

Women in Vietnam's Rural Public: Challenging Men in the Economy

ERLAND MEYER-TRAN¹

Introduction

In this article I shall discuss effects of market expansion on rural women's scope of action in different fields within the village public sphere, the economic and political field in particular, using some recent concepts from development sociology in the analysis. I mainly draw upon my own field observations in a wet-rice growing rural commune² in northern Vietnam's Red River delta. Compared to other rural areas in Vietnam, the Red River delta enjoys a relatively good infrastructure, and with its 11.2 m inhabitants it is Vietnam's most densely populated rural region - two essential prerequisites for market penetration. Therefore, the effects of Vietnam's transition from a centrally planned economic system to a market dominated one can be expected to unfold more clearly here than in more remote areas not as well linked to urban centres and without a comparable abundance of labour.

My considerations develop against the background of the general economic liberalisation, known as *doi moi* that Vietnam has experienced since the mid 1980s. Measures to increasingly privatise agricultural production and trade, which began as early as the late 1970s, were particularly condu-

¹ This text was written in the context of the interdisciplinary Graduate School of Development Sociology and Social Anthropology at the Sociology of Development Research Center of the University of Bielefeld, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. Data were collected during a year of field research in 1995/1996 with kind support from the Hanoi representative of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, namely Dr. Peter Köppinger. Many thanks for helpful advice to Chua Beng Huat, Hy Van Luong, and Gerd Mutz.

² The commune consists of three villages, two of them rather long stretched along a minor road. The commune has almost 10,000 inhabitants, distributed more or less equally among the three villages. Total area is almost 7 km², with 4.8 km² agricultural land. Thus, its population density is substantially above the Red River delta's average of 1,000 inhabitants per km² (cf. GSO 1995: 78).

cive for the economic dynamics that impel the social change, of which the following observations are part.

Among the main steps of this transition process were the readmission of private business through the abolition of state monopolies in redistributive procurement and trade of goods and in price regulation, as well as liberalising foreign direct investment and unifying the international exchange rate of Vietnam's currency, which was all accomplished between 1987 and 1990 (cf. Perkins 1993; Fforde 1993). Given the huge number of Vietnamese who earn their living from agriculture, the various crises this sector had experienced since the end of the Second Indochina War (between North- and South-Vietnam) - i.e. especially a number of regional famines between 1979 and 1990 - had been a mainspring of the whole reform endeavour. The Vietnamese government reacted with a number of reform measures that successively shifted the balance in economic responsibility away from the state towards the private sector, i.e. towards families and households for the most part. This reform started 1981 with the introduction of the so called "Contract 100 System" that enabled agricultural cooperatives to partly transfer the responsibility for crop production to farm households through contracts that allotted each household a certain plot of land, also permitting free marketing of any surpluses. A major change in the economic organisation of Vietnamese agriculture, however, occurred not earlier than 1988 when a number of government decrees deregulated the prices of crops and inputs, increased the farmers' freedom to decide what to cultivate, put private agricultural traders on an equal footing with state agencies in selling inputs and buying outputs, and granted long-term land usufruct rights to farm households, which were codified and made inheritable in 1993, transforming them into factual private property rights (cf. Vo-Tong Xuan 1995: 188f; also Nguyen Tri Khiem 1996). The state's retreat from monopoly positions in trade and economic management facilitated the fruition of the entrepreneurial potential that had developed within the restrictions of the socialist economic system (cf. also Nee 1989: 666f). At the same time, this retreat compelled almost everyone to become his/her own entrepreneur, either as farmer, or - given the scarcity of land in the Red River delta - more and more as wage labourer too, often enough on a daily basis.

This transitional process was introduced by the state, which meant it to be a transition of the economy only. As the process gathered pace, however, it became increasingly difficult to deny what could have been assumed right from the start: That these measures of economic liberalisation would start a process of social change bound to affect every part of Vietnamese society, and that it is not possible to confine it to the economy. Where northern Vietnam is concerned, the economic liberalisation measures were enacted upon an entrenched socialist economic system, a system that was politically

steered by a double structure of professional and political leadership in all its echelons. In sociological terms we can describe such a system as less differentiated than a market economy because the political and economic rationalities of action are intermingled. With economic liberalisation the state has largely withdrawn from matters of economic management (though a couple of sectors remain heavily state dominated³), thus allowing an immense expansion of markets. People were left to their own devices, which meant that the possibility of resorting to authorities in pursuit of economic benefits was drastically reduced. This was an important contribution by the state to purifying the respective rationality of action in the political and economic sphere, amounting to increased societal differentiation and thereby making situations of social interface more likely (cf. below). Moreover, increasing societal differentiation substantially changes the opportunities of social mobility. Corresponding to Victor Nee's "market opportunity thesis" (1989:667), ways of achieving economic success that had hitherto been valid, lost their validity while new possibilities open up.

In the broader context of changing gender relations due to market expansion, the following analysis focuses on specific possibilities women may find and utilise in such interface situations. All the more so as extraordinary success stories of female entrepreneurs from my empirical data lend a particular relevance to this topic. It seems that market expansion affects women's opportunities to expand their scope of action in a specific way, in that the economic sphere offers them opportunities for success and social ascent not available in other areas where state control is tighter, notably in politics, but also in more professional areas like health care.

Resulting from qualitative research, my argumentation is based on characteristic case-studies that exemplify possible ways of coping with transition, informing us about a variety of aspects of such strategies. It is not my objective to give a comprehensive overview of the situation of women in rural Vietnam, let alone in the country as a whole. Rather do I want to highlight new opportunity patterns of social mobility brought about by Vietnam's transition to a market economy, and I want to show to what extent these are more relevant to women than to men.

The following text falls into three major parts: First, the two most outstanding cases of female entrepreneurs in Lan Tai⁴ commune are presented at some length. This is followed by a more general overview of gender relations in village life, with a particular emphasis on female representation

³ cf. e.g. FEER 29.2.96: 45. For an overview on State Owned Enterprises in Vietnam see Yuen et al 1996.

⁴ Persons and villages do not bear their original names.

in various public spaces. Applying recent theoretical concepts from development sociology, the concluding section tries to assess female strategies for improving their standing in a male dominated public and the nature of related negotiation processes.

What Market Expansion Makes Possible: Women Joining the Village's Major Entrepreneurs

Female entrepreneurial commitment as such, notably in trade, is nothing remarkable. Particularly petty trade is a traditionally female domain in many developing countries, Southeast Asia in particular (cf. Boserup 1970: 89f, Luong 1992: 53). The economic success of a few women, especially in large scale vegetable trading and embroidery, which is the traditional and principal handicraft in Lan Tai commune, is nonetheless striking because it marks the intrusion of women into more capital intensive sectors of business and suggests a major change in their opportunities of social mobility (cf. Whyte & Whyte 1982: 22).

Embroidery Entrepreneur

Admittedly, the economic success of Mrs Huong (aged 39) is exceptional: A native of Lan Tai commune, she lives today in Saigon, where her business is also based. At the same time she owns a large production site in her home village. Here almost 2,000 young women embroider Kimono cloth for the Japanese and Korean market. The workers come from five different rural communes, scattered over a catchment area of several kilometres in the vicinity of Lan Tai. Mrs Huong commutes regularly by air between Lan Tai commune and Saigon, where her family lives. She is by far the richest person in Lan Tai commune, if it is legitimate to regard her as a member of this community, for officially she is not a Lan Tai resident.

Since 1975, at the age of 17, Mrs Huong, who had practised embroidering since she was 13, had been working as an ordinary employee with the commune's embroidery cooperative, which was dissolved in 1989. In 1985 she moved to Saigon, where she worked as a seamstress in a garment factory. Soon afterwards, she began to run a putting-out system to produce embroidery ware, providing private households with the necessary materials, which they then processed at home. In 1993 Mrs Huong founded a garment factory in Saigon where she produced winter clothing for Russia and also did some embroidering for the Japanese market. Especially her husband, a former manager in a state textile enterprise, who had spent some

time in Russia, and an experienced tailor like herself, facilitated the production of Russian-style garments. Mrs Huong says, half of his time her husband assists in managing the business, the other half he cares for other things, the children in particular. She states that he supported her career.

Around 1993, Mrs Huong ran an informal shuttle trade with Russia, in which she collaborated with people like interpreters who travelled regularly to Russia. She claims she earned \$2 apiece with a turnout of 1,000 items a month, and says that it was possible for her to set up such a business, because it did not require a large initial capital, since she did not purchase the factory's premises but leased them, which she also did with the means of production, if they were not owned by the employee. What is more, the middlemen always paid half the price in advance, settling the balance later. She recalls that time as a difficult period, not least because of the factory's awkward locality and resulting problems in transporting the employees from their homes to the workplace. In 1996 Mrs Huong was still employing 11 people in Saigon (half of them being her relatives) doing administrative jobs, final checking of the produce and last repairs.

With the large production site in Lan Tai, however, Mrs Huong was confronted with a much greater need for capital. She told us that she had to sell her residential premises in Saigon (at an 800% profit) in order to raise capital. In 1996 she estimated her debts at one billion VND (around 91,000 \$). Still more applications for loans are in the pipeline, notably half a billion VND, designated for the factory's extension, from a national fund for the alleviation of shortages in commercial capital.

The factory in Lan Tai is the largest of five in northern Vietnam, and of 22 in the whole country which have a long-term contract with a Saigon-based Japanese trading firm that provides them with a reliable channel for sales. Initially this contract was mediated by a Vietnamese state export agency. Since 1994, however, Mrs Huong can deal directly with the Japanese company, because her firm was then upgraded in formal terms, being provided with a red stamp.

One reason she gives for why she has established this very large manufacturing plant in northern Vietnam's countryside, i.e. in her hometown, is that in Saigon it is much more difficult to find so many wage labourers, hence an average factory in Saigon has only around 100 workers. She states that most seamstresses in Saigon also come from northern or middle Vietnam, and are not better paid than her employees here in Lan Tai.

Although the factory's 15 by 40 metres main building already has two storeys, Mrs Huong's manufacturing complex is notoriously short of space and steadily expanding: In spring 1996 she acquired plot and building of the People's Credit Fund opposite the factory's main building, so that the

area of her main production site now covers 4,000 sqm. The former building of the People's Credit Fund was transformed into a new workshop and given an annex to house the new canteen. The People's Credit Fund moved next door, occupying two rooms in the health post's residence. All over the village one can observe manufacturing sub-branches springing up, where young women, from several dozen to a few hundred, are working in each of the newly erected buildings.

Vegetable Trader

Vegetables are the paramount cash crop in Lan Tai commune, notably cabbage, kohlrabi, tomatoes, onions, water melon, honey melon, and cucumber. Lan Tai is a local hub for the vegetable trade. One of the biggest wholesalers in vegetables is Ms Thao, a 38-year-old woman with seven years of schooling. Although Ms Thao does not employ as many people as Mrs Huong, she is nevertheless of great importance in the village's economy.

Ms Thao stands out from the village community not only as regards her economic success, but with respect to her private circumstances too, in that she is unmarried and has no children. Although she is not the eldest in her family, not even of those working together with her in the business, she is the boss of this vibrant undertaking, which she has established on her own initiative and at her own risk.

By tradition her family has an entrepreneurial record, though not as professional traders, but as pig breeders of rather significant size. The family also marketed the pigs themselves - save for the share they had to deliver to the cooperative - and so did Ms Thao in her younger years. She then gained further experience in trading when she worked for a state trading agency from 1987 to 1990. After that she started to trade in vegetables on her own: She rented a lorry and transported vegetables from her home area to provinces in middle Vietnam, notably to Quang Binh and Quang Tri, from where some merchandise is forwarded even to southern Vietnam. She bought the vegetables from fellow villagers paying them only in part, leaving the balance to be settled on her return. Thus the risk of this venture was passed on, in part, to her peasant suppliers.

With time she became acquainted with a number of traders in those distant places, so that she was able to establish a reliable relationship that allowed her to stay at home and make deals through phone calls via the local post office. When they had agreed upon the terms of trade, the outside traders would send lorries to fetch the harvest. The peak season for the trade in vegetables runs from November until January and ends around the Lunar

New Year. During that time some of her business partners even stay at her home, also celebrating the New Year festivities together, while each of these traders summons one lorry a day. So in the peak season four to five lorries are being loaded with vegetables every day, including the vehicles of traders who accompany their freight and come back every three or four days. Ms Thao then makes a daily turnover of 30 ts to 40 ts, compared with 10 ts to 15 ts during the normal season. Such an amount is the delivery of about ten households. Ms Thao says that several hundred households deliver vegetables regularly to her: 600 to 1,000 kg each when supply is low and up to three to four metric tons during the peak season. Her suppliers come not only from her own village, but from the whole district. Only during a short period of the year does Ms Thao collect the produce direct from the farmers. She says that she does not pay advances. It takes seven people three to four hours to load a lorry (usually an IFA W 50 from the former German Democratic Republic, and regularly overloaded). To this end she hires a group of seven to ten men for five to six months a year. These receive 7,000 VND a day (about 65 c). Ms Thao states that her household income lies between 500 and 1,000 \$ a year. She says that the price for vegetables has become increasingly stable in recent years. Built in 1990, her family's house is in no way striking. It fits the normal standard of many houses in Lan Tai, and there is no outward ostentation.

The Village's Overall Entrepreneurial Setting

To qualify the two preceding case-studies I wish to briefly sketch the setting in which these two outstanding businesswomen operate.

Apart from Ms Huong, who is by far the most important and richest among all business persons in Lan Tai - and certainly in the embroidery business - there are a number of other embroidery entrepreneurs, each employing a few dozen young women, often enough squeezed into small rooms with insufficient lighting. The men entrepreneurs are qualified as traders rather than in embroidery, while the female entrepreneurs are usually experienced embroiderers themselves, who had already worked for the cooperative - a number of them as supervisors - before they started their own business.

As for agricultural trade, there are two male rice traders who have a bigger turnover than Ms Thao. Moreover, their business is more important, because rice is less seasonal than vegetables, and one of these traders possesses remarkable facilities for storing and processing the rice, which has no equivalent on the part of the vegetable trader.

Gender Relations in Village Life

Starting with some reflections on the foreign male researcher's standing in the social setting that concerns us here, the following section makes some more general points on gender relations in village life as I perceived them during my field research. The main emphasis lies on female representation in various public spaces, indicating structural patterns of accessibility, which form the framework for opportunities of social mobility.

Methodological Digression: Accessibility of Private versus Public Life for the Foreign Researcher

Regarding the setting of my field research and its methodological implications, the public rather than the private sphere is more appropriate for discussing the question of how women are affected by the transition process. Coming (necessarily) with the approval of some high authority in Hanoi down the hierarchy to the communal administration, and being a foreigner to boot, there already existed certain barriers to contact with the ordinary villager. As a male field researcher, it was even more difficult to contact women. If at all, only public spaces offered opportunities, predominantly the marketplace. What was going on within families remained largely unknown to me. This is one important reason for my focus on the public sphere when I write about gender relations in the village: This is what I had access to.

Of course, it is always difficult to be sure of the validity of outside observations - all the more in a Confucian society like the Vietnamese with its overall priority on saving face. In such a society it is very difficult to obtain a real insight, and one can almost endlessly speculate about what might be going on in the background, both in the public and private sphere. In the latter it might well be that role patterns displayed to an outsider, and furthermore to a male foreigner, do not reflect the actual balance of power (as indicated by the Vietnamese folk image of the housewife being the "interior's general" - *noi tuong*). The contribution of women to outwardly maintaining customary role patterns might in their own understanding just be behaviour in accordance with the norms and standards of their community that preserves the man's and the family's reputation. Women as well as men have e.g. deeply internalised that only male household members are entitled to receive guests, i.e. to outwardly represent the family. So not to take away this privilege from men might, in the Vietnamese cultural context, be interpreted as a matter of the family's external appearance and relationships rather than a matter concerning the internal and personal relation-

ship between the male and female family or household members involved (cf. also Weggel 1989: 280).

Saving face being such an omnipresent rule of behaviour, both in private and public, I shall exclude the speculation-riddled private sphere and confine my argumentation to the public sphere, where I assume that this cultural trait makes less of a distortion.

Everything outside the private premises I consider part of the public sphere. In the village this means in particular agricultural fields, the workplace, the marketplace, schools, the health post, (mass) associations, the party, the People's Committee, temples, sports fields, and the streets.

Patriarchal Gender Relations

Even to outsiders it is obvious that in many families men have their wives at their disposal, especially when the wife is considerably younger than the husband. This applies to numerous couples, generating a familiar difference in social status between the couple right from the start of their wedlock: In many cases the groom has already established himself in his job, while the bride has just finished high school⁵. For me the most telling example in this respect was the remark of a 24 year old man whom I had asked whether his 19 year old wife, who was sitting beneath us on the floor, working on an embroidery frame, was doing additional wage labour out of house. He replied that currently she stayed at home, but later she would "be made to work out of house" ("se bát đi làm").

Gendered customs at special meals (particularly at celebrations or when receiving guests) symbolically emphasise women's subordinate position by separating them from the distinguished round of men at the table, requiring women to sit on the floor and usually in a separate room; only at important festivities in which the women take part do they share the room - albeit not the tray - with the men during a meal (cf. also Luong 1992: 215). However, this counts rather among the Confucian-structured customs of a family's outward representation, as do conventions to receive male visitors. Regardless of the actual relationship a visitor might have to a woman from a household, who might even have invited him, it will always be a man's job

⁵ There is a conspicuous differential in the average age of marriage: Among the 42 couples of middle age (i.e. between their twenties and fifties) for whom this data is available to me the husband was on average almost five years older than his wife.

- if even a distant kinsman - to host the visitor and engage him in conversation⁶.

Rules concerning the sexual division of labour assign *inter alia* heavy manual work to women, including transportation and fieldwork. Eisen's statement (1984:158) on this topic is still true:

"(...) heavy work is considered 'men's work' if it is relatively skilled and involves modern machinery. If the heavy work is relatively tedious and not mechanized, it is the kind of menial work the Confucian patriarchy traditionally relegated to women."

The resulting workload of an individual woman depends also on the husband's job: Women whose husband has a white collar job bear an even heavier burden than those whose husbands work in agriculture (which, of course, still applies to most).

The patriarchal character of gender relationships seems to soften if - apart from individual disposition - women have achieved a public reputation of their own, be it socially, economically or professionally. We can assume that busy and successful entrepreneurs or traders who provide a considerable portion of the household income, sometimes even the bulk of it, have a greater say concerning household affairs. After all, these women operate their business independently, they make decisions, give credits, hire workers etc. on their own account, and this is in itself evidence of a remarkable autonomy of action.

Women in Rural Public

If we consider the cultural preconditions in Vietnam for women to play a significant role in public, women in Vietnamese society were never subject to seclusion, i.e. exclusive confinement to the private sphere like women in some Islamic societies: "Participation in Vietnamese social life does not require a woman to be accompanied by a husband." (Eisen 1984: 192) Additionally, given legends of mythical heroines who in ancient times had defeated Chinese invaders, Vietnam's culture contains a model, and thus a pattern of legitimation, of public female commitment and even leadership. Such a cultural predisposition, by the way, facilitated considerably the war-time promotion of women to take over positions and responsibilities vacated by men who had been called to the battlefields, thus mobilising the whole population to support a more and more devastating warfare (cf. White 1988: 171f). The massive mobilisation of women found its official

⁶ For an account of the traditional separation between male and female spheres within a household cf. Luong (1992: 73).

expression in the "Three Responsibilities Movement" of the Vietnam Women's Union, that expressly gave women responsibilities in production, family and fighting (cf. Eisen 1984: 96f; also Luong 1992: 202).

With regard to the accessibility of avenues of social mobility, however, the pre-20th century Confucianist institutional framework in Vietnam clearly favoured women's economic commitment rather than in politics or higher education: "The public sphere of power both excluded women and honored education and public services more than wealth in and of itself" (Luong 1998: 304). Hy Van Luong states that female prominence in the economy that was somehow at odds with Confucian prescriptions for female roles "involved a *modus vivendi* between the dominant Confucianism-structured female subordination and their enhanced responsibility within an alternative household-centered framework" (*ibid.*). Historically, female prominence in the economy was further reduced during the era of French colonialism due to the growing interdependence between literacy, i.e. education, and economic success (*ibid.*: 306). According to Werner, women's increased public responsibilities in socialist Vietnam, especially during the Second Indochina War, did have their impact on female family roles and "were matched by women's greater independence at home" (Werner 1981: 184). Werner does, however, see the completion of agricultural collectivisation, which weakened patrimonial labour organisation in fieldwork, as the crucial precondition to the upgrading of women's status through their greater public visibility (*ibid.*: 190).

In the following table I have schematised public fields of action⁷. Together with an estimation of the degree of formalisation of women's involvement in the respective field I have labelled some of them "female spaces" (cf. below). The table is meant to be read as consisting of four columns, rather than five columns with the third and the fourth column merged into one, because the third column ("kind of leading position") is meant to explicate the fourth one ("occupied by women"), i.e. in the fourth column I have noted what I had in mind when considering leading positions in the respective public spaces. The table's underlying logic is that of an increasing degree of formalisation in public positions as we go from the left to the right. These columns refer to women and their standing in the respective fields. The last (read: fourth) column, however, somewhat deviates from this logic as it refers to the respective public spaces as such, noting whether I would call them female spaces or not.

⁷ When I use the term "action" here, it is predominantly meant in the sense of social action. This includes any kind of communication as a very important form of social action, as many of the fields or arenas mentioned are places to communicate.

At first observation the table suggests a remarkable overall presence of women in public. A clear preponderance in the economic sphere is also obvious. Except, of course, for the women's union, women are virtually precluded from leading positions in the political field.

Table 1: Female Presence in Public Spaces

(own field observations)

	informal chatting circles	formally active	kind of leading positions	occupied by women	female spaces
Economic					
agricultural fields	X	X			
marketplace	X	X	administrator	-	X
chops	X	X	shop owner	X	X
workplace	X	X	supervisor, director	X	X
Political					
mass associations					
women's union	X	X	chairperson	X	X
other	-	X	chairperson	-	-
party	-	X	chairperson	-	-
people's committee	-	-	chairperson	-	-
Professional					
school	X	X	director	X	-
health post	X	X	senior nurse	X	(X)
Others					
temples	X	X	caretaker	X	X
street	X	(not possible)			
sports field	-	-	referee	-	-

Following the rationale of a one party state, which is averse to any concept of separation of powers among its institutions, I use the term "political sphere" to include the party, parliamentary assemblies, mass associations, the state administration, and even the People's Credit Fund. This is congru-

ent with what the people themselves conceive of as the political sphere. These institutions noticeably lack female commitment⁸. As the emancipation of women is, after all, also a proclaimed concern of the Vietnamese CP, in a number of bodies there *are* a few women, but they nevertheless rarely speak out and are hardly ever in a position to influence matters - the women's union understandably being an exception. Notably the People's Committee, the village's executive body, is exclusively made up of men, women only coming into the office as clients or as postwoman.

On the whole, the People's Committee is characterised by a paternalistic way of dealing with villagers who call at the office - towards women even more so than men⁹. It is even true for elderly people, which is quite significant in a Confucian society with its emphasis on respect for the elderly.

In areas like primary school and the local health post - here classified as "professional" - women's representation is stronger, but as "social occupations" such provinces are always overproportionately staffed by women - and not only in Vietnam. Thus it is no surprise to find a certain, albeit underproportionate, share of leading positions occupied by women: a woman as primary school headmistress, and in the health post, which only occasionally sees a visiting doctor, a female senior nurse oversees the daily activities of a predominantly female staff.

A remarkable point is the very strong position women hold in running the just recently restored temples, where ceremonial life has cautiously revived during the last few years. Although they do not run them exclusively, women clearly play a dominant role in matters of traditional religion, i.e. Buddhism and ancestor worship, be it in taking care of temples or attending and performing ceremonial meetings. (Within the small Roman-Catholic community in Lan Tai that seems to be different, as official responsibilities are reserved for men. In attending mass, however, women form the majority, too.)

Although none of the above listed public spaces is completely closed to male entrance and male participation in social interaction, I would nevertheless maintain that some of these spaces could be termed "female spaces" in the sense that the nature of the dominating patterns of communication

⁸ Other field studies confirm this observation. For example Houtart & Lemercinier (1984: 121): "(...) participation in political activities is something that belongs to the husband", or Hy Van Luong (1992: 214f), who reports women's meagre representation in local political institutions.

For nationwide information on shrinking female representation in politics since 1975 cf. Lies (1996: 24f), Tétreault (1996: 50), Eisen (1984: 243-247), and Whyte & Whyte (1982: 53).

⁹ Similar observations are reported by Tran Thi Van Anh (1996: 217).

and interaction is defined and shaped by women. While the political public spaces - except for the women's union - could be termed as "male spaces", where women are regarded as outsiders, in female spaces like the market-place, the temples and those shops and workplaces (singing contests) where they clearly outnumber the men, women's patterns of interaction in turn make the men the outsiders. Here women build up their own structures of relevance and meaning. Thus female spaces function as a "counter public" in contrast to male dominated public spaces.

As in many other societies, the market in particular is a case in point. Apart from female dominated chatting and joking - with men as favourite objects - this also becomes clear from the behaviour of my landlord, who had apparently felt embarrassed by the fact that my interpreter and I took our breakfast in the vendor's market stall amongst all those chatting market women while he was busy on the market, carrying out his official duties as a tax collector. Thus he led us into a neighbouring shabby pub, frequented exclusively by men who reckon puffing up oneself and urging each other to drink to be the only proper behaviour.

Finally, taking an overall view of the table we can discern a correlation between the first "women's informal chatting circles" and the third (fourth) column "leading positions occupied by women", suggesting interpretation of informal female chatting circles as a kind of basis for leading positions staffed by women. That means: Where there is a lack of informal female chatting circles we do not find women in leading positions either, and vice versa: In sectors with women in leading positions, we also find informal female chatting circles at the "bottom"¹⁰.

Strategies for Expanding Women's Scope of Action

A first general conclusion is that market expansion increases women's scope of action. Women reduce male domination in many fields of the rural public, the economy being a particularly rewarding field of action. Women take roles, fulfill functions, hitherto reserved for men; but this predominantly in the largely self-organising arena of the market economy.

In Mrs Huong's workshops, where only women do the embroidery, today all the supervisors are women, too. Before, there had also been some male supervisors, but the workers had complained about the body contact with supervisors patrolling the narrow aisles in those packed workplaces.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Stephen O'Harrow for pointing out this connection to me.

As I mentioned earlier, the process of market transition could sociologically also be termed as a process of differentiation. Another form putting it is the notion of embedded versus disembedded societal systems, applied most often to the economic system. If we say that market expansion, or market transition, goes along with a so-to-say "purification" of systemic rationality, we might as well say that it becomes increasingly disembedded in the sense that transactions and decision-making in the economy are less influenced by "social" considerations than hitherto.

Using the "trader's dilemma" concept of Evers and Schrader (1994), which postulates a certain socio-cultural distance between a trader and her/his home- or host-community, we could assume that the realisation of such disembedding requires features on the part of economically successful persons that facilitate such a socio-cultural distance to their home-community¹¹, especially in a still largely communal (as opposed to "associative") society like Vietnamese rural society. Supplementing this concept with a gender perspective, we could argue that for women it is even more necessary to build up such a socio-cultural distance, because they are subject to traditional role expectations of unselfishly devoting their resources to the good of others.

In the two empirical cases presented here, we can observe conspicuous elements of estrangement from the community: The embroidery entrepreneur detaches herself from social life in the village by living in Saigon. The vegetable wholesaler creates a socio-cultural distance, in that she stays unmarried and childless, and in that she outwardly displays a distinctly "unfeminine" characteristic, measured against Vietnamese standards of female behaviour: Starkly differing from the Vietnamese ideal of a reserved, gentle and soft-spoken woman, to which also many successful business women try to live up to, she is of a resolute and determined character, rebuking a group of male workers at the top of her voice, while answering our interview questions at the same time. According to the "trader's dilemma" concept, such features can be interpreted as means to detach oneself from communal norms of behaviour. Consciously or not: They may help to secure economic success as they function as a step towards dissociating oneself, at least partly, from the community, thereby fending off possible claims of redistribution.

While becoming more differentiated from each other in the course of the transitional process, the economic and the political sphere increasingly form clear-cut systemic rationalities, thus constituting an interface in the area

¹¹ Here the term "host-community" would make no sense, because in this case the commune's population is ethnically homogeneous, and those economically successful people are not outsiders.

where they border each other as societal systems. According to Long (1989: 2) the concept of social interfaces applies to overlapping areas of societal systems, where differing social interests or diverging norms and values create discontinuities of social organisation. Long regards such interfaces as useful for observing processes of social interaction in which actors change their perceptions, interests and objectives predisposed by institutional preconditions and power relations, and in turn influencing and perhaps changing these very institutional preconditions through evolving patterns of action.

The interplay between the economic and the political sphere in the course of market expansion and the particular role that women play in it can serve as an elucidating example for the "intersection" of social fields or life-worlds (*ibid.*:232) or systemic rationalities. Because an important dimension of the transitional process in Vietnam, which started as a state-dominated socialist economy, is the disentanglement of politics and economy, these two sectors are in a process of constantly redefining and renegotiating their mutual relationship. To obtain an insight into such renegotiative interaction on a face-to-face level it is interesting to consider the relationship between Mrs Huong and the village's People's Committee.

Women's attitudes towards political commitment must be seen against the background of a general restraint on the part of economic actors to become involved in political affairs. So when I conducted my interviews, I encountered a frequently expressed aversion to becoming politically committed. While it is common in Vietnam, as in most authoritarian states, to evade any topic that might be considered "political" (usually perceived in a very broad sense), this attitude is more pronounced with women in general, and economically active women in particular. Thereby, they detach themselves from male dominated politics, which is the explicit public sphere. Such behaviour might also be interpreted as an attempt to secure their position and their success in the economy by trying to conceal their significance in that sphere, which I wish to term a "de facto public sphere". Through detaching themselves from politics, they try to avoid political interference in their own affairs.

On the part of political and administrative actors we can also observe this behaviour of delimitation from economic actors, albeit of a different kind. Here, in the case of rural cadres, who are aware of their much weaker material basis due to the meagre financial resources the commune is granted by the central state, it is rather an endeavour to preserve - symbolically for the most part - the state's dignity. All in all, however, this attitude is much less pronounced than the efforts of delimitation on the part of economic actors.

It is true that Mrs Huong did not decline to answer the question altogether, when I asked her about the effects of the new economic policy in Vietnam, *doi moi*. I take it that for her such a reaction would have been incompatible with her public position. Yet she answered very generally, staying scrupulously clear of equivocal issues as most Vietnamese would do if asked the same question.

Mrs Huong says that *doi moi* has made things a lot easier, for example in making contracts or in dealing with local authorities. She praises the combination of reasonable directives from the party's top level with a considerably improved knowledge of local cadres, particularly with regard to economic issues. She asserts that without *doi moi* there would also be rich people, albeit much less, because these are more talented than others. She says that ever since she left home, she had wanted to become a trader but at that time it was much more difficult to transport goods because there were so many toll stations. Before 1985, she remembers, one had to work very hard just to make ends meet, but one could never realise a surplus.

That Mrs Huong takes up the general question about *doi moi* to comment on the local cadres' qualifications - however general the statement remains - indicates the importance the local People's Committee bears for her business. If we consider the special relationship between the embroidery factory and the village administrative institutions, it becomes clear that beyond a certain scale of entrepreneurial activity, involvement in administrative affairs is unavoidable, not least because such activities elicit desires on the part of state officials to find ways to profit from them.

Mrs Huong says that the chairman of the People's Committee "cares a lot" for the factory. On a recent visit to the workshop he had recommended her to take a credit of one billion VND. An important factor that complicates her official standing in the village is that she is not officially registered as a communal resident. Thus, she is legally banned from buying land in the commune on her own account. That makes her all the more dependent on the People's Committee's cooperation.

The main plot where the factory is located, for example, Mrs Huong has leased from the commune's People's Committee. As for her newly acquired plot where the People's Credit Fund had hitherto been located, she told me that she had purchased it. What is more, the striking wealth of the People's Committee, both of its personal members and as an institution, could not be explained without referring to the embroidery factory's success story. The poor regular salaries of such rural cadres, which are often enough paid belatedly, would certainly not allow them such a level of consumer spending on motorcycles, houses, clothing, and even entertainment electronics - things obvious just by outward appearance. Being a member of the People's

Committee in Lan Tai commune obviously pays off. It goes without saying that concerning possible special relationships between local entrepreneurs and cadres the researcher, save his own observations, has to make do with allusions and local gossip, which is hard enough for the outsider to come by.

Conclusion

"Making room for manoeuvre implies a degree of consent, a degree of negotiation and a degree of power (...) It is not the *amount* of power that makes a difference, but the possibility of gaining edge and pressing it home." (Villarreal 1992: 256; original italics) As the above discussion of the relationship between Mrs Huong and the local People's Committee has shown, there is a constant interplay between state and economy, epitomised in these two actors, that entails mutual dependence and reliance.

Mrs Huong seems to manoeuvre and negotiate with local authorities much more than other business people in Lan Tai. This is due to the sheer size of her business and to the fact that she is not primarily a trader but runs an ever expanding production site for which she needs more land and buildings. Such manoeuvring, though, does not take place from a position of autonomy (which - I agree with Villarreal - can be a misleading concept, de-emphasising persisting necessary strings between the involved actors) but from a delicate balance of dependence and independence (cf. Villarreal 1992: 262f).

Pure traders seem to pursue a somewhat different strategy, in that they rather stick to their existing facilities, avoiding showing off their wealth - as described above -, thereby largely avoiding prying by local authorities. Yet this is rather a frontstage observation that cannot exclude backstage interaction and negotiations, all the more since I stayed in the field only for a limited period. Judging from common patterns of social interaction, however, such background fiddling is very unlikely to involve female traders like Ms Thao whose economic significance for the whole commune cannot be compared to Mrs Huong's. On the other hand, Mrs Huong's degree of (partial) independence, with her huge amount of capital and her Saigon-based residential status, might just *appear* most marked, while other business people who are based in the village face a greater need to conceal their potency from possible redistributive claims.

Vietnam is still in the midst of ongoing processes of negotiation between different societal spheres, the economy and politics in particular, constantly redefining their mutual relationship. Social and cultural factors figure

prominently in this process, not least because the Vietnamese society is still far from a state of secured legality provided by a reliable and independent judicial system, despite Mrs Huong's praise for the greater ease in making contracts brought about by *doi moi*. This article has presented specific examples of how this transition, that entails increasing differentiation of social spheres, enables women with sufficient material endowment and entrepreneurial talent to enhance their standing in rural public. Whether such careers do or will constitute a typical female biographical pattern remains to be seen. The case-studies presented here, however, were not meant to maintain a *general* trend towards emancipation and status-enhancement of Vietnamese women. Restitution of the family as the central production unit and the state's retreat from responsibility for social welfare rather validate the common assessment that *doi moi* imposes extraordinary burdens on women, although I would not go so far as to call women the losers of Vietnam's transition.

References

- Boserup, Ester 1970: *Woman's Role in Economic Development*, London: George Allen and Unwin
- Eisen, Arlene 1984: *Women and Revolution in Vietnam*, London: Zed Books
- Evers, Hans-Dieter & Heiko Schrader (eds.) 1994: *The Moral Economy of Trade. Ethnicity and Developing Markets*, London & New York: Routledge
- Fforde, Adam 1993: The Political Economy of "Reform" in Vietnam - Some Reflections, in: Ljunggren 1993, pp. 293-325
- GSO - General Statistical Office 1995: *Statistical Data on Basic Situation and Infrastructure of Rural Region in Vietnam*, Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House
- Houtart, Francois & Geneviève Lemercinier 1984: *Hai Van. Life in a Vietnamese Commune*, London: Zed Books
- Kerkvliet, Benedict Tria & Doug J. Porter (eds.) 1995: *Vietnam's Rural Transformation*, Boulder/ Col.: Westview Press
- Lies, Ursula 1996: Vietnams Frauen heute. Anspruch und Wirklichkeit, in: Roland Platz & Gerhard Rieger (eds.): *Südostasien im Wandel. Gesellschaftliche, politische und ökonomische Analysen*, Stuttgart: Schmetterling, pp. 19-27
- Ljunggren, Börje (ed.) 1993: *The Challenge of Reform in Indochina*, Harvard University Press
- Long, Norman (ed.) 1989: *Encounters at the Interface. A Perspective on Social Discontinuities in Rural Development*, Wageningen Sociologische Studies 27, Wageningen: Pudoc

- Luong, Hy Van 1992: *Revolution in the Village. Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925-1988*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press
- Luong, Hy Van 1998: *Engendered Entrepreneurship. Ideologies and Political-Economic Transformation in a Northern Vietnamese Center of Ceramics Production*, in: Robert Hefner (ed.): *Market Cultures. Society and Morality in the New Asian Capitalisms*, Boulder/Col.: Westview Press
- Nee, Victor 1989: *A Theory of Market Transition. From Redistribution to Markets in State Socialism*, in: *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 54 (Oct.), pp. 663-681
- Nguyen Tri Khiem 1996: *Policy Reform and the Microeconomic Environment in the Agricultural Sector*, in: Suiwah Leung (ed.): *Vietnam Assessment. Creating a Sound Investment Climate*, Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 21-41
- Perkins, Dwight H. 1993: *Reforming the Economic Systems of Vietnam and Laos*, in: Ljunggren 1993, pp. 1-20
- Tétreault, Marie Ann 1996: *Women and Revolution in Vietnam*, in: Kathleen Barry (ed.): *Vietnam's Women in Transition*, London: Macmillan, pp. 38-57
- Tran Thi Van Anh 1996: *The Direct Loan of Capital from the Bank to Develop Production and Gender Equality*, in: Kathleen Barry (ed.): *Vietnam's Women in Transition*, London: Macmillan, pp. 214-225
- Villarreal, Magdalena 1992: *The poverty of practice. Power, gender and intervention from an actor-oriented perspective*, in: Norman Long & Ann Long (eds.): *Battlefields of knowledge. The interlocking of theory and practice in social research and development*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 247-267
- Vo-Tong Xuan 1995: *Rice Production, Agricultural Research, and the Environment*, in: Kerkvliet/Porter 1995, pp. 185-200
- Weggel, Oskar 1989: *Die Asiaten*, München: C.H. Beck
- Werner, Jayne 1981: *Women, Socialism, and the Economy of Wartime North Vietnam, 1960-1975*, in: *Studies in Comparative Communism*, Vol. 14, Nos. 2 and 3, summer/ autumn, pp. 165-190
- White, Christine Pelzer 1988: *Socialist Transformation of Agriculture and Gender Relations: The Vietnamese Case*, in: John G. Taylor & Andrew Turton (eds.): *Sociology of Developing Societies in Southeast Asia*, London: Macmillan, pp. 165-176
- Whyte, Robert Orr & Pauline Whyte 1982: *The Women of Rural Asia*, Boulder/Col.: Westview Press
- Yuen, Ng Chee & Nick J. Freeman & Frank H. Huynh 1996: *State-Owned Enterprise Reform in Vietnam. Lessons from Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)