND. She is also the breadwinner of the family (four persons on average). Consequently living standard is lowest in relation to Vietnam's urban standard...

Further more, housing and hygiene conditions are very poor. Apartment buildings were built 40 years ago, with 16 or 18 square meters for each flat. First of all, this kind of flat was designed for unmarried young workers (each flat can house 3 or 4 workers). But now, it's granted to a general working family. Thus some families together 3 generations live within only one flat...

Apartment buildings are degrading terribly due to lack of maintenance and renovation for years. There're only one latrine trench and a bathroom for 5 to 10 families. Now that, there's only one running water tap working for about one hour providing water for 5 to 10 households each floor. . .

Environmental hygiene such as drainage, waste and polluted air caused by coal cookers from households, the 8th March apartment building area is become a "high storey slum"...Residents in the 8th March living quarter have faced negative impacts resulted from market mechanism transition over the last years...Frustration and pessimism are commonly found among households living in the area (Luan and Schenk 2000: 98-101).

Over the years, residents of the *khu* have adapted their living conditions in various ways. As mentioned previously, some have extended their space into corridors or balconies, or built extensions onto ground floor flats. It is also common to plumb in private kitchens and bathrooms where possible. Such improvements and alterations are aimed at creating a privately defined space clearly at odds with the original collective ideology of *khu* living. As noted previously, this movement can be traced from the early complaints about communal kitchens and toilets. It has intensified with the decreased regulatory atmosphere and increased access to money and building materials post-*doi moi*.

At the same time, officially organised, public maintenance and repairs to the *khu* buildings were virtually non-existent. Uyen, for example, a Party member and Women's Union official who lives in D1 building, on the same side of the courtyard as Bac Nhu's house, showed me a petition she was circulating for all ten families on her floor to sign, addressed to the management of the factory. The petition requested that they fix the central common area of the fourth floor, which was clearly collapsing, Uyen told me, "because the building was built in 1961 and never repaired. It is now so decrepit that the city won't take responsibility for it any more and wants the factory to do it. There are a lot of problems like that."

As the buildings have decayed and been physically adapted, residents have also been expected to assume more responsibility for them, as the legal arrangements surrounding provision of *khu* housing have changed. As noted in previous chapters,

before *doi moi*, *khu* apartments were distributed (*phan*) free to workers according to their ranking, especially of political points (*diem*). Now they are sublet (*hoa hong*), with the factory providing the housing in exchange for subsidised rent, so that the residents are responsible for small rent payments every month. Some long-term residents have been able to buy their flats with equity calculated for the length of time they have lived there. Most people wanted to buy their flats although they were glum about the condition of the buildings and the wisdom of the investment, as well as doubtful about its legality.

Following is a conversation I had with Bac Chanh, a fifty-seven year old Women's Union member and former weaving section worker, who lives in a small two room flat in Building A4. In Chapter Three I recounted Chanh's story of her disappointment at the allocation of the flat on the third floor. She and her husband pay to rent the flat and now want it to be allocated to them with no additional charge:

MR: How much do you pay for this flat every month?

Chanh: 24.600 VND (about \$2).

MR: If later the factory sells this flat, will you buy it?

Chanh: We have to do so. But some days ago they said that they would only charge people who bought flats here in cash. People who stayed here for a long time might have a certain amount subtracted from the price. So there are people who don't have to pay, some are even given for free. Since I moved here, I have had to pay a lot for housing. I have lived here for over 30 years.

MR: When will you be able to buy it?

Chanh: I don't know. The factory said I hadn't handed in the housing fee in recent years but the collector still goes to collect very frequently. He comes to my flat to collect every month. I don't understand what is going on. It is now still messy like that. Retired old women like me don't know whom to claim to.

The People's Republic of Building D15

However, as I discovered in the *khu tap the*, not everyone finds themselves so confused and powerless by what Vietnamese call the new situation (*tin hình moi*). One day when I was visiting Bac Nhu in her ground-floor apartment in the *khu*, we were mixing a vat of sweet bean paste to serve with sticky rice for her breakfast stall. She asked me how my research was going, and I told her I thought it was going well. "Are you learning all about factory women? Do you want to meet more workers?" she asked me. "In fact," I told her, "I know a lot of women. Maybe I have to meet more men." "Yes," Bac Nhu answered delightedly, "and you can ask them what they

think about women! Come back tomorrow and I will take you to meet some old men. They will have time to talk to you all day.”

The next day I brought my tape recorder and came with Chi Khanh to Bac Nhu’s house. Bac Nhu led us into the D15 apartment block, across the courtyard in front of her house. As we climbed the stairs, both Chi Khanh and I noticed that the building was freshly painted, the stairs were tiled rather than the usual concrete, and the hallway was wide and clean. “*Dep qua!* (How beautiful!)” commented Khanh. “Yes, this building is new and rich,” replied Bac Nhu. Bac Cao’s on the third floor was the largest *khu* flat I had seen, with three large rooms and a big balcony. Bac Cao and his wife welcomed us in. As we were introduced, offered tea, and settled down in the main room, Khanh, looking around with interest, immediately started firing off questions about the building and the apartment, how much it cost, how long Cao’s family had lived there, how many square metres they had. “One minute, please,” I begged her as I fumbled with my tape recorder.

Cao explained that his family, six people, had moved to D15 in 1992, after living since 1976 in Building E1, in one room that was fifteen square metres. Their place in D15 was fifty-four square metres and cost 26 million VND to buy (around \$2,350). Cao’s wife’s brothers and sisters had loaned them money to buy the apartment, although Cao insisted proudly that they had been repaid within two years. Cao also pointed out modestly that the apartments on the third floor of the building were cheaper than those on the ground floor, which he said were bigger and airier. Cao, who was fifty-five years old, had been an army medic and then a hospital administrator, and had retired early with a relatively generous army pension (400,000 VND a month, around \$36, almost twice the average factory pension and more than the salary of some of the women factory workers who still worked full-time). His wife still worked in the weaving section of the factory, as did his oldest daughter, who was twenty-nine. They had all supplemented their income in the previous flat by raising chickens in the kitchen and boxing cigarettes, although Cao’s daughters complained that packaging cigarettes expended too much effort for too little money. Cao had three more children, the youngest of whom, at seventeen, was in her first year of university and who everyone believed and hoped would be the most successful one in the family. Cao’s second child, a son, had finished university but was meagrely employed and the third, a daughter, had dropped out of college to make way for her youngest sister.

Perhaps aiding his evident success in taking advantage of the economic opportunities presented in the new market economy, Cao had an exemplary political background. He was active in many of the mass organisations of the *phuong*, including serving as president of the *phuong* Red Cross committee, although all of his roles in the community were volunteer and so none directly brought in extra income.

What I eventually pieced together, on subsequent visits, of Cao's family's economic and political circumstances fit one pattern of post-reform life in the *khu*, a kind of nuclear corporate family augmenting small-scale entrepreneurial activity with factory and *khu* political connections. This modern success reached its apotheosis in Building D15, which, as I came to learn, was a special zone of individualism among the collectivity of the *khu*. The clean prosperity of life in Building D15 contrasted dramatically with some of the other lives in the *khu*, such as the damp poverty of wounded veteran Ong Muong who lived two courtyards away in one small room and whose son was married outside in the courtyard because Muong's family didn't have money to pay for a tent.

The development of Building D15 and the allocation of its flats showed one way that the political activism of the past could intersect with the free market values of the present. Building D15 was built under the public housing regulations in the late 1980's but in the *doi moi* spirit, with private bathrooms and kitchens. Rather than allocating the flats for rent, land-use rights to the flats were auctioned off for sale. The price for the flats was subsidised, so that the cost was below market rates, but still far more expensive than housing had previously cost for March Eighth *khu* residents. The sale was massively oversubscribed and prospective residents used political influence to gain the right to buy the flats. Bac Cao, for example, had his excellent army record and political history, as well as family support. Bac Hoe, who lived on the ground floor of Building D15, bought his place in 1992 for 36 million VND (\$3300). (It was more expensive than Cao's because it was on the ground floor and larger, almost eighty square metres including a small garden). Hoe had been an engineer in the factory since its early days and previously been allocated a small place in another building. He told me that when he applied to buy his place in D15, he had to wait in line and then have a long interview. His file was examined and his record discussed. Hoe had been a long-time activist and had high priority in the *diem* system of points, as well as also having financial support from a daughter working in Germany and another working for a foreign company in Hanoi. Bac Hoe's family

was another example of *doi moi* success, with his prosperous daughters and his youngest child, a son, studying at Chu Van An, Hanoi's most prestigious secondary school.

The allocation of space in D15 provides a clear example of political status being brokered into material advantage, reminiscent of the old points-based allocation of accommodation in the *khu* during the days of high socialism mentioned in Chapter Three. However, it was my impression that the present advantages of political activism are variable: sometimes beneficial, but not always sufficient to justify the time and energy required.

In the *khu*, as elsewhere in Vietnam, there is declining interest in political participation at the local level. Party membership is low, and there are fewer and fewer people doing "social work" (*cong tac xa hoi*) through the *phuong*. In one exception, the Women's Union of the *phuong* remains strong, perhaps because the historical importance of the factory as a women's project and the identification of the *khu* as a residence for the factory. However, most of the active Women's Union members are over fifty and retired. The one young woman in the Women's Union, Nga, was a twenty year old college student and the daughter of a Women's Union board member. Nga also served as President of the *phuong* Youth Union and organised summer courses for children that were required attendance in the People's Committee headquarters (to be re-admitted to school in the autumn, children required a certificate that they had participated in some constructive summer activities). Besides Nga, none of the young people I knew was a Youth Union member and Ha, for example, snorted dismissively when I asked her whether she was interested in it, although her father Anh Minh is a Party member. Nga invited me a few times to attend Youth Union meetings but always cancelled at the last minute, so that I began to suspect that Youth Union meetings were often suspended for lack of attendance. With the shortage of activists willing to enlist in the local mass organisations, Nga's doubling up of roles in the *phuong*, in both the Youth Union and the Women's Union, was a common case. Bac Nhu, for example, was the vice-president of the Women's Union; she was also the accountant for the Red Cross of the *phuong*, and served on the People's Council of the *phuong* and in the Retired Person's Association. Bac Cao, who was President of the Red Cross in the *phuong*, was also active in the Veterans Association. When the Elderly Person's Union had had a recruitment drive a few years earlier, they signed Bac Cao up although he was not yet old enough and Ong Muong, at seventy-seven years old, complained about

people younger than fifty-five who had joined. Cao was one of the few who diligently attended their regular meetings (Muong said he usually felt too weak), although he complained about their frequency and pointlessness.

As I discussed in Chapter One, while *doi moi* has reduced the status and honour of local officials, it has created a situation in which money has replaced political engagement as a measure of prestige. Some cadre have used their political influence to aid themselves and their families in accumulating wealth, and there is widespread concern about corruption among local and national officials. As with the *phuong* cadre whose political connections allowed him to build a large house in front of someone else's smaller one (cited in Chapter One), those who are close to the fire in the new order may use their power and connections for material gain. In another example, a woman I knew who was a manager in the personnel section of the factory was married to a man who worked for a state-owned tourist company. Despite apparently having only their combined state salaries, they had recently bought a twelve-seat van that the husband could rent to his company for use in transporting tourists. Another manager in the wife's section told me jealously, "It cost \$20,000. Where do you think she got the money? And they have to pay to park it!" Malarney quotes villagers who say of officials who have become wealthy: "They used to have nothing, and now they ride motorbikes" (Malarney 1997: 918).

The allocation of space in D15 produced an ironic situation, in which some of the most vocal advocates of the virtues of the old days of high socialism, such as Ong Cao, secured a privileged position within the *khu* as a whole that would have been politically unacceptable in the past. This contradictory situation was illustrated to me one day when I was visiting Bac Hoe, who lives on the ground floor of Building D15. As I was chatting to him about how beautiful his flat was, he told me that it must stay like that, because everyone agreed. I asked what he meant, and he produced from his papers a document which read as follows:

Regulations for the Use of Building D15

House D15 belongs to the ownership of 24 households. The guarantee of life expectancy and beautiful appearance of the architecture of this construction, guaranteeing order and security, to preserve the affection and feelings of community and neighbourliness, is the responsibility and the right of every household. Therefore, we together pledge ourselves to strictly realise these regulations, consisting of 5 points:

Point 1: The house of each family consists of: a living room, a kitchen and bathroom area, a water tank, territory (if you have it) belonging to the ownership of each flat. If you repair, upgrade, or change the structure, or add anything extra, you must have the agreement of the administration of all levels (for example, the *phuong*, the *quan*) and must have the agreement of all the flats around.

Point 2: Every activity: cooking food, washing/bathing/showering, drying clothes, rearing animals for production, must be inside the house of every flat. If you keep dogs you must inoculate them and you cannot let them wander unbridled.

The hallways and staircases of all the flats must be swept in turn and you may not place [ritual] offerings or anything there in order to guarantee easy passage and beautiful cleanliness. (Except for staircase II, which has a separate regulation).

Point 3: The spare land (from the edge of the first floor corridor to the edge of the common yard of the house D15-A3), 60 m² wide, is the pathway and common play area of all the families, absolutely no family can transgress this by doing anything private like: planting plants or leaving anything which becomes an obstacle to activities and passage.

Point 4: Respect each other, don't bang, don't make noise stomping around on the floor, don't make noise at lunch time, and in the evenings the children of the families of D15 cannot romp with their friends in the corridor, the steps, or the terrace.

Point 5: All the families if they keep vigilant and are unified, help and aid each other, can realise a civilised life, and a new family culture.

This commitment comes into effect from 10/10/94. All the families in D15 unanimously pass and pledge to strictly realise these regulations.

If any family commits an error they must bear the full responsibility.

The document was carefully typed on official letterhead, with the national slogan across the top: "The Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Independence, Freedom, Happiness". It was stamped at the bottom in a red ink seal, and dated "Hanoi, 26/9/94". It looked exactly like an official document of the People's Committee. But in fact, it was an unofficial, certainly non-Party arrangement. Bac Hoe explained to me that after the flats were allocated, in order to keep the building in the gleaming condition in which it had been constructed, the residents agreed to establish rules for life in Building D15. Together they drafted these rules, and produced this document that was copied to each resident.

The decision to emphasise five points, and the official language used, echo countless other such study documents and campaigns with which the occupants would be familiar from the days of high socialism. Ho Chi Minh, as noted in the previous chapter, outlined five revolutionary virtues, adapted from the five Confucian virtues. Similarly, as quoted in Chapter Two, a Party Directive from 1964 outlined the “Five Goods for Neighbourhoods, Five Goods for Families, Five Goods for Collective Living Quarters (*Khu Tap The’s*)” (Hanoi 1964a). But those principles were aimed at goals such as “enhancing the public revolutionary spirit” and “developing new personalities and lives in line with socialism”, while the manifesto of Building D15 has different aims. Rather than support the collectivity of the entire *khu*, the group of D15 residents had quietly seceded from *phuong* management and arranged privately to maintain the value of their property and the quality of their domestic lives. However, to legitimise this private undertaking, in their manifesto, the residents of D15 had deployed the language and iconography of the Party, and of the socialist past, including the valorisation of a “new family culture” and “security and order”. As Malarney writes of Thinh Liet, where discussion of morality and culture are imbued with ideas taken from socialist campaigns, “official positions and assertions have, in effect, become part of... social reality” (Malarney 2001a: 112).

The language of the D15 manifesto is in itself a form of nostalgic recollection of the glory day of the *khu* as a whole. It is less certain what “new family culture” and “security and order” mean in this new context. Although the regulations appeal to “feelings of community and neighbourliness”, they represent above all a spirit of individualism and the pursuit of familial and private rather than collective and public good. In the rest of this chapter, I look at how the inhabitants of the *khu*, and women in particular, pursue their family lives in the present. I discuss many aspects of domestic life in the *khu* during my fieldwork, including relationships between men and women, the reproduction of families and the central economic role of women within families in the changing economic context. I consider the ways in which women in the *khu* express anxiety about crime, drugs, and moral decay, and evaluate markers of success and failure, including their own identities as rural and urban. I suggest that contemporary domestic life in the *khu* is negotiated around the limitations and expectations of political and economic access and moral judgement, and show how women’s judgements about moral action and virtuous behaviour remain coloured by the past as they struggle to adapt and try to prosper in a world

that has become more morally fragmented, and in which the fire of socialist political power is dampened by market economics.

Making ends meet

As I have mentioned, the opening of Vietnam's economy since *doi moi* has allowed the visible emergence of a tiny wealthy elite and a small urban middle class, with a growing wealth disparity between these privileged few and most of the rest of the country¹. Class markers included access to consumer goods such as motorbikes and televisions; investment in housing and property; and advanced education. Some factory workers were more successful than others in taking advantage of the new economic climate to achieve such goals. These new markers of economic success introduced a new morality, or adapted a pre-revolutionary one, of wealth competition and hierarchy that contrasts, contradicts, and coexists with recalled and expressed socialist virtue. This process is reflected in the nostalgia that I have already discussed. One of its chief results among women in the *khu* is a perpetual anxiety about money, family, and morality.

Even in the *doi moi* era, with the prestige of state owned factories diminishing, there were still some advantages to staying within the stable and secure system of state jobs and subsidies, as well as the network of political connections that could accrue. This was part of why the March Eighth factory was able to retain some of its older workers, although it was more difficult to recruit younger ones.

In my research in the factory, I saw how that work had come to be valued differently in the post-reform era. After observing work in several different sections of the factory, I asked Tam, a retired Trade Union official, how productivity was encouraged. Tam told me that in the past, political peer pressure was a primary motivator. Tam said: "If they left their machines during a shift, for example, or missed work, they had to write a report, and were criticised. Their competition scores would be cut down, for example for title of 'Excellent Worker'." On the other hand, the Trade Union in the past could mediate factors that influenced production. As Bac Chanh told me:

If someone had a problem, the Trade Union at lower levels could recommend the higher one to reconsider. In production, if we had a close relation with the

¹ Especially left out of the economic boom are farmers who constitute the majority of Vietnam's population (around 80 per cent). In Vietnam in 2000, around 30 million people (37 per cent of the population) were living in poverty, and around 25 million (60 per cent of the labour force) were either underemployed or unemployed (World Bank *et al.*: i.9).

women workers, we could assure them that, for instance, her low quality work was due to low quality fabric or because her children were sick, she must stay at home to take care of them, and another worker took over her work, it was not her fault. If what we said was reasonable, she would be all right. But if not, she wouldn't.

Since *doi moi*, though, more direct economic incentives are used. Tam said, "Now there is not enthusiasm like in the old days. When they started to use the monthly bonus system, people would be switched from Category A down to B in the ranking system, or they would have their salary increase delayed."

Thus, in order to encourage a more market-oriented attitude among workers, a productivity bonus system had been introduced in some of the sections, with ranks for each of the workers that were evaluated monthly. This system was explained to me in great detail and I was very interested in it until one afternoon when I sat next to Bac Quy, a shift boss in one of the spinning sections, while she calculated the monthly bonuses. Quy, who was in her early fifties, had worked in the factory since she was in her early twenties and was still politically engaged with the campaigns in the factory. Her husband had died eleven years before and her son had moved to a different part of Hanoi with his wife. She lived alone in a small *khu* flat and said she planned to retire in about five more years. While I sat with her that afternoon over tea in one of the spinning section offices, Quy showed me how she filled in a large ledger with notes on the productivity ratings for different workers on the shift, according to scale, planning, safety, and hard work, with ranks marked for each worker². As Quy filled in the blanks, I asked her how she remembered all the numbers for each of the fifty-some workers she was marking. "See, this is Sinh, she's worked here for thirty years and is rank six," she answered, pointing at one worker's line. "Minh, though, she's only on contract for one year, she doesn't even have a correct rank but it would be rank one. Phuong and little Nga, they're in their thirties and both have children. They're rank four." As she went through the list, I saw that all of the columns, for each category of productivity assessment, were filled in with ranks allocated simply on age and seniority, so that Sinh got sixes in each column, resulting in a total salary that month of 120 per cent, while Minh got ones in each column, resulting in a total salary of 80 per cent. This method followed neither the

² The factory does have official ranks for each worker, based on their seniority and also their skill level, which is supposed to be tested every year, although many workers do not bother taking the skills test and are promoted through the ranks anyway. Workers can increase their ranking through taking extra training courses and taking skills tests. For calculating productivity bonuses, though, there are temporary ranks used that are described here.

competitive expectations of the new economy nor the particularising organised dependence Walder (1986) described in China; rather, it followed a simple presocialist model of age hierarchy. As I have described, the Party attempted to eliminate this age hierarchy in ritual practice, social relations, and even language, introducing the egalitarian *dong chi* (comrade) in place of the personal pronouns that traditionally have placed speaker and spoken to within an exact relationship of age and status based on kin terms. (The use of *dong chi* has almost completely fallen out of favour since reforms.) As she read to me the list of bonuses I could in fact hear Quy sliding down through the register of personal pronouns as she descended from those older than her (*ba*, grandmother and *co*, aunt) to her near contemporaries (*chi*, older, and *em*, younger sister) to the newcomers (*chau*, little children).

The productivity bonus system was not without consequence, though. Several workers remarked to me that they worked harder now than during the *thoi gian bao cap*. The male water engineer quoted above told me:

There have been a lot of changes since the subsidy time. Then you just got your salary every month. Now you get it according to production, if you are late and lazy and make bad products then you don't get salary. Life is also rather better, women in the subsidy time had it really hard, with work and finances and having to worry about domestic things too much. Because of production salaries, of course everyone in the subsidy time didn't work actively like now because at that time everyone's salary was the same...If we take a rest without a reason we don't get paid, if it affects work then we will be disciplined.

Rofel (1999) describes how the bonus systems in the silk factory she studied were based on individual piece-work in addition to a fixed wage; this is called the "position-wage system" and is resented by workers because their fixed salary is so low that it requires them to produce more than the minimum in order to earn a living wage. Rofel suggests that this system represented a shift from a Maoist ideal of collectivity to a free-market individualism: "Party cadres and technical managers in the silk industry explained to me that the position-wage system would rid workers of their tendency to 'eat out of one big pot' " (Rofel 1999: 111). This is a remarkable shift in the March Eighth factory and the implications of this bonus system for cadre/worker relations. By linking bonuses to individual production, management accepts that there is no longer any collaborative spirit in production. As Dennis writes of coal mining in England, in a review of different wage systems tried in the mines, where managers and miners were in opposition: "Piece-work is the natural

form for the wages system to take where there is a tradition of hostility” (Dennis 1969: 67).

Managing the Family

Women in the *khu* were almost always in charge of managing finances within families, as is the typical arrangement in Vietnam (cf. Tai 2001: 175; Anh and Le 1997: 87; Thi 1996: 71). Husbands who had regular salaries tended to turn them over to their wives, and most day-to-day purchasing decisions were made by women, as well as long-term strategic planning for education and other costs relating to children. Chi Tinh, for example, told me, “I manage the money. My husband gives me all his salary. If you have a happy family, it’s so valuable. You have to live happily so your children can study...if you want to keep happiness in the family, the woman must act properly as a wife and mother so the family will be happy.” Both women and men said that the responsibility for taking care of and planning for the family was in the hands of women.

Besides planning and running the household economy, women were often most responsible for bringing in income as well. Social science studies in Vietnam confirm my own observations that women do more work than men, the majority of agricultural work and almost all the domestic labour (cf. Thi 1996: 71-73). Even in rural areas, the division of labour in the paddy fields leaves the most arduous parts of the cultivation process to women. A survey published at the end of my fieldwork concluded that women produced between 60 and 70 per cent of the nation’s entire agricultural output and that 75 per cent of heavy manual labour in the countryside was carried out by women farmers, who worked on average four hours a day more than their male counterparts (Watkin 1999: 1). In her study of women market traders in Ho Chi Minh City, Leshkowich notes that their husbands were “either unemployed or underpaid civil servants whose incomes are too low to support their families” (Leshkowich 2000: 18). Ironically, despite the high unemployment rates for Vietnamese men, recruiting male workers at the March Eighth factory was becoming even harder in the reform economy. This was partly because workers with the required technical skills to fill many of the male-designated jobs in the factory could earn more in private enterprise. Additionally, as borne out by the study cited above, even for unskilled labour in the factory, men were less accustomed to the monotonous rigours of hard work than women.

This general gender division of labour has created a situation in the *khu* now in which economic life is overwhelmingly the responsibility of women. As was stated in the book excerpt that begins this chapter, for March Eighth workers: “A female knitting worker has an average monthly salary of almost 300,000 VND. She is also the breadwinner of the family (four persons on average).” As Ong Minh told me, “Women have to do more than men, to develop economically. In European countries, men worry about the economic life of the family more, but here in Vietnam mostly women do that.” Some mothers in the *khu* are widows or divorced, raising children by themselves. Many of those who are still married cannot rely on a regular income from their husbands or adult sons, many of whom work as casual labourers or motorbike taxi (*xe om*) drivers. During the day, while the women work in the factory or run the stalls at the public market, the courtyards and street side cafes of the *khu* are filled with underemployed men, chatting, drinking tea or beer, smoking endless cigarettes and playing cards or Chinese chess, and in some cases gambling away as much of their wives salary as they have access to (cf. Oxfeld 1996 for a discussion of men’s gambling as a producer of social status). The first summer, 1998, that I spent in the *khu* was particularly hard as many men were betting on the World Cup. I encountered more than one woman crying because of gambling losses; one told me that her husband had lost her entire month’s salary on the World Cup. Men relied on their wives’ steady, if small, income from the factory. “If I don’t go to work, we still have enough to eat,” a *xe om* driver told me one afternoon as we drank tea together. He is the husband of thirty-eight year old March Eighth worker, and the father of two sons, eight and thirteen years old.

Financial Worries

Chi Phuong, a thirty-nine year old worker in the dyeing section had two sons, aged fourteen and three, and a well-employed husband, who was a policeman. She itemised some of her household expenses, out of her monthly factory salary of 200,000 VND (with a low average because of periodic lay-offs in the dyeing section) and her husband’s salary of 7 to 800,000 VND:

Water is 25,000 VND a month, calculated according to the number of heads. Electricity is about 50,000 VND a month. I don’t know yet how much a year will cost in schooling the kids. Roughly for the baby it will be 150,000 VND a month. And for the older one, about 100,000. We have to try very hard. I think it will be very difficult to pay. Some families can pay, it’s easy and no

problem for them, but for us with our low salary it really affects the finances of the family.

Chi Phuong's concern about meeting bills was not unusual. Family budget numbers often did not add up at the end of the month, especially in families where the mother's state salary was the only dependable income and there were school-age children, who required so much extra expenditure for care and schooling. With the added burden of the fear of illness and the cost of private health care, ritual expenses (as mentioned in previous chapters), and the lobbying by husbands and children for nicer clothes, consumer goods, and other markers of status and success, women factory workers felt constantly harassed and worried about money.

For example, the one large purchase that generated extensive discussion in any household was a motorbike. As Vietnam made the vehicular transition from primarily bicycles to widely available motorbikes, owning a motorbike became a marker of success (hence the bitter quote above about cadre riding motorbikes) and a common aspiration, especially of young men. Men often argued to their wives that buying a motorbike was an economic investment, since they could then moonlight as a motorbike taxi (*xe om*). Honda motorbikes, produced in Vietnam or imported from Thailand or Japan (the imports were slightly more expensive but popular because they were believed to be better quality) cost \$1,800-\$2,400 new when I was in Vietnam, while an average annual factory worker's salary was around \$430. Still, families saved, borrowed money, worked extra, and bought a motorbike if they possibly could³. Although women learned how to ride motorbikes and would use them if there was a practical reason to, the motorbike in the family usually clearly belonged to the husband. Loan's husband Anh Minh, for example, took his motorbike to work although he worked in a shop within walking distance in the *khu*, while Loan bicycled down the road to the factory and their daughter Ha bicycled twelve kilometres to her university every day.

The financial argument for buying a motorbike as a capital investment in *xe om* work was not entirely convincing. In practice, most motorbike taxi drivers were only intermittently solvent. For various reasons of oversupply and demand,

³ Borrowing was a common subject of discussion in the *khu*. Domestic and small trade debt, mostly informal, seemed generally high. Leshkovich (2000) offers a comprehensive analysis of debt relations, ratio, and maintenance among women in small trade, including a helpful explanation of informal debt networks (*hui*) (Leshkovich 2000: 128-130). Official small credit programmes tended to be aimed at women, who were seen as more responsible. "Women reinvest money while men spend it. Women manage and use loans more effectively than men...men spend money on partying, gambling and drinking rather than reinvesting in any other profit making activity," concluded one study by the Bank for the Poor (Tao 1999).

scheduling, and commitment, only a small number of motorbike taxi drivers I knew of made reliable profits from their work. One man told me that he made 500,000 VND a month driving *xe om*. His wife interrupted him quickly to say “One month 500,000 VND. The next month, nothing at all.” Just as was the case when the other *xe om* driver told me that he did not need to work because of his wife’s steady factory income, in most cases, for most women, the purchase of a motorbike added to the economic strain of caring for the family rather than relieving it.

The Growth and Gender of Commerce

With many men not contributing significantly to the household budget, following *doi moi* market opening, many women began to pursue or aspire to pursue small trade as one avenue of advancement for their families, in direct contradiction to socialist policies that previously criticised private commerce.

Scholars in China and other post-socialist states, and somewhat in Vietnam, have looked for models to describe the emergence of trade and private property. Already widely discredited by the economic successes of some countries in Asia is the Weberian view that Confucianism fails to provide an elective affinity with capitalism and that Asian culture is inhospitable to capitalist development. This view has been replaced by another that suggests the opposite, that East Asian culture is well-suited to capitalist development because of such tendencies as hierarchical respect and discipline, thrift, and repression of individual desire in favour of communal needs. Such tendencies are described as the “Asian way” or “Asian values” (cf. Brook and Luong 1997: 5).

Added to the Asian values analysis, one way of explaining capitalist development in post-socialist countries is an hydraulic model, which suggests that the impetus for commerce and petty trade pre-dated the socialist revolution and was suppressed during the socialist era, erupting promiscuously with the loosening of state control over the economy (Gates 1996). In Vietnam, economists and historians have made a hydraulic model argument for decollectivisation and post-*doi moi* economic growth. The universalising assumption that the Vietnamese people are naturally capitalist has found favour with foreign investors and the international community.

Anthropologists have made more subtle observations about Vietnamese economic practice, including suggesting that it is explicitly gendered. In a recent

book on market cultures in Asia, two chapters on Vietnam come to a similar conclusion about petty commerce historically, that it is traditionally the province of women (Malarney and Luong in Hefner 1998). Malarney suggests in his history of commerce in the Red River delta that women engaged in trade because it was devalued according to Confucian principles, and that women accepted the stigma of commerce, for the sake of advancing their family. "The economic consequences of this prestige-stigma hierarchy were critical. Commerce flourished at a crude level in creating wealth, but its stigmatisation as not being a prestigious, elite occupation hampered its further development" (Malarney 1998: 277). The socialist attempt to de-stigmatise non-agricultural forms of production, such as with the industrial proletarianisation of the March Eighth workers, "occurred only with labour deployed to specific goals, [to] help build the nation and revolution...working for oneself or working to increase one's profits remained stigmatised" (ibid.). Capitalist activity and small trade that was severely curtailed under socialism has exploded since *doi moi*, with family-run businesses constituting the vast majority of industrial and commercial establishments, 97.3 per cent according to one survey (Le and Rondinelli, quoted in Malarney 1998: 281). In the same volume, Luong's study of Bat Trang, a pottery handicraft village near Hanoi, explains how women were the primary entrepreneurs in commerce and industrial production in the ceramic industry there in the past, and resisted the collectivisation and cooperatisation of their industry. Women in Bat Trang have now been somewhat eclipsed in the management of firms by the bureaucracy of state socialism despite expressed socialist values of gender equality. Luong's data from Bat Trang, indicating that women are rarely in top management positions, appear replicated across the country in the sphere of industrial entrepreneurship (Luong 1998).

Despite male domination at the top of the business management hierarchy, however, the level of petty commerce and small-scale trade is clearly and visibly dominated by women in Vietnam. As I mentioned previously, in the difficult days of state subsidy, many March Eighth women workers engaged in small business ventures and *lam them* outside the factory in order to supplement their small state incomes. After *doi moi*, many women in the *khu* ventured into the newly open economy with varying degrees of skill and success.

Commercial activity in the *khu* by the time of my fieldwork was very much the public province of women, as seen particularly in the markets. There, almost all of the shoppers and sellers were women, who haggled loudly and enthusiastically

with each other. It was rare for men to shop for food and there were very few men selling in the markets, with the exception of butchers, who tend to be male (although many of them did the slaughtering while their wives did the selling). From posture and attitude, one could immediately tell the difference between men who actually worked in the market as a profession, and those who were just filling in temporarily for their wives, the real stall holders. When I went to the market with women, they would swoop in on these part-time men with intensity, expecting to be able to intimidate them into a bargain. I could not tell whether bargains were in fact the result, but it illustrated the perception that men are not as careful, or proficient, in trade as women are. Similarly, men used their putative commercial incompetence as one effective weapon in their arsenal of resistance against domestic labour. Even unemployed men would wait for their wives to go to the market after they come home from a factory shift on the grounds that if they went, as a man, they would be exploited by the female stall holders. Men “can’t bargain” (*khong mac ca duoc*) or “don’t know how to bargain” (*khong biet mac ca*) I was told both by men and their resigned wives.

Women endure continuing stigma against commerce in order to try to help their families. As I described in the Preface, now that Vietnam is opening cautiously to international trade and experimenting with the global economy, Party rhetoric is caught between urging openness and criticising its results. Unlike in China, no leader has ever said “To get rich is glorious”. The comparable post-*doi moi* slogan, “If the people are rich, the country is strong”, was not reflected in other Party policy, which forbid Party involvement in private trade and continued to reflect distrust of the private sector. Public attitudes towards private business are still circumspect. Leshkovich (2000), for example, discusses negative images of women traders, who are portrayed as voraciously greedy. Although money is more and more seen as a measure of success, there is also more and more concern about the moral pitfalls that wealth is seen to create, such as the social evils that I discuss later on in this chapter.

The Importance of Helping the Family

Despite the socialist state’s attempt to supplant some of the social roles of the family, family relationships in the *khu* during the time of my fieldwork were the central focus of life for almost everyone and the primary concern of many women’s lives. When talking about how she always went to visit her parents and siblings in

her *que* before Tet, Loan quoted for me a Vietnamese proverb: “A drop of blood is worth more than a fishpond of water (*mot giot mau dao hon ao nuoc la*).” The importance of maintaining a patriline persisted in the desire for sons (as I will discuss in an upcoming section), but children generally were seen as an essential focus to life. Although being widowed, divorced or unmarried was seen as unfortunate, being childless was a real tragedy for most women (cf. Thi 1996). Women without children were pitied and the two whom I knew well, Uyen and Sinh, said they pitied themselves. As childless women, Uyen and Sinh were both allocated even smaller *khu* rooms than standard, so they each lived in subdivided rooms with only enough room for single beds rather than the usual double bed platform. Both said they were lonely, and had to keep busy since they had no family. They were both active in *khu* politics and Uyen was also involved in activities at Chua Quynh pagoda, while Sinh was a shift boss and Trade Union leader in the weaving section of the factory. Sinh told me that she bought her television so that the children on her floor would come to her room to watch with her, and she was thinking of buying a video machine next for the same reason. When I visited her there were often one or two small children in her room, especially one chubby four-year-old girl who would sprawl companionably on Sinh’s lap as she watched television and drank sweetened fruit drinks that Sinh mixed for her.

Bac Nhu, as I have mentioned, turned her small breakfast business into a family industry, with her daughter-in-law helping her to make vats of sticky rice and sweet rice balls in her front kitchen. Bac Nhu and many other small scale female entrepreneurs who I knew in the *khu* were proud of their ability to make money in order to help their families. As Malarney writes in his history of commerce in the North, “Families valorised wealth creation because it created circumstances conducive to family advancement...money provided a visible expression of the proper execution of one’s filial obligations...money and the wealth it represented were highly prized” (Malarney 1998: 274-5). Luong agrees: “Women of most social strata played prominent economic roles beyond the household...they did so not to replace their domestic-centered roles but to increase the financial resources of the unit for which they were responsible” (Luong 1989: 745). Norton cites spirit mediums describing the reasons given for why women become mediums: “Women carry the weight of the family, so if anybody in the family needs the protection of spirits they must become a medium” (Norton 2000a: 66).

Despite all this economic activity, most women in the *khu* were only moderately successful, if at all, and all suffered variously from the new economic demands placed on them. As I have mentioned, the *doi moi* reforms and the changing economic circumstances in Vietnam had an enormous effect on the availability and cost of public services. At every level, state employees tried to manoeuvre around the limits of state salaries and service provision. In education, for example, teachers charged families to give their children extra tutoring and school administrators charged assorted extra fees to support the school. In health care, the factory clinic was reduced to an occasional nurse on duty, and most workers paid to see doctors outside of the clinic or went directly to pharmacies when they or their children were sick. As an example of how social services had declined since high socialist days, Bac Nhu recited for me her poem about the diligence of the *nha tre* childcare teachers during the high socialist period (“My child has many mothers/They are the teachers of the kindergarten,” quoted in Chapter Three). Nhu told me that in the past in the kindergarten, if the child was sick the teachers took care of them. Now, said Bac Nhu, if a child is sick the parents must go and bring the child home, because the teachers are just working for money and will not make any extra effort.

Ong Muong told me:

In the old days I think women workers worked too hard, but material life was better because now everything is subtracted from the salary. The life of the worker was better in the state subsidy time, there were people who cared about people, now it is only taken from your salary, so everything is more expensive. For example, workers must pay for 1500 VND for their lunch at the factory, and the factory only pays 1000 more for [subsidising] it.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, many people viewed the *thoi gian bao cap* as a time of greater moral prosperity. Although Ong Muong’s assessment of it as also a time of greater material prosperity is an unusual one, many people concurred that the *doi moi* era had brought burdensome financial pressures.

In the upcoming section, I describe the enforcement of the two-child policy. The factory had a continued interest in supporting family planning, including abortions, and keeping birth rates low. When they gave birth, women workers were granted varying lengths of leave depending on which section they worked in. However, leave was paid at a lower rate that made it economically unfeasible for many workers to take more than brief maternity leave. Women often returned to

work as soon as possible after giving birth so as not to reduce the family income, and then rushed back and forth from the factory to the *khu* for breastfeeding at lunchtime.

Family Planning

Thus, as well as taking responsibility for the economic life of their families, women workers were also in charge of their production and maintenance. One important issue was family planning and birth control. Women workers at the factory when talking about the past said that having more freedom of marriage choice was generally regarded as great progress. They tended to be more ambivalent when discussing state policy on reproductive issues. As mentioned in previous chapters, Vietnam has had a variably enforced two child policy since the early 1980's, including a high priority on long birth spacing, at least five years, between the two children. The factory community had one of the highest rates of compliance with the policy in the country and local officials received awards from the national Party for their exemplary statistics. The factory and the *khu* could maintain even into the present enough control over women workers to enforce this policy by threats of job loss, eviction, and cuts in social services in cases where political persuasion is ineffective. However, with an ineffective education and distribution system for birth control, the two-child policy is primarily maintained through a high abortion rate. In the *khu*, most women I talked to were dissatisfied with their birth control options. This impression was confirmed when I talked to a cadre from the state Institute of Social Science who was working on a survey in the March Eighth factory about women's knowledge of reproductive health issues. She told me that she was dismayed to find that most of the workers were confused about the various forms of birth control available and many relied on abortions instead. The factory gave workers who had abortions a week's leave and a bonus of about one tenth their monthly salary. Most of the women I talked to had tried an IUD, the most commonly available form of birth control, at some point or another, although everyone complained about them being uncomfortable and having unpleasant side effects, such as dizziness, headaches, and general weakness. Other studies of women's attitudes to birth control in Vietnam have mentioned similar responses. IUDs are seen as foreign and Vietnamese women often say they are not suitable for Vietnamese women's bodies (cf. Tuyet 1996; Gammeltoft 1999, 2001). Women's first choice was condoms, but most said they were too expensive and it was difficult or impossible to

persuade their husbands to use them. So even for women who supported family planning, the mechanics of birth control were troublesome.

Gammeltoft (2001) explicitly links birth control campaigns to state policies about happy families. She describes how the post-*doi moi* ideological goal has shifted from New Family Culture (*gia dinh van hoa moi*, which she translates as “New Culture Family”) to simply a “cultured family” (*gia dinh van hoa*), considered essential for a stable society. State campaigns about cultured families tend to be directed at women more than men: “The message conveyed in ‘Happy family’ prescriptions is clearly that women’s roles as mothers and wives imply special responsibilities for the welfare of their families [and] family and nation are presented as analogically related and independent entities, the welfare of one naturally benefitting the other. Since women bear special responsibilities for the welfare of the family, they also, by logical extension, bear special responsibilities for the welfare of the nation” (Gammeltoft 2001: 272).

Generally, most women in the *khu* did not strongly disagree with state attempts to limit population. Using the language of state campaigns on family planning and rational budgeting and expenditure, women in the *khu* generally endorsed the state view that two children were sufficient. They said that urban women need fewer children than rural families, and that children were so expensive to raise that it was impracticable to have many of them. They also told me that children were more valuable now within the family than in the past since there are fewer of them. The director of the *khu* nursery (*nha tre*) told me that the *nha tre* no longer has a night shift because “parents now have a fewer children so they don’t want to leave their children overnight as they did in the past.” Bac Chanh summed up the argument about why family planning was a good policy in the *doi moi* era:

That policy is helpful because the current society is different from the old one. In the old days, the children could go to school without paying fees, and it didn't matter if they wore darned clothes to school. But now the children don't wear such clothes. Because the country is developing, the civilisation level is higher, the children are well nurtured. They can have their favourite breakfast. In my time, the mother only fried rice for the children to eat before going to school. And now when parents bring their children from school, they ask what the children want to eat. The economic condition is better but if you have many children, you won't have enough money even for school fees. The school fee alone is a large sum in one month. And when the children are in secondary school, they have to take [and pay for] extra classes. Before there were no extra classes, only learning at school. Now there are [the costs of] many kinds of extra classes combined with clothing matters. Our children

have to have clothes equal to what others have to keep up with the society and their friends. All of this stuff costs a lot. So family planning is a very righteous policy. It is appropriate for each family's economy.

Son Preference

Despite agreement about the need to limit families, there was still ambivalence about the way that the policy prevented families from trying to have sons if they had two daughters. As previously mentioned, son preference was the target of state campaigns and is portrayed as a backward (*lac hau*) and feudal (*phong kien*) ideology, and so women might have been reluctant to admit that they still sympathised with it. Usually when they talked to me about it they said that the problem was husbands, who still demanded sons.

I have already mentioned one case of a worker who wanted to have a third child in order to satisfy her husband's desire for a son, and her neighbour who said it was "not modern" (*khong hien dai*) to need a son. Many of the divorce cases that I heard about in the *khu* were attributed to the failure of the marriage to produce sons, and the divorce was always blamed on the attitude of the man. In one dramatic case, a male worker had moved his young wife, with whom he was said to be very much in love, back to his home village when she was found to be infertile. Rather than divorce her, he had illegally married again another woman worker, older than himself, and had a son, whom he took to his first wife in the countryside to raise. I met him in the *khu*, where he lived during the working week with his second wife, while travelling out to see his first wife and son whenever possible. The neighbours gossiped disapprovingly about this arrangement. I asked them why the second wife stayed with her husband and they said that she was old and ugly, and considered herself lucky to get a man even at such a price.

On the other hand, son preference was not a hegemonic ideology. Bac Hoe, who had two daughters and then eventually a son, claimed that "I didn't have the third child to have a son, we only planned to have any child. It was just up to fate. I didn't think about preferring a son to a daughter at all." Bac Chanh told me: "In the old days, it would really be fearful to not have a son. But in recent years people are much happier if they even have two daughters." Women told me that it was good to have daughters, who when babies were said to be "easier" and when older helped more around the house. Ong Minh and his wife told me that they had their third son because they hoped for a daughter, after several years with just two sons. The two-

child policy had not yet been implemented then although there was pressure not to have too many children. "Family planning wasn't so radical then," Ong Minh told me, "and my wife wanted to have a daughter. We didn't expect to have another son!"

Husbands

One clearly unsuccessful aim of state campaigns for domestic reform attempted to increase men's involvement in housework. I very rarely saw men in the *khu* do much domestic work at all, especially not cleaning, cooking, or shopping for food in the market (as previously mentioned). Sometimes they kept an eye on children while wives did other work. Similarly, sons were not expected to help their mothers at home although daughters were. I frequently spent afternoons cooking with Ha while her younger brother Phu lounged in bed, reading comic books or watching television. Older men who had lived through the state campaigns on equality in domestic labour always acknowledged that they had failed to adhere to them, although often with elaborate reasons for their own exceptionalism. Ong Minh, for example, when asked if he helped his wife with the housework, told me:

I am a bit lazy. I did help, but just a little. I sympathise with her, but surely because of my character, sometimes I am a little too angry and I shout. I'm difficult. Outside the house, in society, everybody praised me for good behaviour but in the house, when I came home, surely because of my feudal character as head of the family, I am a little bit difficult. But I don't mean anything bad, I feel satisfied with my family life but I am hot-tempered and respond quickly when I am angry. But my wife understands me and feels satisfied, too.

However, considering themselves lucky to get any man may be one reason why women workers are willing to sustain the high rate of domestic, industrial and commercial labour with which most of them support their husbands and families. Women outnumber men in Vietnam disproportionately as a legacy of war (cf. Thi 1996). With the exception of some men in the *khu* who either work in the factory or have other stable state jobs, like Chi Phuong's husband the policeman, women have no alternative model for productive spouses. There are many older single women in the *khu*, war widows and divorcees. I have already mentioned Uyen and Sinh, who were childless as well as unmarried, and Chi Thanh, a shift boss in the factory, whose husband had died and whose adult son had married and moved away rather than live in her *khu* apartment, leaving Thanh to raise her daughter alone.

One older woman worker, Bac Hoa, now retired, was married to a man who she said had come back mad from the war. She had been married to him since 1957 and moved to the *khu* in 1962 with one child, although her husband did not live with her until he was discharged from the army in 1973. They had three sons, two of whom were married, and the oldest was an engineer at the March Eighth factory but lived in another *khu* flat. The second son had married a Czech woman and lived in the Czech Republic with two sons. The youngest was a mechanical worker in the Hanoi Thread Company, another state owned factory. Hoa told me it had been very hard to raise three sons by herself, although luckily she worked administrative hours (*hanh chinh*) rather than shifts so she did not have to leave them in overnight daycare. As I sat inside with her one day her husband started yelling at us to be quiet and turned up the television very loud. We moved outside onto the front stoop, where she began shaking dried flowers in a big rice basket, she said for making tea to treat her husband's high blood pressure. Finally he came out and yelled at me to go away, that his wife had work to do. Bac Nhu told me later that the husband was insane with jealousy and would not let his wife talk to anyone. Bac Hoa told me that she sent her husband sometimes to stay with their son and that the grandchildren had a calming influence on him, but then he came back to her and was worse. "But he's my husband, I have to keep him," she told me. On the other hand, another woman I knew, Lan, had also been married to a man who she said had gone mad in the war. They were unable to have children and finally in 1990 her husband's family had taken him away to live with them elsewhere in Hanoi, signing the divorce papers on his behalf. Lan was fifty years old when I met her and said she had decided when her husband left that life was too hard with men, and that she preferred to remain alone.

Bac Nhu also said that she valued her independence more than the companionship of a husband. She had been divorced many years before I met her and her husband had long before remarried and eventually moved to the South. I asked her why they had divorced and she told me: "I am very competitive and accustomed to being self-reliant since I was small. I was not strictly educated like other girls to be modest and gentle. I bullied my husband. He was very handsome and many women wanted him, but still I was stubborn with him. Once he slapped me and then I started a cold war with him. Then we got divorced. Without him I am more free in spirit." According to Bac Nhu, his ex-husband's new wife had already had three sons by a previous marriage. While Nhu's sons have all turned out well, her ex-husband's stepsons were all troublesome: one died in prison, one drowned, and the third was

thief and hustler whose creditors had forced his stepfather to sell his house to pay his debts. Nhu said her relationship with her husband was still amicable and that he had even suggested they get back together. They had met up in Vung Tau, a southern seaside resort, when Nhu was on a holiday tour of the South, and her ex-husband had propositioned her, saying they should “go out to play” (*di chôi*). Nhu said she refused because afterwards his wife would raise a fuss and “make a lot of noise”. I asked her if she had ever thought she might remarry. “I thought of it when I was younger. But I had three children and so I thought any man would be afraid to marry me. Besides, I am not gentle or beautiful.”

The unreliability of men as providers seems to account for the rise in reliance on women’s incomes. This may lead to increased respect for women: “In urban areas, it is obvious that a daughter might have the capacity to support her parents as much as a son. The status of daughter might thus improve even further with the renovation (*doi moi*), and young women might gain both in their relations with their parents and their future spouse” (Belanger and Hong 2001: 261).

Mothers-in-law and Daughters-in-law

The growing economic dependence on women in the *khu* in turn has also reinforced virilocal residence in the *khu* and contributed to the reintroduction of daughters-in-law. While the older workers were a generation without mothers-in-law, many of them now encouraged their children, especially sons, to live at home after marriage, giving them extra domestic labour in the form of daughters-in-law and possibly new sources of outside income as well. Bac Hoa, with the mad husband, told me that she was eager for her youngest son to get married so she would have a daughter-in-law to help with the housework so she did not have to take care of her husband all by herself.

The “feudal” treatment of daughters-in-law by mothers-in-law was an explicit target of state campaigns, and as I have previously mentioned the March Eighth workforce, during high socialist days, originally experienced a community almost devoid of mothers-in-law. The relationship between mothers and daughters-in-law was traditionally hard. “Once married, many a Vietnamese woman found that the hardest cross to bear was...the harsh, intolerant ways of the mother-in-law. It was considered routine for mothers-in-law to haze a new arrival mercilessly, and many found pleasure in continuing the practice indefinitely” (Marr 1981: 193).

Now many of those original workers were becoming mothers-in-law themselves. With a *doi moi* economy and the post-campaign morality, however, mothers-in-law felt more restrained about asserting their rule of law in the household. Several older workers told me that they were much less tyrannical than mothers-in-law in the *que*.

This is one conversation I had with Bac Chanh about her mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. She had three daughters who are all married and live elsewhere. Her only son and daughter-in-law lived in Poland with her year and a half old grandson. Her flat was decorated with several poster-sized photographs of her grandson and a few photos of his parents.

MR: When you moved here, did your husband's mother come to visit you?

Chanh: No, only after I had children. When I was young [had not had a child yet], I went to visit her in the *que* at weekends.

MR: How was your relationship with your mother-in-law?

Chanh: It is lucky that my family has only one daughter-in-law. She is very well-behaved, always greeting others. When she comes home, she also does many things. In the old times, I did the shopping on my way home, and could only wash my hands or face when I had finished doing everything. At meal times, I had to sit next to the pot and serve everyone. I couldn't choose to sit next to my husband or elsewhere. Now the couple [my son and his wife] sit very closely next to one another.

MR: How long had your daughter-in-law lived with you before leaving?

Chanh: She had lived here for ten months, from January and they flew to Poland in November.

MR: So nearly one year? So how was your relationship with your daughter-in-law?

Chanh: We were all workers so it is easier for me to sympathise with the couple. They often went out in the evening and came back late, while I watched television and slept. But I couldn't sleep in the morning. I woke up at 5 a.m. and washed the glasses and the cups, cleaned the house. My daughter-in-law got up later and took our clothes to wash. When I came home from the market, she said I could go to visit someone's house if I liked, while she cooked, it means going to see my daughters, then leaving there at 11 a.m. to have lunch. So I went out and came back for lunch at noon.

MR: So do you think her good character is because of her family's teaching or your influence?

Chanh: I must have sympathy (*tin h cam*) with her [treat her well]. But she is very obedient. In other houses, when the mother wakes up the daughter-in-law also has to wake up. But I sympathised with her and let her sleep.

Despite being relatively positive about her daughter-in-law, Chanh also complained to me that it was her daughter-in-law's fault that they have taken her adored grandson so far away and she could not see him, and she thought her son was working too hard in Poland. She pointed to a large photo of her son in a smart

Western suit and her daughter-in-law in a frothy white wedding dress. “When they got married he was fat and she was thin. Now he’s thin and she’s fat.”

Since there is more social and geographical mobility as a result of *doi moi* policies, mothers-in-law may feel they have to be more careful with their daughters-in-law. A survey by the *Thanh Nien* (Youth) newspaper during my fieldwork found that “an overwhelming number of single women (eighty nine per cent of the respondents aged under 25) claim they would rather remain single than have to live in their in-laws’ house if they get married” (quoted in Vietnam News 1999: 2). An article by Yan (1997) about social changes under socialism in Xiajia village in China reports a similar change in relationships there. In what Yan calls “the triumph of conjugality”, he describes how the family ideal has shifted from the superiority of the parent-son relationship to the importance of the horizontal, conjugal one. According to Yan, the rise of conjugal bonds weakens parental authority. Yan observes that young couples in Xiajia want conjugal independence at least as much as they value economic success. This has led to a power shift between older to younger generations in families. Yan quotes an older women complaining that her daughter-in-law did not help at all around the house, and that instead of being in charge, the mother was “ ‘an old servant in the family’ ” (Yan 1997: 203). Hinton (1997) describes how the older women in Long Bow village in China resisted revolutionary attempts to transform family life because this would give more power to children, particularly daughters-in-law. Older women who had suffered under their own mothers-in-law looked forward to being the boss when their sons got married and protested against the liberation of women and promotion of egalitarian domestic and social roles that would deny them this opportunity.

Similarly, parents of children who are academically or economically successful may feel left behind by them. For example, daughters who marry well are likely to move from the *khu* entirely and may require long commutes to visit grandchildren. Even sons who have good jobs may move with their wives from their mothers’ houses, in order to have better accommodation elsewhere in Hanoi, such as Chi Thanh’s son, or make more money overseas, as in the case of Bac Chanh’s son and that of Bac Hoa, whose son lived in the Czech Republic.

How to Raise Children

There is intense pressure put on children and parents in post-*doi moi* Vietnam by the decreasing number of children, the rise of consumer desire and status competition, and anxiety about class mobility and children's education. These pressures all contribute to an atmosphere of concern in the *khu* about the moral and practical choices that parents make about how to raise children.

A "feudal" childraising style of parents, especially fathers, beating their children was not uncommon in the *khu*, as I witnessed and heard myself. Just to cite one random example, I have this in my fieldnotes from July 14, 1999, while visiting Bac Thue, a retired worker and a long-term Party member and active Women's Union member, who is renowned for her fortune-telling skills:

Thue adopts a confidential tone and leans forward, whispering. I hear a clattering sound outside the door, and look up to see a small girl being whacked twice, apparently hard, by a man whose back is to me. She has attracted a crowd and is now sobbing in that abandoned, shrieking way that kids have when you think they are never going to stop. She loses her breath and starts coughing and choking...everyone is laughing, including the father, who is holding her dangling from the elbow...Bac Thue is still whispering fixedly at me and I have momentarily lost track of what she's talking about. She doesn't appear to have noticed anything amiss outside...

The behaviour of the crowd that I described clashed with Party ideals of neighbourliness and family. Technically, everyone in that crowd was violating Party policy on public order, promulgated, for example, in the 1964 Party Directive on the "Five Goods" mass mobilisation campaign to create a "new lifestyle". The Directive warns against "gathering around foreign visitors and accidents on the street" (Hanoi 1964a). The father in the case was violating another directive of that campaign, not "to feudally beat or scold wives or children" (*ibid.*).

Despite such actions as those I witnessed, because of such state campaigns, when discussing child raising, people were careful about expressing their endorsement of child beating. Bac Hoe told me:

When I was young and didn't behave, my father would make me lie down on the bed and beat me with a whip, and I couldn't resist or react. Now we can't do that to our children, that was under the old feudal system. When I was about ten years old I was still beaten by my father in that way, even at twelve, thirteen. I remember. But now they don't do that, don't make kids lie down. My father would give a long moral lecture, then beat me so I remembered it. If I was well behaved I wasn't beaten much but if I was bad I was beaten

more. It's still good if you can do that to your children, though. Good if they obey, because many children now refuse to do that.

It seemed clear to me that socialist campaigns about feudal behaviour and proper child-rearing techniques had affected at least the public discourse, if not always the actions, of parents and adults.

But parents also tried to indulge their children so they would be happy and successful. I have already cited examples of parents "spoiling" their children with their favourite foods or clothes, or spending more money on their education. Bac Dau, the male cadre who warned of Uncle Ho's "sugar-coated bullet", told me that his parenting style was persuasive:

This is the art of teaching children things. Sometimes I would wake them up in the middle of the night and tell them things (*tam su*). To *tam su* is to talk softly, for a long time, very intimate and in great detail. For example, 'Do you love me? Do you love your mother? If you don't, you could leave now and I won't try to stop you.' People think better during the night and think more deeply and thoroughly, and from this will decide to behave well.

Dau told me this was like a technique used in political education, although he said he had learned it from his father, who used to *tam su* him in the middle of the night. He also said he had heard they used the same technique on political prisoners and prisoners of war at Hoa Lo, the prison known to Americans as the Hanoi Hilton. Another older male cadre told me that this kind of teaching can be done even in the womb; he called it "pregnant education". He said a mother should listen to music, say kind words, and try to avoid all strong emotions when pregnant, not argue or cry (cf. Tai 1985: 23). He said women were responsible for how children behaved, and said "Old people have a saying that a child is spoiled by the mother and a grandchild by the grandmother (*con hu tai me chau ngoan tai ba*)."

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, many parents experienced the frustration of children being educated beyond their own levels, although they were still ambitious for their children to be successful in school. Chi Loan paid 100,000 VND a month from her 450,000 VND salary for her teen-age son, Phu, to have extra tutoring. Many times when Phu went out to meet friends, Loan asked him "Have you studied yet? Have you finished your schoolwork?" and he always muttered yes or shrugged. Loan told me that Phu wasn't getting good marks in school but she could not help him because she did not understand what he was studying. She asked Ha, Phu's older sister and a university student, to check up on his schoolwork, but Phu

flatly refused to let Ha look at it. Similarly, Bac Hai told me he could not tutor his daughter, who is thirteen and in eighth grade, because “what she studies is different from when I studied, and I only studied to year seven.” Many parents expressed the same anxiety to me, that they expected to be able to help their children with schoolwork but found it too hard (cf. Long and Hong 1998 for a discussion of the problem for women since *doi moi* of not being able to help educate their children). “Generational dissonance”, a term used to describe the differences between a newly arrived immigrant generation and their children (Smith-Hefner 1999: 191), can be used to describe March Eighth women’s relationship with their children, as the workers feel that in this time of rapid change, their children are moving into new and often threatening spheres of social and economic activity. This perception makes women anxious about their children’s future and their own, and heightens their sense of powerlessness and moral danger.

Drugs and social evils

Amidst myriad anxieties besetting women in the *khu*, the fear of drugs and addiction seemed to predominate in their consciousness, reflecting the general ambivalence over the effects of *doi moi*. The *khu* is now awash in concern about Vietnam’s rising drug problem, reflected in national policy. Parents of young children are terrified that their children will become addicts and this is used as justification for strict parenting of adolescents. In accordance with Party directives, *phuong* officials have made drug prevention and the treatment of addiction a priority propaganda item.

Drug addiction was the main topic at a Women’s Union Executive Committee meeting I attended. Each of the Committee members reported on their cell’s efforts to assist in the rehabilitation of addicts in the *khu*. My notes from what was said in this meeting:

Bac Nhu: Our cell was allotted two children to help, Huy and Hung. They are both about 19 years old and their mothers and fathers are workers. After a period of time of us helping them, Huy has work, but he and Hung have the possibility of getting addicted again.

Bac Tien: Our cell was allotted two children to help, Liem and Thanh, but we don’t yet dare affirm that they have broken their habits. Liem’s mother is dead, he lives with his father and his father protects his child. Whenever he thinks that the boy has quit heroin, the father stops paying attention to his

son's activities and he doesn't have any knowledge or experience about this disease. The boy has quit school. Generally, it's very difficult to quit drugs. Thanh's father manages the household very strictly. All day there's someone in the house to keep the kid in, but still he's unable to stop his child's addiction. The child looks awful, yellow and weak. We went to visit the family but they still say the boy has broken his habit.

Chi Nga: My cell has Tung, who studied at university until second year but had to quit school. He can quit drugs for three days but then returns to his habit. Every time we see the boy in a fit of addiction it's very miserable. He went to his *que huong* in order to go far away and avoid it, but it didn't work because in the countryside now there are also addicted kids.

Chi Tam: ...I attended the case of Hong Anh. Her father is a disabled veteran. Our union created good conditions for the girl to go to break her habit in the city rehabilitation centre, but her mother wouldn't agree for her to go and said that her child has already recovered. In this way it's very difficult because the mother and father spoil the child and protect her. I know that all mothers and fathers go to work all day but certainly we only hope they can do the most fundamental thing, to warn and counsel their children, confront the grave danger of drugs which tempt them on many sides. All mothers and fathers must try to find out the problem and try their utmost to help their children escape the grave danger of drugs.

The moralising and improving drive of the early 1960's encouraged cadre to report wholesale improvement in public security, reflecting well upon the revolutionary spirit of the community. In the 1990's, however, the Party and the government construed the drug problem as an invasion of decadent Western, capitalist, materialist values, consumed by children who have been influenced by corrupting images and consumer desire. Parents of drug addicts were accused in public meetings of slack parenting and indulging their children. Public hysteria about "the heroin problem" was fuelled by sensationalist newspaper articles and vicious rumours, such as the "drugged sweet cake" that pushers were supposedly giving to children outside primary schools.

Heroin use, like the free market, was explicitly linked to the rise of prostitution in the *khu*. Hershatter, among others, has written of how prostitution has been used in Chinese Communist Party propaganda as a metaphor for "moral danger and physical disease, and a marker of national decay" (Hershatter 1999: 4). Women, and sometimes men, complained about the tea shops in the *khu*, which they believed were basically brothels, just as Dau complained about "men with locked briefcases" frequenting cafes and karaoke bars. Bac Nhu told me that there were no brothels in the *phuong* but that she knew two prostitutes who lived there and worked elsewhere.

She said they had been hairdressers in central Hanoi and had become addicted to heroin: “Before they were beautiful. Now they look ugly and withered, but they can still look ok if they put on a lot of make-up.” Nhu told me that she watched them leave for work in the evening and come back early in the morning, as she was setting up her breakfast stall. “When the sun comes up they still come by here to eat sticky rice and bean custard in the morning. Before I saw they had a car that brought them, now I see they go by motorbike taxi (*xe om*).” Nhu said she and others from the Women’s Union had tried to talk to them and help them, but their addiction was too advanced and they denied their activities.

What was striking to me was how much people in the *khu* talked about heroin addiction, relative to how comparatively little of it there actually was. In the *khu*, where there was so much public regulation, the *phuong* officials knew exactly who were the *khu* heroin addicts, as can be seen in the Women’s Union meeting. And yet, every parent was convinced that their children were at great risk, leading them to keep their children at home as much of the time as possible, and to alternate spoiling them to keep them happy (thus encouraging consumerism, one of the causes of moral decay that they believe created this epidemic) with attempts at surveillance of all their movements outside the house.

Government propaganda also linked heroin abuse to AIDS infection, which was similarly widely portrayed as pollution from outside. A Communist Party Central Committee directive called on all levels of the Party to “promote a healthy, clean and faithful lifestyle and abstinence from drug abuse and prostitution to link HIV-AIDS prevention to social evils campaigns” (Vietnam Communist Party 1998). Similarly, rising crime was also seen as a product of this moral decay resulting from an openness to the outside. By contrast the war-time and *thoi gian bao cap* era was remembered as a time of shortages, but safety. One older worker told me,

The *thoi gian bao cap* time was very hard, there was no drug evil but there was queuing evil, long queues for half a day to buy a kilogram of sugar. But one happy thing was the society was not in decay. Now it has deteriorated. In the old times, we left our houses unlocked to go out but no one stole. Now if the house is left like this it must be locked. The house near here, the people went to their *que* at Tet. They locked up very thoroughly, but the thieves still broke in and stole everything. Now thieves are very audacious. The society is like this now because it has opened too much.

Many parents told me that they were constantly anxious about their children straying into social evils. Bac Hai, wounded veteran and father of a twenty-year-old son, told me:

As for the negative aspects of *doi moi*, we know little and must go slowly with foreigners, because we don't understand so many things. In the factory, we don't have any youth who are addicted to heroin. In the *khu* we have some whose children are addicted, my friends have children who are addicted. My cell has the opinion that we should create good conditions for this child to quit, but we still don't know if he has. The mother and father of this child are also retired workers. Because of social evils like that, I really protected my children. I returned from work, even if thirsty, I didn't go into the tea shops around the factory gates, I came home. Because there all kinds of people gather, gathered together they would chatter, fight each other, drink tea and then drink alcohol, after that they would be robbed, get in fights.

Bac Hai told me that when his son failed his high school exams, Hai insisted he go to work: "I invited him to join the factory so that he wasn't at home misbehaving. He must understand that now he's not able to study, but if he stays at home he'll follow his friends into trouble, so he had to go to work. To work shifts with his father, and his father can manage him." Like Hai, many parents found themselves trying to protect their children from social danger that they saw as a direct result of *doi moi*, while also hoping that their children could succeed within the new system of education and economics.

Urban: Rural :: Modern: Backward and Urban: Rural:: Corrupt: Pure

All of this anxiety about money, children, and morality, as I have described, finds some expression in nostalgia. This is sometimes expressed in recalling the ideals of the socialist past and the language of the socialist mobilisations, as I have discussed. Additionally, it is also sometimes expressed as a nostalgia for the idealised pre-revolutionary, in fact timelessly ahistoric, village life. Thus, older women in the *khu* measure their current *doi moi* experience against their expressed imaginations of an idyllic countryside past. They negotiate to place themselves within these ideals by maintaining a dual status as both urban and rural.

Raymond Williams (1973), in The Country and The City, discusses the recurring representation throughout English literary and cultural history of the countryside representing innocence and simplicity, as well as backwardness and ignorance, while the city represented learning and civilisation, but also worldliness

and corruption. This same dichotomy pertains in Vietnam, and the rural/urban moral judgements of women in the *khu* could be mapped over Williams' English ones. Even further, Williams suggests that the country ideal is an always receding one, in each era harkening back to an imagined simpler, more innocent rural past. Similarly, just as socialism incorporated pre-socialist models of virtue, women workers used these rural virtues to comment on *doi moi* life and morality.

The Vietnamese home village, *que*, is a powerful imaginary ideal even for city dwellers (cf. Hardy's (1998) study of Vietnamese migration for a discussion of the emotional and cultural resonance of the concept and symbolism of the *que huong*). Many women will identify themselves as being "from the *que*" although they have lived in Hanoi more than half their lives. Very few answer "Hanoi" when asked where they are from. Women retain different levels of commitment to and communication with their *que*, depending on whether their families are still alive and living there. Most consider it especially important for their children to spend time in the *que*, visiting grandparents and often spending entire summer holidays in the country. Mothers say quite often that this teaches children good countryside values, displaying their concerns about children growing up in more morally dubious urban environs. Another way some workers in the *khu* stay connected to the countryside is to move their families back to the *que*. Bac Thu, for example, a male management cadre in the factory, lives alone in a six metre square subdivided room in the *khu*, while his wife lives with their two teen-age daughters in their *que* in Thanh Hoa province. His mother died during the year I was doing fieldwork, and he told me about going back to Thanh Hoa for the funeral, for which he had many responsibilities as the oldest son in the family. When I commented on the absence of a wall altar in his small *khu* space, he said "It's true that according to Vietnamese tradition I should have an ancestral altar (*ban tho*) here, but I stay here by myself and it's not my *que*. So my wife tends the family altar in Thanh Hoa."

Other workers express more ambivalence about their relationship with the city and the country. Bac Lien's family, for example, had moved to Hanoi from nearby Ha Tay province when she was very young. She says that since her parents and grandparents all moved here, and were buried in Hanoi cemeteries, and her siblings all live here, she now calls Hanoi her *que huong*, although she occasionally returns to her parents' *que* to pay respect to older ancestors' tombs. She says none of the older women who retired from the factory when she did wanted to return to their own *que*.

They all have families here so what should they return to their *que* for? Their family, husband, children all live here. Only their parents stay in the *que* so sometimes they go to see them. No one wants to return to the countryside! Right above my flat, there are four women who don't have children. One is sixty, one is over sixty, and they're not even returning to their *que*, although I don't know why they don't. Another woman, living close to Bac Nhu, has been diagnosed with cancer but she is still fine now. Her family heard of that and wanted to bring her back to the *que* but she didn't want to go back. She stays here alone instead. Her sisters can come here to see her but she won't go back. She said that when she died, she would return, but now she was still alive so she would remain here.

Bac Hai, a fifty-six year old male worker and wounded veteran, told me:

In my *que* everyone has a garden, a pond, it's enough to live off. If, when I retire, I don't have enough savings then I will go back home where I can have some rice fields and a pond. When my oldest boy grows up perhaps I will return to the countryside just to live, because everything here will be so cramped, and more complicated. My wife will still be here to take care of the children, but maybe I'll return to the *que*.

But Bac Thu, whose wife tends his family altar in the *que*, said he had no plans to return to the *que* when he retired. He said he hoped his daughters would come to university in Hanoi, so that he could stay with them.

While women described the *que* as a place of good *tin h cam*, moral virtue, and simplicity, they also said, in their reluctance to move back to the countryside, that it is technologically undeveloped and culturally backward (*lac hau*), not modern (*hien dai*) like Hanoi. Some of these descriptions are clearly imaginative, since the examples they gave were almost always factually wrong. For example, rural lack of "technology" was usually further defined as "they don't have television, electricity, or light bulbs". This was almost certainly true in the *que* that the worker left in the early 1960's. By the time of my fieldwork, though, with Vietnam's extensive rural electrification programme and promotion of television as a means of state propaganda, most lowland villages in the northern provinces that supplied workers to the March Eighth factory had electricity. And, with some economic prosperity and distribution of consumer products, even if television sets were not as widespread in private households as they were in Hanoi and in the *khu*, every village would have had a few television sets around, at least in public video parlours. Furthermore, the women who made these comments were likely to have visited their home villages as recently as the previous Tet and would know this from their own experience. When

pressed, they would even admit that their *que* did in fact have electricity, or television, and that they were talking about “*ques* in general” (*cac que huong noi chung*). To say that we have electricity and they don’t expressed their ideal of themselves as sophisticated Hanoians.

On the other hand, a woman in the *khu* would also sometimes say that she was herself unsophisticated. The expression *nha que* (peasant; from the *que*) was most often deployed as an insult. Hanoians used it without irony to dismiss the clothes, dress, manners, or accent of the countryside. I once attended a football game at the army stadium in Hanoi, where the home crowd rooted for the Army team against a visiting team from the poor rural province of Nghe An, which was outmatched but playing bravely. The crowd, incensed at the plucky defenders as they continued to thwart a victory, began chanting “*NHA QUE NHA QUE*” at the provincial team whenever they clustered around their own goal. March Eighth workers would jokingly call themselves *nha que* when they compared themselves to wealthy Hanoians or to me. For example, people said to me at various times, “I’ve never been to visit Huong pagoda, I’m so *nha que*,” or “I’ve never tried foreign food, I’m so *nha que*,” or simply, “I can’t understand, I’m too *nha que*.” Indeed, compared to more successful middle class Hanoians, the factory workers were *nha que*, the *khu* an outpost of old socialist ideas and industrial decline on the outskirts of Hanoi. The snottier of my bourgeois Hanoi friends didn’t hesitate to tell me how fruitless they thought it was for me to try to learn about “Vietnamese culture” (*van hoa Vietnam*) from the “simple” (*don gian*) women of March Eighth. One descendant of an aristocratic French-trained family even suggested that March Eighth women were so poor that they frequently turned to prostitution⁴. She was surprised when I told her that the women I spent time with had televisions. Like the workers’ image of the undeveloped *que*, she had imagined the March Eighth *khu* was too poor or too backward to have them.

There was another way in which television was a marker of metropolitan identity, and that was in the workers’ choice of what to watch. They would frequently say that they preferred Vietnamese programmes to foreign programmes, since they were “too *nha que*” to understand foreign programmes, which might be Hongkong or Japanese soap operas or Chinese martial arts movies or obscure

⁴ This also reflects a common problem for factory women in many largely agricultural societies. Ong (1987), for example, shows that young women working in a Free Trade Zone in Malaysia were associated with immorality. Mills (1999) in Thailand describes the same problem for textile factory workers.

American sitcoms, all dubbed into Vietnamese. In practice, though, and without exception in my observation, when channel surfing the three available channels, no one ever chose a Vietnamese programme over a foreign programme. Here is a parallel example to women telling me that there is no electricity in the *que* (when in fact there is), which they told me to emphasise their difference from the backward country folk. By saying they do not watch foreign programmes (when in fact they do), they emphasised their difference from the sophisticated, global, urbanised elites who could understand such corrupting foreign things, including the middle class Hanoians who they knew were sneering at them. This self-identity as *nha que* conferred back on these women an ideal of innocence that they found comforting against the confusions of consumerist urban life. It also defended them from their own failure to prosper in an economically competitive environment where their tiny state salaries and tiny crumbling apartments were no longer enviable, but were pitiable markers of their inadequate adaptation to modernity. By clinging to their countryside identity, they could hold the moral high ground of *tinh cam*.

One day I was visiting Chi Binh, a worker in her fifties, who was retiring soon and planned to stay in the *khu*. The woman who lived next door to her stuck her head in the doorway for a few minutes to giggle at me, as she did every time I visited there. I greeted her politely, as I always did, and she laughed nervously without replying, as she always did, and went back to her room. I asked Binh why she never shut her front door, and she said:

There's no reason to. We often visit back and forth with the neighbours, and if we have any problem we run back and forth, also to play. Many neighbours work in the factory, all the neighbours around here. Neighbourly relations are very relaxed, really. We've all come from the *que* and we're all *nha que*, all the *ques* are concentrated here. There's no real Hanoians here at all. We're from Ha Tinh, Ninh Binh, Thanh Hoa, Hai Hung, all the provinces around here, we've got them all.

However, while professing this ideal of rural-like harmony, Chi Binh also expressed contrasting moral judgements in the same idiom. On another day, Binh complained to me as she cleaned up the communal kitchen in the hallway in front of the row of front doors: "Five families share responsibility for this space, but my family takes care of it separately, alone, to make it more comfortable and clean." I asked why the neighbours didn't clean up when they used the kitchen and she

laughed loudly and bellowed down the hallway, as if she intended everyone to hear, “Because they live like barnyard animals! They’re all so *nha que*!”

Conclusion: Boundaries

The boundedness of the *khu* once functioned to keep in discourses about revolutionary morality, circulating within the community and factory in which they were created and reproduced, and through the enactment and expression of which factory women experienced a sense of political power and importance. The boundaries also were intended to keep out counter-revolutionary or feudal ideologies such as the power of the patriarch and the subjugation of children; backward ideas about mothers-in-law and son preference; and capitalist trade and consumer desire.

As I have shown in this chapter, through the end of the high socialist period and the growing impact of economic reforms, *khu* barriers against outside influences and divergent moralities have weakened or collapsed. Using the language of state narratives about public order, the residents of Building D15 attempted one way to recreate these boundaries, not to include within them a greater moral order but to maintain the primacy of private, non-state space and to exclude disruptions from outside. Many other March Eighth workers in the *khu*, without the reinforcement of their political centrality, have been left struggling in the new market economy to define and protect their identity as moral persons and relieve their anxieties about the dangers and insecurities of new economic and social conditions. For the older women workers, once they no longer pursued the goals of the revolution or of national development, concerns about family became pre-eminent. As wives and mothers, women in the *khu* tried to define new moral boundaries. Within these they incorporated pre-socialist ideals of neighbourliness and rural harmony, such as in their idealisation of the countryside and the appeal of the *que huong*. They also embraced revolutionary ideals of egalitarianism and order, such as in their reluctance to support child beating and son preference and in their careful treatment of daughters-in-law. They included *doi moi* values of economic success and competition, pursuing small trade and class aspiration through the education of their children. In all of this, women workers expressed anxiety about excessive openness and reinforced the private boundaries of the family.

CHAPTER SIX

Religious and Ritual Practice

In the previous chapter, I described many aspects of contemporary life in the *khu* that have been influenced by revolutionary discourse as well as pre-revolutionary models of virtue and *doi moi* attitudes about wealth and status, and proposed that women in the *khu* try to manage the economic and social life of themselves and their families within the constraints of all of these competing and complementary concerns. In this chapter, I look specifically at the religious and ritual practice of women workers in the *khu* as an example of how they absorb and negotiate these concerns.

I begin this chapter by discussing activities and events that occur around the lunar New Year holiday in the *khu*, and describe what happened the year I was there. I use this story to explain some of the continuing concerns that workers in the *khu* have about their relationship with ghosts, ancestors, spirits, luck and fortune. Later in this chapter, I describe religious and ritual belief and practice, including the gendered aspect of religious practice in the *khu*, which is primarily pursued by women. I conclude that the increase in ritual and religious activity since the relaxation of state control can be linked to rising anxieties about moral disorder, the free market and economic gain, as described in the previous chapter. I also conclude that women's increased engagement with Buddhism; popular religion; and fortune-telling, geomancy, and other "superstitious" activity contrasts with their diminished political engagement and status.

Lunar New Year

For women in the *khu*, the lunar New Year holiday (*Tet Nguyen Dan*, or *Tet*) is the focus of the year's ritual activity and, as in China, a time of "chaotic sociability" (Stafford 2000: 136), during which reciprocal relationships of all kinds, with the living and the dead, are reiterated and reproduced in a bustling round of paying ancestral homage at home, visiting pagodas, and familial, friendly and collegial visiting and eating.

On Tet morning, February 1999, well into my fieldwork, I went to visit Chua Quynh pagoda with Chi Loan and her daughter Ha, my hosts. I knew that neither of

them went to this pagoda very often, usually only at Tet, unless they were visiting Loan's *que huong*, in which case they went to the village pagoda there. Loan's husband Anh Minh said he never went, and he did not accompany us. Loan even got a little confused about which of two alleys to take to walk to the pagoda, which is only about five minutes from her house, and I took over navigation, as I was very familiar with the route. On the way, we walked past the house of Bac Nhu, who was just hanging out her washing. I ran over to give Tet greetings, and introduced her to Loan and Ha. Nhu said, "Are you going to the pagoda? Chau [Nhu's grandson, who was six] and his mother [Nhu's daughter-in-law] are there now." Loan asked, "Have you been already?" and Nhu told her, "No, I'm Catholic." "Ok," said Loan, "Happy Tet."

At the pagoda, which was thronged with people, Loan and Ha were awkward and peremptory in their actions. They put their offerings, some apples and a bag of biscuits, on a plastic plate, of which there is always pile on a table to one side. As I helped Ha arrange the plate, I realised I had spent much more time at Chua Quynh than either of them, and was more comfortable, more habituated, to moving around in its symbolic space¹. We all circled the main statues and prayed at each, lighting incense. I took three sticks from a larger bundle and lit them, shaking my clasped hands in front of my face with my head bowed, in the prayer stance. Everyone muttered what they were praying for, as it is good to say it out loud. I muttered "Good health for my family" and Loan whispered to me, laughing, "Say it in Vietnamese, not in English (*Em phai noi bang tieng Viet, khong noi tieng Anh duoc*)!"

Inevitably I bumped into a lot of people I knew at the pagoda, including a very excitable Chau and his mother, and it was a cheerful and lively crowd. The mobbed pagoda visit is one aspect of the holiday that people remember when they say Tet is happy (*vui*). Crowds are generally beloved in Vietnam. A Vietnamese expression, often trotted out when you are crushed up against more humanity than can possibly fit in whatever space into which you are all squeezed, is *Dong qua, vui hon*, "Very crowded is happier." The more the merrier. The *khu* inhabitants are as Stafford describes his

¹ I mean this to refer to Connerton's description of "habitual memory" of ritual behaviour, as he describes how we learn to use our bodies in appropriate modes of ritual behavior, recalling the forms of movement and speech required in ritual performance. "In habitual memory, the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body" (Connerton 1989: 72). As Jing points out, this only begins to address the problem of what happens when ritual memory is lost, as happened in his Chinese village, where the embodied reaction must be relearned (Jing 1996).

villagers in Taiwan: “They apparently value a certain kind of noise and crowding, much as they value the ‘hot and noisy’ bustle of a religious festival. It is as if this good kind of happy disorder provides protection from a bad kind of unhappy disorder, the kind caused by ghosts or social instability” (Stafford 1995: 35).

Loan, Ha and I went out to the courtyard outside the gate of the pagoda, where there were several bushes and a spouting water fountain. Several children were perching and playing on the edge of the fountain while their parents stood around chatting to each other or posing the children for pictures. Loan said she should take a picture of Ha and me in front of the fountain, and I was showing her how to point my camera, with our backs turned to the fountain. There was a loud splash, and we turned around to see a little girl, perhaps five or six years old, emerging from the water in the fountain, screaming. Her father and grandmother fished her out in a great commotion, and she was streaming with water and howling. Her little plaits, all carefully done up with ribbons for Tet, were bedraggled and sticking out at mad wet angles. Her father, angrily, pulled her to one side, away from the crowd, and began roughly stripping off her clothes, as her grandmother descended with a fluffy coat. Off came her dress, a flowered red patterned jumper, and then her white poloneck, and she was left half-naked in her boots and red tights, howling even more vociferously and jamming herself into a feral crouch, with her arms around her bare chest, whether to protect herself from cold or eyes I could not tell. Her father crammed her arms into the woolly white jacket and steered her away. Although a watchful crowd had formed, it was a sombre one and kept its distance.

On any other day, the plight of the little girl, and her father’s by extension, would have been greeted with boisterous laughter, such as the scene I described in the last chapter when a father was beating a child in public. The performance should have been made even funnier by the father revealing his evident embarrassment. On this day, however, there were expressions of concern from the watching crowd: *she’s cold; they’ll take her home now; she lives close by; it will be all right*. Everyone scattered from the courtyard as she was taken out. No one who had witnessed the scene wanted to linger any more, and Loan and Ha hustled me away from taking a picture of the girl or the fountain. The festive mood was broken, and I was the only one who seemed to find it at all funny. We walked home seriously and quietly. Later that afternoon, visiting Loan’s in-laws, I told the story to the group and Loan joined in the telling, laughing about how wet the little girl was. However, the following week, when I brought back my

photographs of Tet to show Loan and her family, I reminded Loan of the little girl in the fountain and she said she “didn’t remember” the story and then “didn’t remember” what the little girl looked like. She asked me if I had a photograph of the girl, and I reminded her that she wouldn’t let me take a photo, which she denied.

The second day of Tet, I went to visit Bac Nhu, to go with her on a round of Tet visits to *phuong* officials and friends. I told her I saw Chau at the pagoda the day before, and she brought him out to say hello to me. He began to cry when we left, wanting to tag along, but for once none of the older women were sympathetic, and we all began to walk away. As he hung in the doorway, wailing, Nhu turned and said, half to him and half to me, “Chau must stop that. You can’t cry on Tet.”

The girl who fell in the fountain at the pagoda reminded me of a similar account I had read of a child’s misadventures during lunar New Year festivities. Stafford (2000: 137; 1995: 85) describes an eight year old boy who was becoming bored during an extended New Year’s visit to another family’s house. After kicking out at an elderly relative and then taking without asking a number of firecrackers, the boy injured his hand while lighting the firecrackers outside. To placate him after his burn had been examined and deemed not serious, the adults around the table brought him into their circle and gave him some beer, breaking with custom that children do not sit, eat or drink with guests. Stafford suggests that the adults acted unusually in order to preserve the peaceful social and moral order that family visiting and New Year’s sociability reproduced and expressed, and “because people usually avoid arguments and the use of inauspicious language during the festival period. Negative words spoken at this time of year may have serious consequences” (Stafford 2000: 137).

The examples of the girl in the fountain and impatience with Chau’s complaining illustrate some of the special attributes of the Tet holiday and the communal and spiritual significance of maintaining a happy atmosphere and well-ordered social relations. The crowd retreating from the misfortune of the girl in the fountain demonstrated to me how strong was the collective belief that what happens at Tet could influence the fortune of individuals and families throughout the coming year. This is expressed in symbolic action such as the thorough cleaning of the house during the days before Tet, so the ancestors can visit comfortably, and the preparation of special food for the ancestors, and particularly the practice of inviting a lucky and prosperous man to be the first visitor after midnight (*xong nha* or *xong dat*), whose example of good fortune

should set the tone for the family for the rest of the year. This collective belief persists despite years of state campaigns that dismissed such beliefs as superstitious. Malarney (2001a), in his discussion of socialist attempts to control the meanings and practices of various ritual practice, describes how the revolutionary state tried to curtail the “wasteful” aspects of Tet consumption and downplay the spiritual aspect of the celebration. Part of the state’s concern in reform was to eliminate the belief, symbolised clearly at Tet, in spirit causality, “that supernatural entities punish the living for moral transgressions, [especially] ancestors” (ibid.: 133). Or, conversely, that happy and well-tended ancestors bring good fortune and prosperity to the family.

In the example of the Chinese boy who burned his hand on the firecracker during Lunar New Year, Stafford suggests that through his incorporation into the commensality and conviviality of adults, this boy learns “the mechanisms of relatedness through which people come, in the passage of time, to be connected to one another. Through these mechanisms, I would suggest, children learn to situate themselves in particular historical communities” (Stafford 2000: 139). Stafford is interested in how his villagers develop a Chinese historical consciousness, implicated in which is the disjuncture between national narratives of socialist campaigns and family-based narratives of connections with ancestors into the past and children into the future.

In the *khu* during Tet when I was there, one piece of evidence of a similar disjuncture between national and family narratives was what was not there. Since 1996, the Vietnamese government has strictly enforced a ban on firecrackers on the grounds of promoting public safety and eliminating wastefulness. In Vietnam, just as in Stafford’s Chinese village, firecrackers have historically been an important part of the New Year celebrations. Firecrackers are said to be festive and lively and either scare off bad spirits or welcome the ancestors with fanfare, contributing to the *dong qua*, *vui hon* excitement of the whole period. The firecracker ban was generally unpopular, and, unlike many Party directives I have mentioned, it was thoroughly enforced². Tet was a quieter affair than in the past, and people in the *khu* alternated complaints about the firecracker ban, especially by younger people, and earnest quoting of the government line on their dangers. The year that I was in the *khu*, the government had devised a compromise by staging public fireworks on Tet in three cities. Some of the young men I knew from the

² One woman in the *khu* has had to take in her in-laws from the *que*, since they lost their livelihood making firecrackers when the ban was instituted.

khu went to Lenin Park in Hanoi to watch the show, including Loan's sullen son, Phu, but most of us stayed home and watched the explosions on television. Loan was impressed that the event could be broadcast from all three cities at once. She was equally impressed by a live transmission from a Navy ship of a crew of Vietnamese sailors sending greetings to their families, who were responding from a studio in Hanoi³. I had been sceptical about the televised fireworks, expecting that they would be another example of the government and the Party trying to make a virtue out of necessity, to convince people that some ersatz experience could substitute for a beloved tradition. However, the televised fireworks seemed to soothe at least some of the sense of loss that people had expressed the previous year, when there were no firecrackers, no fireworks display, and the official substitute in Hanoi was a bunch of candle-lit helium balloons let off over the central lake. I asked Chau later if he missed firecrackers, and he mumbled something about watching them on television. I realised that he was too young to remember a Tet when they exploded live around him.

I have shown in previous chapters, in both the confluence and disjuncture between national narratives and the personal recollections of March Eighth factory workers, how the older workers place themselves in a moral history that highlights their past political participation and reflects their anxiety about present changes and dangers. I have also shown how state discourse on proper behaviour has been adopted, adapted, and rejected in various ways by workers and their families. Similar themes emerged in the context of religious, spiritual and customary practice. While the firecracker ban, for example, was successfully enforced, some people still grumbled about the lack of firecrackers while others accepted it, and children, growing up without firecrackers, at least conditionally accepted their absence. By comparison, continuing attempts by the state to ban the burning of votive paper objects were widely unsuccessful and around the *khu* during Tet great clouds of smoke carried numerous offerings to the ancestors. In this chapter, I examine these issues in relation to religious practice in the factory and *khu* and describe how this reflects concerns about state power and family morality.

³ This event had some geopolitical significance, since the sailors were stationed in the South China Sea, guarding Vietnamese claims to the contested, possibly oil rich Spratly Islands, which are claimed by China and many Southeast Asian countries and are the source of occasional outbursts of regional tension.

Religious Practice Since the Relaxation of State Control

In Chapter Three, I mentioned that in the past there were no wall altars in the factory. The contrast with the past can be seen immediately in the presence now of wall altars in every office of the factory. Consider the Trade Union official in Weaving Section B who admitted that she had told the workers for many years that they could not have a wall altar for fear of the flammability of the cotton thread they were working with: “Fire was prohibited.” Although the “no fire” (*cam lua*) sign still hangs on the office wall, as she told me this in 1999, sitting in the management office of the B Weaving section, she gestured to the wall altar above her, on which several sticks of incense were burning. The man sitting next to us, a low ranking manager, was smoking a cigarette.

I visited B Section again a few weeks later, to attend a small opening ceremony for some new offices that had been built around the back of the section. Construction had not quite finished on the new offices; bare wires protruded from walls and ceilings where lights and ceiling fans would be fixed, and the unfitted glass windowpane leant against the wall under the open frame. But the wall altar was already in place, “facing northeast”, the section leader told me, laden with lit candles in gilt candlesticks, a big bunch of roses, and an incense pot already littered with expired sticks, their thin trails of ash dusting the surface. The section boss told me that she had consulted her fortune-teller, who told her where to place the altar, and who had chosen this date as an auspicious one for the opening, despite the work not yet being finished.

Attitudes in the factory reflected broader state policy. As Kleinen describes: “Although official approval for holding festivals and for reopening of cult and worshipping places is still required, it seems state intervention is rather limited. The State, seeking popular legitimisation, recognises tacitly that Buddhism and—to varying degrees—other religions fit into *the tradition of the people* and are therefore permitted to be practised” (Kleinen 2001: xi).

The flourishing of religious and ritual practice since reform was also visibly reflected in pagoda-going. The two pagodas near the *khu* were experiencing a boom in attendance. Religious activity had begun again in Chua Mo in the late 1980’s, around

1987⁴ according to the junior monk there. In 1990, some repairs were begun on the damaged main pagoda building, paid for by local contributions, and reconstruction commenced in earnest in 1995. Both Chua Mo and Chua Quynh had octogenarian head monks and had recruited new younger monks within the previous few years. Both had seen a dramatic upsurge in the number of older women who *quy*, that is, to join the pagoda in a ritual conversion ceremony and pledge to “belong to Buddhism” or “become children of the pagoda”. Many of the older or retired women workers I knew in the *khu* had chosen to *quy*, including many Party members and local officials. They were supposed to go to the pagoda to pray as often as possible, but this varied widely among those who *quy*; some went twice a day, some only four times a year for the key pagoda rituals. There was also a wide incidence of parents “selling their children to the pagoda” (*ban khoan*), in a small ceremony that gave the child a kind of nominal Buddhist identity and membership in a particular pagoda.

The new junior monk at Chua Quynh presided over four young monks and was ambitious to continue expanding. He described his recruitment by the senior monk, who came to visit him at his last pagoda, a quiet spot on the far edge of the city.

There is too much demand here (at Chua Quynh) and because there is only one old monk and four young ones, the top administration of the church requested me to move. The old monk came to check me out at the old pagoda. He interviewed me and watched me work. He told me that many more people come to pray here than at my old pagoda and there are not enough monks here to care for all of the people who come.

The level of demand at the *khu* was illustrated to me one day when I went to visit the head monk. The *quy* women and some young boys (acolytes and *ban khoan* children) were preparing a vegetarian feast for the next day, in honour of the death anniversary of one of the pagoda’s founding monks, who is buried in the courtyard. They were preparing one hundred trays (*mam*), for one hundred tables; some several hundred people were expected (cf. Malarney 1993: ch. 8 “The Problem of Feasting”). The junior monk was on the telephone for hours that day, ringing around other pagodas to invite monks to the celebration. Complaining of the excessive heat (the newspapers headlines

⁴ The significance of the dates is in relation to the beginnings of economic opening, legally begun in 1986. To have begun ritual activity in the pagoda so soon after the passage of the *doi moi* legislation indicates the level of enthusiasm for religious practice in the community.

screamed “Heat Wave” that week, and Hanoi’s main water reservoir was running low), the junior monk emerged from the office occasionally and padded through the kitchens, checking out festival preparations, in his brown tunic trousers and Adidas trainers, eventually stripping off his tunic top to reveal a matching Adidas tee-shirt beneath. Although adherent Buddhists sometimes say that Buddhist pagodas are “not expensive” to maintain, since monks live simple lives and “eat vegetarian food, just vegetables and some rice”, the scale of this festival rivalled a lavish wedding. On the other hand, aspects of Chua Quynh reflect the accident of geography and history that placed it near to the *khu tap the*, with its political sensitivities and surveillance. For example, as I have mentioned, the national ban on burning votive paper offerings (*hang ma*), on the grounds of wastefulness, is widely violated by individuals at home and in many pagodas, but is enforced at Chua Quynh, despite the grumbling of many women who *quy*. The young monk is still very popular with the older women in the *khu*, who speak of him admiringly and euphemistically as “tall” and “big” and “fat”, since it would be improper to describe such a chaste and sacred figure as “handsome”.

The atmosphere at the smaller Chua Mo, located further from the *khu* in a maze of back alleys, was markedly different. The pagoda was less well-frequented, its monk a thin, altogether more ascetic character than his colleague at Chua Quynh. Chua Mo’s location further away from the *khu*, which as I have described still remained a centre of what passed for political orthodoxy, also seemed to be reflected in an approach less aligned with the concerns of the state: at Chua Mo, for instance, the burning of votive offerings was allowed, as it is in many other pagodas around Hanoi. And unlike at Chua Quynh, local *phuong* policemen would stop by whenever I came to talk to people at the pagoda⁵. The Chua Mo monk had studied at a teaching pagoda in the south, not uncommon among northern Buddhists but still a marker of some difference, and was also finishing a philosophy degree at the National University in Hanoi. He told me that

⁵ They would amble along after I had been there for a few minutes, obviously alerted by someone to the presence of a foreigner at the pagoda. They would ask other people, and then me, who I was, and seemed content with my response that I was studying “Vietnamese culture” (*van hoa Viet Nam*). When I offered to show them my research permission papers, they got shy and said that wasn’t necessary. I had the impression they were just keeping a general eye on things. By comparison, I was never approached or interrupted when visiting Chua Quynh, which suggests that it was a less marginal site. When I formally interviewed the junior monk at Chua Mo, two undercover policemen showed up after we had been there for about ten minutes and joined us casually on the floor, smoking cigarettes and even contributing to the discussion, as I describe.

the number of people attending the pagoda had been rising dramatically from the early 1990's.

More and more people came from 1992. Before that, people didn't know the pagoda was here. From 1995 when we started reconstruction people knew more and more. For example, before then for a death anniversary for a founding monk, we may have only 200 people but now 1500 will come. Many women factory workers from the March Eighth factory come. Only a few come every day, but many come on the lunar first and fifteenth. Here in Vietnam a lot of things were not open before now but now you can talk more freely about those things, so people can learn and develop.

The monk also explained why he thinks that people returned to the pagoda so readily after the reforms, and why the government policy on religion changed:

Before, under the state subsidy time, people didn't have access to the outside world and material life was of a low standard, so they couldn't pay much attention to spiritual life. Marx was an atheist and anti-religion and Vietnam was obviously Marxist. But after that the government realised that Buddhism is not a religion but also a philosophy, and one that people at all levels can understand and follow, not just intellectuals. Although intellectuals can benefit from it, too. Buddhism is not idealist [*duy tam*, belief that life can be influenced by supernatural force, contrasted with *duy vat*, materialist], so this helped to resolve official problems. It's not really a religion, so the intellectuals can believe in Buddhism because of course they don't believe in supernatural forces. They use it as a philosophy more than a religion.

One of the visiting policemen helpfully chipped in at this point to offer his own interpretation, almost certainly from his own experience, of this rather tricky bit of doctrine:

People who are *duy tam* will go to the fortune-teller and will say superstitious things, and it's worrying and tiring for them. If you're Buddhist, you can go to the pagoda and not worry because they will give you a good date for a burial and not scare you with bad omens. For example, if someone in your family dies and the fortune-teller tells you that he died on a bad day, so other people in your family will die soon, too. This is very worrying. But a pagoda will help to fix the situation by telling you a good burial time for the dead person.

In the policeman's view, religion is an antidote to superstition, a reasonable and reassuring system that can combat the irrational fear-mongering of fortune-tellers. Thus,

the monk and the cop, who represent different aspects of state power, have each achieved an ideological, and practical, rapprochement, mapping the lingering anti-spirituality of state policy over their interior metaphysical landscapes (or vice versa).

The Shifting Boundaries of Superstition

In Chapter Three, I mentioned how there was confusion in the past over the extent of Party policy on religious practice. The policeman's observations point to a fundamental confusion that has persisted, despite the new tolerance towards formal religious practice, over the distinction between approved religion and superstition (*me tin*), as I described in Chapter Two.

Bac Nhu, the Women's Union leader who was one of my main informants and a valued ally within the *phuong* bureaucracy, was also one of the fiercest of the anti-superstition campaigners in the *phuong*. In one of the monthly Women's Union meetings at *phuong* headquarters, she announced:

And one more problem these days is that Ba Lam is calling forth the spirits of dead people and very many people are going to her. I feel this is a very serious problem of superstition and we must put a stop to it immediately. People make a lot of noise when they go to her. The *phuong* has not yet given any official opinion to stop her.

On another occasion, she complained that technology had increased superstitious activity. "They're so modern now, you can get fortune-telling over the telephone."

Nhu had also begun attending Catholic services again at Ham Long, one of Hanoi's main churches, since the relaxation of state religious policy. She was usually vague with me when I asked her about her religious practice during the height of state control, and frequently shrugged off her religious affiliation, saying that it was her mother and not her father, who had been a revolutionary independence fighter, who was Catholic and that no one else in her family practised the religion. She said there was not much religion of any kind during the state socialist period, because people had more pressing concerns, although she also suggested that part of why there is more religious activity now is because people are seeking solace or relief from other, modern pressing

concerns. Her children were raised Buddhist, she said, and her grandson was going to be sold to the pagoda, *ban khoan*.

Bac Nhu had no wall altar in her house. Her flat was decorated with several images of Catholic iconography and a rosary was sometimes hung casually over the edge of a chair or a nail in her sitting room. Despite having been discreet about her religious practice during the time when it would have been impolitic or even impossible to practice it openly, Nhu rightly gauged that she did not need to act as circumspectly in the current political climate. However, she also explained to me some of the pastoral work that she does through the church, very small scale local charitable work in the community around Ham Long. Charitable activities outside of government structures, especially by religious organisations, are forbidden, and the priest at Ham Long had already been warned that the work his congregation did was unauthorised. Even Nhu, who was a Party stalwart, was willing in this situation to weigh state dictates against those of her conscience, and follow her conscience.

Bac Nhu's stern views on superstitious activity was, however, hardly representative of that of most women I knew in the *khu* towards geomancers, fortune-tellers, diviners, and religious specialists (*thay cung; thay phu thuy; thay dia ly; thay boi*), whose advice on various issues was often sought in the *khu*. I have already mentioned one high level March Eighth manager who consulted a fortune-teller for guidance on placing a wall altar in a new office. In the past in the *khu*, if families put up wall altars, they say they usually themselves chose the position in the house, "for convenience" or "without thinking". Often the husband in the family did it, and men usually dismiss this in recollection as if hanging the altar were just another household task. I found some exceptions to this, in cases where someone in the family had a particularly strong belief in geomancy. In one case, a woman worker who was a Trade Union official in the factory moved into a flat in *khu* building A4 in 1967, which she shared with two other families. "All three families had wall altars," she told me, "But we placed them only where was convenient. If they put their altar in one place, we would place ours in another place, that was all." However, when her family was granted a new flat to themselves in 1973, she brought in a geomancer to place the altar.

I had to invite a *thay phu thuy* to choose the direction of the altar. At first, because I didn't know, I had placed a small altar. But when he came, he advised

me to have a bigger one. So I made a big altar which is one metre long and fifty-nine centimetres wide. He asked me to do so, exactly so, even one millimetre bigger or smaller was unacceptable. But after that, there was no improvement or advantage, so I was very disappointed.

More and more now, people invite geomancers to come and place their altars properly, or rearrange the layout of their houses. Bac Chanh, the Women's Union official who told me how simple her wedding was during the socialist era, described recently receiving a geomancer in her house. She had long suffered fatigue and persistent stomach-ache, which the hospital had finally diagnosed as a serious liver ailment but not treated to her satisfaction:

My son got acquainted with a man. My family is poor but his is very rich. He is a lecturer at the Technical University. He came to visit us and sat watching my house. At that time the front door was on one side and the other side was this window. They have just been changed. The bed was placed lengthways. He sat watching and shook his head. He said if we couldn't build out the rest of the balcony, then at least the kitchen door should have a north west orientation. It frightened me to look at his book, there were such sicknesses in it! It is like a map...He also said that the altar placed like that was not good and meant either death or chronic sickness. Before I just placed it wherever was clean and high. He showed me how to place it. He said we should have this front door orientation since the house in D14 Building [across the courtyard] has a mirror hanging that reflected on ours so I always had stomach-aches, and the bed's front end couldn't have the front door orientation. The ancestors in the old times also avoided lying with your head towards the front door. I knew it but had to do it like that because of the difficulties [of lack of space in the apartment]. In the past, only coffins were laid with the first end orienting towards the door. From that time on, we called him Uncle and fraternised with him.

A highly esteemed geomancer described to me another example he had cured in the *khu*. In one family, he found that the sewage tank from the toilet ran under the kitchen floor, which he said was bad because kitchens equalled fire, and fire over water fought each other, so the water tank had to be moved. I suggested that all the *khu* buildings were built with exactly this arrangement of toilets and kitchens, and he laughed warmly. "Yes, but not all families have called me in to fix them!" He also said that an important element of placing wall altars was the birth year of the patriarch, which was complicated as well in the *khu* with so many women-headed households.

Many women were not at all abashed to discuss experiences that fall directly under state prohibition although they tended not to willingly label themselves

superstitious. Chi Ngoc, a thirty-eight year old worker whose father died in the war when she was an infant, told me about calling his spirit (*goi hon*) when she needed help or advice. Ngoc said she did not keep pictures of him on her altar because she left them all at the altar of her uncle (*Chu*, father's younger brother) in Thai Binh, in the family's *que*.

I don't need pictures of him, because my father is so sacred. I called his spirit when I was in Thai Binh and he said that I am only a daughter so I don't need to follow the custom so closely. I should just light incense for him and put flowers for when he will come, I don't need to bring the pictures here. He [his spirit] sometimes came to visit me when I was a baby and I was being very difficult, I had a terrible reputation as a baby, living alone like that. Also when I married my husband I lived with my husband's mother and father. They sold *pho* (noodle soup) and worked slaving away all the time. I always had a headache there. When I invoked his spirit, my father told me I had to leave my in-laws and have a better life. So I requested the factory to come work here, and to live here in the *khu*.

Ngoc's mother had abandoned her after her father's death to remarry in what was seen as undue haste, which was reflected in Ngoc's unusual use of the word "reputation" to apply to her own infant self and describing herself as "living alone" (*doc than*), that is, not with her birth parents. She was raised by her father's family, with whom she still has warm familial contact, but never saw her mother again after a failed reconciliation attempt when she was eighteen years old. After that, her mother moved south with her new family and Ngoc lost touch with her. Many years later, when Ngoc was visiting her *que* in Thai Binh, she heard that her mother was also visiting there. She called on her father's spirit again to advise her:

I had gone to visit my mother [in 1978, when Ngoc was 18] but she didn't have any sympathy (*tinh cam*) with me at all. I followed her around for two days but she ignored me, and her behaviour towards me was very bad. So in 1993, I went to call the spirits and my father told me that I should remember that time, when I had gone to visit my mother and she didn't pay any attention to me. Still I intended to go one more time, but my father didn't allow me to go, he said now I should leave on the bus and leave her alone, so I didn't go. Although my mother was also there, I went straight from Thai Binh and didn't go up to see her. I only sent word to say that I forgave her.

There was scepticism about spiritual efficacy and human expertise as well, though. The same now-retired Trade Union official who had risked Party opprobrium to place her wall altar in 1973 went occasionally to fortune-tellers, particularly looking for news of her second son's prospects:

One son is very good compared to others in society now, so I am very happy. But my second son wants to do big business. He is a worker [at March Eighth factory] but his mind is always stuck on big business, large-scale trading, so he tries to do it but he always failed. So I ask about that, just because of superstition, in fact I don't believe in fortune-telling but I only want to know whether he could do business successfully. Because every time he tries, he fails, so I wanted to know when this period would be over. But they said not until he was thirty-something. Now he works in the factory but still is obsessed (*me*) about trading. How unhappy he is. My husband has taken an extra job since retiring, and any money we earn was spared for him to do trading but he has failed every time.

In this case, her protestations ("in fact I don't believe in fortune-telling") seemed contradicted by her regular pursuit of the most accurate fortune-teller, which included trips to places such as Cau Dien (fifteen kilometres from Hanoi) and Cau Giay (on the outskirts of town). But she sounded more seriously sceptical in recounting her experience of calling up her father's spirit:

My elder sister and I went to my father's calling up two years ago, accompanied by our mother. My father said he knew my mother was there with two children but when we asked him about the order of those two children, he answered wrongly. I guessed that the fortune-teller just said it based on what we said, not correctly. Spirits calling up is not very accurate.

I went once with Chi Uyen to visit Chi Hoa, a fortune-teller and *len dong* spirit medium whom many women workers visited (cf. Norton 2000a for an analysis of *len dong* mediumship rituals). Chi Hoa had established her own shrine on the top floor of a narrow concrete house in a crowded neighbourhood near the *khu*. The house was otherwise typical and walking up through it, through families engaged in everyday activities such as watching television and eating lunch on the floor, gave no hint of the energetic activity going on upstairs. There were two main altars in the small room, each crowded with statues of gods and goddesses and laden with offerings, plastic plates of fruit, incense, and money. One of Hoa's disciples took me to pray in front of one of the altars, chanting briefly for me and Uyen in turn. She told me she was praying *an sao* for

me, to “calm down the stars”, and to counteract bad fortune in my *tu vi*, horoscope. At the other altar, Hoa counselled women who had come for fortunes and advice. She was an extravagant character in her fifties, large, elaborately coifed and bejaded with huge earrings, rings, bracelets, and necklaces, with brightly lacquered finger and toenails and her teeth and mouth stained red from chewing betel nut. She had a deep, gruff voice and a peremptory but sympathetic manner. I watched her lay her hand on the wrist of a woman, who said she had terrible stomach pains that the doctors could diagnose or cure, checking her pulse and nodding intently. The next supplicant was involved in a complicated land dispute involving taxes and large sums of money. When it was my turn, Hoa turned to me and closed her eyes. She asked me my name and my husband’s name, our ages and birth years, how many sisters and brothers we had. She asked how long we had been married and I answered, “Nine months.” She opened her eyes and looked at me for a minute. “Come back next month,” she ordered. After some discussion, it transpired that I was not there for help in conceiving a baby, as she had assumed. Uyen interrupted, saying I just wanted good luck for my family and good health. Hoa wrote out a charm for me, folded it up and wrapped it in a piece of gold foil. She told me to carry it with me at all times and never open it.

Coming back from visiting Chi Hoa, Uyen and I cycled passed Bac Nhu’s house. We stopped in the doorway to say hello and chat. When Bac Nhu found out that Uyen had taken me to visit Chi Hoa, she made a sour face and pinched my upper arm. “Take her to the pagoda (*chua*),” she told Uyen, who is also a regular pagoda-goer.

The most direct conversation I ever had about belief was in the kitchen with Ha, preparing a huge meal on the eve of Tet. We were talking about going to the pagoda the next day, and had this brief and light-hearted exchange:

Ha: Do you believe (*tin*) in spirits (*than linh*)?

MR: No.

Ha: Why not?

MR: I don’t know. Do you?

Ha: Yes.

MR: Why?

Ha: Because I’m very afraid (*rat so*) of them.

MR: Why?

Ha: I don’t know.

When I slept over at Loan's house, she and I slept in the same bed, but she always slept on the outside, with me on the inside. Parents sleep like this to protect their children from ghosts.

Gendered Belief and Practice

In many of these examples, we have seen a range of what people in the *khu*, especially women, say they seek, when they engage in spiritual, religious, or even self-defined superstitious practice, despite state disapproval and in some cases their own revolutionary pasts. Good health for self and family, family harmony and happiness, moral inspiration and protection from evil spirits and the angry dead are common aims. For example, Bac Thuy, a Women's Union official whose wedding was described in Chapter Two, has *quy*-ed, although she says she only goes to the pagoda occasionally. She told me that she appreciated the moral lessons of Buddhism:

Before joining the pagoda, the monk taught us to first perfect ourselves at home. If you went to beg at Buddha's door, you should first live kindly, act kindly to your neighbours, act gently with your children and family. This is the primary thing. It is unacceptable that you could *quy* but when at home you still answer back to your husband insolently or swear at your children. I agree with that, we have to have a heart. We may beseech Buddha, but we must live for our husband, children and the neighbours, respecting the hierarchical order, treating others well. You get what you give, I mean a good person will get good things rather than bad things. In the pagoda, the monk preached that being a beggar at Buddha's door means when living we must follow the Buddha's example. It means morality, honesty, no deception, and living so as to bring out the goodness in our children.

Overwhelmingly, however, what women say they seek is material gain, wealth, success and advancement. In one example, a childless, divorced fifty-year-old worker told me at first, "I just pray for good health." But she went on to say:

I am not a lucky person to have had a chance to be rich. Workers in general are not rich. Sometimes I buy a lottery ticket to win and be able to buy a ground floor flat. Unfortunately, I always lose. I don't want to continue to be unsuccessful, but I have to live only on my salary because it is just me alone. So I have to save, and to pray. It is ok, at least a little bit, for me to live in the *khu* on my salary, but I could never live outside or downtown, it would be too expensive

and I could not afford it. Even the prices of vegetables and other things are more expensive downtown. So I could only be successful if I pray to be lucky.

This perceived materialism is identified by both women and men as an explicitly gendered aspect of religious practice. The monk in Chua Mo explained this succinctly:

This is the main difference between men and women. Men come to the pagoda to learn about Buddhist philosophy and apply it to daily life. Most women come with the belief that they can rely on the Buddha to help, can get something from it.

The Chua Quynh monk commented that this is a historical imbalance. “Generally in Vietnam, women follow Buddhism much more than men. In the village, men usually went to the *dinh* (communal house) but women went to the *chua*.”

The traditional sex segregation in the *dinh* and the pagoda was one of the feudal elements of the traditional Vietnamese village that egalitarian socialist policy was intended to eradicate (Malarney 2001a: 60; Kleinen 1999: 35). The gendering of religious practice, and of religious resurgence, is an ethnographic fact that has become commonplace in Vietnamese studies. Norton, for example, has looked at the ways in which male and female spirit mediums display different intentions, with the men desiring prestige and status and women pursuing individual freedom (Norton 2000a). Kleinen describes the predominance of women in maintaining the pagoda in his village: “support from the local women of Lang To had been instrumental in keeping pagoda ceremonies intact as much as possible...more and more young women are seen in the pagoda as ceremonies are held more often...elderly women of Lang To took the lead in the first steps to renovate the pagoda” (Kleinen 1999: 167).

The language of practice and belief is a gendered distinction as well. As Norton describes, it is popularly held that women are more interested in spiritual matters (*duy tam*) than men who are more interested in material matters (*duy vat*) (Norton 2000a: 66). Status and prestige is mostly vested in male religious experts who use their religious knowledge as a form of spiritual and social capital. Just as these religious experts criticise women for having a materialistic attitude towards spiritual practice, other men in the community, including husbands, sons, fathers and fathers-in-law, and local officials, also engage in a similar critique. Few men I knew practised much ritual

activity, beyond occasionally lighting the ancestral incense. Usually at Loan's house, for example, she was the one to light the incense on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month. During Tet was the only time I ever saw her husband Anh Minh have anything to do with the family altar. He helped to arrange the food offerings, flowers, and paper money and objects, in this case, a large cat, representing Ky Mao, the Year of the Cat⁶. Later he lit the incense on the altar and said a brief prayer, which he read from a notebook, and after midnight he joined Loan outside to burn the paper offerings. It is especially important for him to do this at Tet since he is the father and head of the family.

One exception to this was Ong Minh, the retired teacher whose wife is devoutly Buddhist. Ong Minh is unusual in that he actively participated in promoting the spiritual life of his children and took his sons occasionally to his *que* to pray at family graves and thank the ancestors. Ong Minh likes going to the pagoda occasionally and told me excitedly of his visits to three of the main pagodas in Hanoi during Tet: "I felt very happy. Although I have lived in Hanoi almost forty years and went past Quan Thanh many times, for the first time I brought my wife to Quan Su pagoda, Quan Thanh temple and Tay Ho temple. I felt comfortable and peaceful to do that. I liked to pray there and burn incense with my wife and children." When I commented in reply that I never saw Ong Minh light incense in his house, he replied:

I don't usually care much for lighting incense on the wall altar. Only when something reminds me. For example, when an animal dies I burn incense immediately. I raised that dog for more than ten years but it died just a couple of days ago. I felt great regret. I wrapped it in a big bag and people say that if a pet dies you have to put it down in the river so that it will be cool [superstition that cool water is better for an animal's soul than to bury it]. My son drove me in a car to take it to the river and put it in, *thuy tang* (bury in the water). Afterward I was troubled and when I burned incense I felt lighter, more spiritual.

Ong Minh's story was an unusual one, for me. Otherwise, the male exceptions to the predominantly female engagement with spiritual pursuit were almost all what the Chua Mo monk called "intellectuals", men who engaged with Buddhism at a philosophical and doctrinal level. One of these is the geomancer I mentioned before, who has placed altars in the homes of top Party leaders. Another is a university professor

⁶ In China, the Year of the Rabbit.

who spent a year in a pagoda in the south studying meditation. He described to me the theory/practice split along gender lines, and its historical, rural dimension:

In the countryside, there were two systems based on sex. Men went to the *dinh* to ask for their power. But women went to the *chua* for their moralities, but their moralities relating to men, really. What women prayed for was clothes and rice. In traditional Vietnamese culture, women had no right to education, and only knew about things inside their family, so they weren't as interested in the work of the world. So they are naturally superstitious. Men are quite different. So very few Vietnamese people are really Buddhist, less than 2 per cent.

Women tended to accord male religious experts enormous respect, and may have felt chastised by the suggestion that they pursue religion for material gain. Bac Chanh, the Women's Union official who had brought in the geomancer to re-align her house and wall altar, joined Chua Quynh in *quy*. She told me:

People who *quy* are preached to by the monk. He said traders give him money and ask him to pray for something for them [in business] but he never does that. Going to the pagoda is praying for virtue. He said we disciples are all retired and come here for peace of mind, not for profit. He said if you have a little money, put just a little as an offering, 100 or 200 dong. It is not necessary to bring incense and flowers. If we ask to buy incense, the monk will criticise us.

On the other hand, women did not necessarily abide by the judgment of their economically unsuccessful husbands and sons, who express similar opinions. Chi Uyen, the factory Party official who took me to visit the spirit medium and balanced her Party meeting schedule with her daily *quy* visits, told me:

Men don't go to the pagoda and aren't religious or Buddhists. Half the people in my *que* [in Thai Binh province, centre of Catholicism in the North] were Catholic but generally Buddhism is the religion of Vietnam. Women believe more in Buddha or Jesus, men just think about beer and wine, not about spirit or belief.

Conclusion: Loss and Gain

The attitudes and practices outlined in the examples above reflect the extent to which many of the women in the *khu* now engage in religious activities that would have

been strongly proscribed in their youth during the days of high socialism, and which remain the target of official ideological disapproval. As noted above, these “superstitious” practices as well as church and pagoda visits are mainly carried out by women, whose predominant concerns now are with the pursuit of material improvement for themselves, and through themselves, for their families.

There is a kind of obviousness in the fact of women's concerns being focused on the family, given their central domestic role, as outlined in the previous chapter. But the dramatic increase in the level of religious and superstitious activity since *doi moi*, widely acknowledged in the examples above, also reflects the specifically gendered implications for spiritual pursuits of the loosening of state control since the late 1980's.

The reforms that led to the loosening of state control over religious activity were not directly intended to do so, originally; they were a by-product of economic reform, which signalled a move away from many aspects of Party domination of social life. As outlined in the previous chapter, this has had a particular impact on women in the *khu*. First, their established central role as the main economic support of the family, evident throughout the *thoi gian bao cap*, has exposed them more than men to the economic pressures on their small state salaries and the concomitant increased consumerism that has emerged with *doi moi*. Women see themselves as being economically responsible for the success of their families, their health and education. Therefore it is not surprising that women, more than men, have sought recourse to hoped-for spiritual assistance in their efforts to pursue economic success, and good luck.

Secondly, as also explained in the previous chapter, the *doi moi* opening to market activities has allowed some women in the *khu*, more than men, to pursue when possible additional economic gain through petty trading and small business activities. Women rather than men have taken the lead in this activity, which can be seen as a response to the new pressures and status competition created by the *doi moi* environment. This also inclines women to seek spiritual assistance in their pursuit of success in their small trading activities. The growth of gendered commerce and concerns about money were explicitly linked in the *khu* to the growth of gendered religious practice. As the Chua Quynh monk told me, "Now the economy is developing so women have more capacity and do more business. They need to worship for luck and help." Bac Son, the former factory cadre who was trained by Chinese experts and who said he and his wife never went to the pagoda, told me, "It is most important to perfect yourself. God

is only inside you, if you go outside to pray it's not right. Women think that gods bless them to attend to their business, to do trade without attracting the attention of the police." Another religious expert, the professor mentioned above, observed to me that "Fortune-telling and many kinds of belief have increased recently. The free market is like a war; you need good luck in order to survive it."

The resort to the previously taboo world of the spirits as I have described in this chapter also reflects a response to women workers' diminished status and removal from political importance. To return to the experience of children in the *khu* at Tet with which I began this chapter, we can view the behaviour of the adults around them through the lens of state power. Thus, the happy noise of exploding firecrackers has disappeared, in response to the dictates of the state, which recalls how people in the *khu* in the past embodied and enacted the high socialist era's disapproval and restriction of religious activity. But the dispersal of the crowd when confronted with the ill-omened fall into the fountain, and the burning of votive offerings, despite the state's continued disapproval of such practices, demonstrates the resurgence of private religious concerns of which the state continues to express its disapproval. During the Tet when I saw the girl fall in the fountain, I witnessed or discussed many Party orthodoxies being violated: Nhu's Catholic pastoral work and her grandchild being sold to the pagoda; materialism in religious festivals; the placating of the ancestors to prevent their vengeful return to the living world; even the honouring of the lunar calendar itself, a Pandora's box of superstition and old ways. These are all choices that people made during a period of changing political, economic, and social opportunities and restrictions.

In the previous chapters, we have seen how the mass mobilisations and public campaigns of the socialist era that targeted destructive capitalism and inegalitarian practices have affected the ways that women express their anxieties about money and moral decline in the post-*doi moi* present. One of these ways, as we have seen in previous chapters, is socialist nostalgia and the re-invention of an egalitarian past. Another way that women express their concerns about post-*doi moi* morality is in the continued manipulation of their roles in enacting and expressing state power and policy. Thus language and ideals of socialist policies persist in the construction of the present, but also represent and underline the diminution of the former importance and power of the March Eighth workers. In the religious context this tension is also played out, with the women talking about those activities disapproved of by the state, such as visiting

fortune tellers, in the language of state disapproval, while at the same time eagerly pursuing them.

Loss and gain are inextricably tied in to the sense of local history in the *khu*. Although children now in the *khu* are growing up without direct experience of state socialism, the absence of firecrackers during Tet, for example, reminds their parents of old slogans about waste and order. While older women workers have surrendered much of their instrumental influence over the management of social order in the factory and the *khu*, they have regained access, through practice, to a spiritual realm that was ideologically tabooed. However, by pursuing this practice they relinquish the moral superiority and political purity that respecting and promoting those taboos once granted them in the days of high socialism. In the realm of religious practice, they express their anxiety about the economic changes that have also brought them loss and gain: of social and moral order, webs of obligation, consumer desire and aspirations for their children and themselves. These transformations in their historical and political consciousness reiterate their movement from close to the fire to far away from it, through their lifetimes in towards the centre of political power during the period of state socialism, and then out towards the margins during the reform era. Their perceptions of change in national narratives allow and encourage them to uncouple and detach their identification and interests—familial, ideological, spiritual—from those of the state.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have considered the past and present of the March Eighth factory workers and described how one is invoked in the other. I have demonstrated how these women remember themselves as being a central concern of, and centrally concerned with, building socialism (Part One), through which they felt themselves to be close to the power of the state, so that through their actions they represented and enacted state power (Chapter Two). Despite this convergence with state narratives of socialist heroism, women workers also expressed dissatisfactions with some aspects of state policy in the past, but also compared the present *doi moi* era unfavourably with their recollections of the socialist era (Chapter Three). This nostalgia for what they saw as the morality of the high socialist days, that they expressed in complaining about post-*doi moi* morality, can be seen in their stories of Ho Chi Minh and their continued respect for his model of virtuous leadership (Chapter Four). By the time of my fieldwork, women workers perceived themselves to have become remote from political power and they primarily concentrated instead on building families (Part Two). As I have described in this thesis, during my fieldwork, in the transition from state socialism to a limited market economy, March Eighth women struggled with changing social and economic demands that affected their family life (Chapter Five) and their spiritual and religious pursuits (Chapter Six). In these struggles, March Eighth women negotiated positions for themselves as moral actors, drawing on such state-mandated values as simplicity and egalitarianism, and pre-revolutionary values such as *tinh cam* and respect for the spirit world, as well as pursuing wealth for their families in the market while warding off its dangers.

By way of conclusion, I would like to consider briefly the past, present and future of the March Eighth women workers.

The Past

In his study of social memory among the displaced Kongs in China, Jing takes the phrase “flashbulb memory” from psychology to describe memories of dramatic

experiences, such as the flooding of their old village that the Kongs still describe emotionally thirty years after the experience (Jing 1996: 58). The flashbulb metaphor is obviously borrowed from photography, which can freeze a dramatic moment in a permanent representation. Some of the stories of the past that the March Eighth workers told me may have been those kind of memories, frozen, highlighted drama, such as Ho's visit to the factory. And overall, as I have described in this thesis, the whole revolutionary experience was dramatic for the young women who came from their villages to the city, to work in the factory, to fight for the revolution, to live according to new ways. Despite their divergences from the revolutionary agenda (as I described in Chapter Three), many of the March Eighth women believed that they were creating a new world through their personal actions and political involvement. They felt as Malarney writes of his Thinh Liet residents: "For these people, the revolution provided an opportunity to create a better society and a better future. Their past had not been a particularly good one, thus many actively participated in the revolutionary struggle to create a new society. One of the strongest impressions one gets from conversations with such people, even after you strip away the layer of post facto nostalgia that many have for those years, is the sense of possibility that many felt during that time. The old order had been torn down, and the future had enormous potential...with concerted, guided action, a better society could be made" (Malarney 2001a: 331). This enormous sense of possibility, and the sense of loss at its passing, was palpable for me in the stories that older women told me in the *khu* and the factory. It is reflected in the way that factory workers described themselves and their pasts, and in how they applied elements of revolutionary discourse to contemporary judgements.

This sense of possibility is also reflected in the archival photographs that sit on my desk and have been reproduced in this thesis. In one of these photographs, taken in 1965, two labour heroines pose in the weaving section of the factory, with the poster that reads "Learn from all the comrade excellent workers (*Học tập các đồng chí thợ giỏi*)". This same poster is still there, although as I explained throughout Part Two, the motivation for learning from excellent workers in the factory is not. Still, I am fascinated by the evidence of the poster, although I walked past it many times before realising after seeing the photograph that it dated from at least 1965. As I mentioned in the first chapter,

contributors to the book Picturing Power (Evans and Donald 1999), describing and analysing posters in China, address the question of how revolutionary politics were visually expressed and consumed. This resonates with my own experience of fieldwork and of writing ethnography because there is a similar proliferation of political posters in Vietnam, once physically present in the factory and the *khu*, whose slogans are verbally invoked in the stories of the workers. The poster in the weaving section is not visually striking, certainly compared to the vivid images described in Picturing Power. Nor is it as dramatic, nor as visually pleasurable, as other posters I have seen from the high socialist era in Vietnam, others of which are also still fading on factory walls and reproductions of which are for sale as tourist souvenirs in central Hanoi. Nor does the poster in the photograph have the visual density of the many recent campaign posters that I saw displayed in public spaces around northern Vietnam, posters warning of the dangers of heroin addiction or HIV infection, exhorting mothers to breastfeed, or promoting the “industrialisation and modernisation of the country” (*cong nghiep hoa, hien dai hoa dat nuoc*).

Despite its visual poverty, the poster in the photograph continues to catch my eye, and my imagination, because it is a visual trace that I saw myself of campaign time, which is verified and reified by its representation in the official photograph. So the other archival photographs catch me, as well. The smiling faces of the young women workers, lifted up towards Ho Chi Minh as he celebrated and honoured their contribution to the revolution, show an image of the enthusiasm that women recollected for me when I asked them about the past, and often even when I just talked to them about the present. The photographs, from a government information agency, preserved in official archives, constitute an element of state discourse about heroic, revolutionary narratives of the past. A book of war photography from the archives, containing interviews with several photographers (Niven 2002), confirms that attempts to portray positive images to inspire the war effort led to photographers staging the occasional shot or editors censoring too negative an image, although the photographers also took enormous risks to get many genuine combat shots and suffered the same privations of danger and discomfort as did North Vietnamese troops travelling up and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the front. The editor concludes that the photographic propaganda efforts were largely successful: even

the photographers themselves were inspired by the heroism they witnessed and recorded, and “said that since the war had ended, their lives had become pedestrian, routine, lacking in meaning” (Niven 2002: 21). In the photographs of the cheering women and the smiling labour heroes, the state narrative converges with the stories that the women told me, when they were young, and it was not like now.

The Present

The power of images of women recurs throughout writing on Vietnam. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, for example, Taylor (1999) and Turner (1998), in their histories of Vietnamese women at war, were also struck by the image of Nguyen Thi Kim Lai, the militiawoman, photographed with the captured American pilot, who as I described was an inspiration to the March Eighth women in their self-defence work. Taylor (1999: 109) writes of the photograph: “It symbolised well the relative size of the two antagonists, the unfairness of the conflict, the determination of the Communists to win, and the power of women”.

This power of women is what the historian Tai (2001) addresses in her analysis of the cultural interest in the war and the revolution. Tai, writing about “the faces of remembrance and forgetting”, contrasts the photographs in museums of Vietnamese peasant women, “their faces lined with age and grief”, with photographs of smiling young women on billboards used to advertise products and promote tourism (Tai 2001: 167). Tai suggests that through gender stereotypes, women are represented as the repository of memory and forgetting in Vietnam. Various contradictory images of women “represent both the power of memory and the fickleness of oblivion, both the debt that is owed to the revolutionary generation and the ingratitude of post-war youth” (ibid.: 168). Mothers are portrayed as constant and reliable, raising sons to be soldiers. The country itself is represented as feminised, like a young girl, who must protect herself against foreign conquest; contradictorily, female independence fighters, throughout Vietnam’s long history, are publicly commemorated and celebrated (cf. Turner 1998; Taylor 1999). Tai asserts that through guerrilla fighting that encouraged women not only as soldiers but as defenders of the homefront and participants in the total mobilisation of the North, the

American War was not symbolised as a traditionally masculine pursuit. In post-war commemorations, the mothers of young men who had been killed while fighting were honoured, with women symbolising the remembrance of sacrifice. On the other hand, women also symbolise the forgetting of sacrifice in the post-war reconstruction, with women portrayed as the negative side of *doi moi*, engaged in trade and status and consumer competition, betraying the ideals of the revolution. Tai concludes: “Winners and losers in the market economy, young and old, grieving and forward-looking, self-sacrificing and hedonistic, icons of memory, symbols of forgetting; women embody the dilemmas and contradictions that are involved in making sense of war and postwar, revolution and counterrevolution in Vietnam” (ibid.: 192). I found among the March Eighth factory workers all of these contrasting images of women that Tai describes. As I have shown in Part Two of this thesis, March Eighth women retain some of the values and ideas that they learned, enacted, and expressed in their revolutionary pasts, just as the traces of campaign time remain in the posters still hanging in the factory. State campaigns influence how they feel about and act towards their husbands, sons, daughters and daughters-in-law; how they talk to and about their neighbours; how they are restrained in their spiritual practice and how they dismiss their own concerns as superstitious; how some of them still believe that workers and managers in the factory should be equal.

Bac Hoa, for example, the section chief of one of the weaving sections, was a long-term Party member and had worked in the factory since 1963. Unlike the management cadre in the administration building and some of the younger section chiefs, who all wore street clothes, Hoa usually wore the same simple uniform trousers and shirts as the workers in her section. One day when I came through the section office, Hoa surprised me by coming from behind the curtain that was strung up in a corner of the room. Workers used the space behind the curtain to change in and out of their street clothes and uniforms. Hoa came from behind the curtain in a trouser suit as she was trying to fasten a little pearl necklace around her neck. I said “I’ll help you”, and moved behind her to help her with the necklace clasp. “I usually wear simple clothes,” chattered Hoa, a little embarrassed. “I don’t usually wear such clothes. I have to go to a meeting in the city. You know, I don’t usually wear these clothes.” “I know,” I said, “How can you

ride your bicycle? Those nice clothes will get dirty.” “No, no, I can’t ride my bicycle to a meeting,” Hoa replied, “I have to go by car. It’s a meeting, do you understand? I have to go by car. You know, I don’t usually go by car. I usually go by bicycle. You know I usually go by bicycle, don’t you?”

Hoa’s embarrassment about using the factory car was similar to another experience I had at the factory. I was returning from lunch in the staff canteen one day with Chi Thanh, another long-term Party member. To return to the spinning section we had to cross the central lane in the factory in front of the main administration building. As we crossed the street, a car drove in through the main gate and pulled up in front of the building. The car was an old Russian Volga, no longer glamorous since *doi moi* had led to the availability of other car models, but representing an earlier time when only government officials rode in cars. A woman who looked to be in her fifties got out with two younger men and went into the building. Thanh said “Oh, that’s the Director. The General Director of the factory!” I said that I hoped to meet her someday. Thanh said, “That’s the factory car. But she doesn’t usually go by car, you understand? Usually she goes by bicycle. For meetings, she has to go by car.”

Embarrassment about dressing up and wasting resources are, as I have suggested, traces left of a socialist morality of modesty, simplicity, and frugality. These are some of the values exemplified by Ho Chi Minh, who according to the stories of the workers criticised a previous director of the factory for dressing up when the workers needed cleaner toilets and good food to complete the important work of building socialism.

During those days, at least in the way they tell it, women workers were enthusiastic about their role in production. By the time of my fieldwork in the *doi moi* era, the applause of workers that I witnessed at power cuts in the factory could be read as resistance to the demands of capitalist productivity. Scott’s (1985) famous concept of “weapons of the weak” has set an on-going debate in the study of labour. Scott describes the “everyday resistance” of poor wet rice cultivators in Malaysia to exploitation by their patron. According to Scott, these farmers were engaged in quiet struggle every day, including foot dragging, the opposite of going on strike, with individual slowness; false compliance, working when the overseer is around but not when he is absent or looking away; and pilfering. Scott contrasts this with organised attempts to change the system in

which the farmer works: "Everyday resistance is informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains" (Scott 1985: 33). Anthropologists have used the concept of everyday resistance to describe all kinds of activity in industrial settings. In one example, Ong (1987, 1991) represents a view that reads resistance to gender discourse in the spirit possession of young women workers. Ong's factory women do not describe their spirit possession as resistance, however, and this raises the problem of identifying what is resistant behaviour. Other shopfloor ethnographies find more overt expressions of worker discontent. In an American steel plant, for example, Bruno (1999) describes workers telling stories of stealing tools and materials from the factory. Stealing represented the triumph of the worker over management and owners, so that in some cases, the items stolen had no particular use or value. Bruno's workers are direct in their valorisation of pilfering as a way of tricking the managers, challenging their supremacy and superiority. Bruno considers that workers telling these stories to him indicated that they did not accept existing class and power relationships as natural. However, he concludes that workers actions were not consistently resistant, and in this he hews closely to Scott's original thesis. He writes: "On balance, worker resistance toward the steel companies was not dogmatic and did not preclude occasional tactical cooperation... While some form of resistance was common throughout the period studied, worker attitudes toward their employers were a synthesis of palpable anger, gratefulness, and mere resignation" (Bruno 1999: 129). Describing a more confrontational situation, Beynon in a Ford automobile factory in England found workers constantly struggling with management, sometimes over apparently minor changes in their working conditions. "Workers will always be militant as long as management tries to encroach over their daily issues" (Beynon 1984: 167). Unlike the steel workers who recognised that they needed the factory to prosper in order to keep their jobs, the Ford workers resented the company's success, did not want to buy Ford cars and advised other people not to.

In fact, though, I think how hard women work at the factory now is less their concern than why. In the idealised socialist past, they saw themselves as good socialist workers, but they no longer have such a moral image to aspire to. As I described previously, they also benefitted materially and in status from their identification with the factory, benefits that have evaporated since reform. In post-*doi moi* Vietnam, old socialist

posters, dating from when the factory was new, shiny, and held out hope of a bright future, are juxtaposed with the outdated, broken machinery and crumbling factory infrastructure. Confusion over the conflicting demands and advantages of the market economy is reproduced inside the March Eighth factory in the incompatibility between the vestiges of the socialist system and half-hearted attempts to adapt and compete. The factory no longer functions as a revolutionary social institution; factory work has become just work, and not glorious socialist labour. The factory no longer places women workers near to the political centre, and their interests have shifted away from it.

As the social and political boundaries of the factory and *khu* that created it as a revolutionary social institution fragment and dissolve, the limits of state functionalism are also revealed in the choices that women make to pursue petty trade and commerce; to abandon political pursuits; to fear ghosts, worship ancestors and seek fortune at the pagoda; to accept age and gender-based hierarchy in the factory and lose interest in the morality of productivity.

The Future

The March Eighth factory seems highly unlikely to survive the continuing process of state owned enterprise reform in Vietnam. As I have described, the factory is still buoyed up by extensive state support, and would require restructuring and vast investment in new machinery to be competitive in a freer market (Appraisal Report 1997). Its fragile economic position is additionally supported through guaranteed access to government allocated export quotas; competition for these quotas is increasing from newer and more economically efficient producers, mostly foreign owned and based in the South. This quota system will gradually be dismantled when Vietnam eventually follows China into the World Trade Organisation, to the likely detriment of the March Eighth factory.

New investment capital is unlikely to be forthcoming from either the government, despite the historic and political significance of the factory, or from the country's tiny fledgling stock market. The prospect of rescue by foreign investment seems even more remote; foreign investors in the garment and textile sector in Vietnam in the 1990's all

opted to invest in new factories on green-field sites, mostly in the more reform-minded South, which remains the country's financial and manufacturing centre. While the factory women workers may feel that they are no longer warmed by the heat of the fire of state power, foreign businesspeople complain that their efforts to work in Hanoi are encumbered by being too close to the fire, in the form of a highly politicised government bureaucracy (coincidentally, another way that the *gan lua* metaphor is used is to compare the relative advantages of being in the North, near political power in Hanoi, and in the South, where political factors tend to intrude less). As I have described in this thesis, the March Eighth factory still marks an important locus for this convergence of politics and economics, reflected in the observation that I quoted in Chapter Three: "It's just too political, this factory."

The women workers I spoke to were aware of the factory's problems, and many had experienced lay-offs or part-time working as a result of the lack of demand for its products. But most were largely unaware of the broader political debates over state owned enterprise reform and privatisation that would probably affect their future, and possibly lead to the factory's closure. As I described in the preface, when I asked them what they thought about the government's partial privatisation, using the manufactured Vietnamese government phrase *co phan hoa*, most workers had no idea what I was talking about, and many assumed I was just having language difficulties. For me, this was a dramatic illustration of how distant their relationship with state power had become. It contrasted with their remembered days of political study aimed at fully understanding and enacting the latest directives of the Party. Although, as I showed in Chapter Four, for example, whether they did indeed fully understand, and how much they remembered, of those teachings, was widely variable.

The older March Eighth workers who remained in the factory, and especially those who encouraged their children to work there, have relied heavily on the security that state jobs are supposed to provide, and in some cases their children have traded more lucrative but riskier opportunities for this stability as well. If the factory closed, many of its workers would face dire circumstances. Even with further extensive industrial development in the North, which is any case not imminently likely, the older March Eighth workers are not highly employable in the private sector. Those who might prosper

even without the factory are those women who have been more successful in private trade, who are less reliant on their factory salary and connections; those whose children have been successful also have some insurance for the future.

Whether or how long the factory survives, March Eighth women will continue to negotiate for themselves a moral course around the lessons of the past and the continuing anxieties of present. In this thesis, I feel I have only begun to describe the complexities and contradictions involved in the choices that these women make and the rich diversity of political discourses and social and cultural influences from which they draw. Despite state attempts to create a monolithic view of the past and the present, despite my attempts to describe a sometimes alternative view of it, I am left with a wry observation from an unexpected source: the official factory history. Despite the book's minute recording of ideological expression, construction materials, production outputs, mass mobilisations and campaigns, trade union rosters, clubs and meetings and daycare centres and what was served for lunch and multiple other details of thirty five years of the factory, the official history finally admits that it has failed to capture the range of experience and image that completely describes the factory and its workers. With resignation, the factory history, and my thesis, concludes: "Life really always has many more sides and is livelier than a book (*Doi song hien thuc bao gio cung da dang, sinh dong hon moi sach vo*)" (*Cong Ty Det 8-3* 1995: 106).

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