

GENDERED INEQUALITIES IN ASIA

Configuring, Contesting and
Recognizing Women and Men

Edited by Helle Rydstrom



GENDERED INEQUALITIES IN ASIA

GENDERING ASIA

A Series on Gender Intersections

Gendering Asia addresses the ways in which power and constructions of gender, sex, sexuality and the body intersect with one another and pervade contemporary Asian societies. The series invites discussion of how people shape their identities as females or males and, at the same time, become shaped by the very societies in which they live. The series is concerned with the region as a whole in order to capture the wide range of understandings and practices that are found in East, Southeast and South Asian societies with respect to gendered roles and relations in various social, political, religious, and economic contexts. *Gendering Asia* is, then, a multidisciplinary series that explores theoretical, empirical, and methodological issues in the social sciences.

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Introduction

Gendered Inequalities in Asia: Configuring, Contesting and Recognizing Women and Men

Helle Rydstrøm

This volume considers the roles, status and recognition of women and men in Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and India.¹ The chapters represent a bouquet of interpretations of the ways in which socio-economic and cultural patterns in Asia intersect with one another and, in so doing, translate into power relations that create both possibilities and constraints for women and men of various ages, sexualities, ethnicities/races, social classes and economic status. Scholars such as Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz (1995; 2006) and Brenda Yeoh and her colleagues (2005) have highlighted how individual agency in Asia is both enabled by and limited in global flows of power, ideas and people. As Ong and Peletz note, 'Processes of state and nation formation, global economic restructuring, and overseas labour migration have created fluid geographies of gender, race, and class that cut across national boundaries' (Ong and Peletz 1995: 8). These global processes have made what it means to be a female or male in an Asian context increasingly varied and blurred.

By examining a number of Asian societies, the chapters in this volume illuminate the heterogeneity not only of Asian nation-states but also of the groups of people living within the borders of nation-states. At the same time, however, the chapters deal with common socio-cultural and economic patterns in Asia that inform power relations and inequalities between

women and men and even within the categories of women and men. Socio-political and economic inequalities between women and men in terms of access to political and religious power, occupational and health inequalities, hierarchical orders within the family and sexual practices are explored in this volume as forces that inform the constitution of females, males, bodies, femininities and masculinities. The chapters thus provide knowledge about the ambiguous ways in which women and men craft themselves within and are crafted by the societies in which they live, and how the processes of becoming a woman or man are intertwined with discourses and practices of recognition and justice.

THE RECOGNITION OF WOMEN AND MEN

In order to capture the social status ascribed to women and men it is necessary, as Aihwa Ong argues, 'to examine how indigenous notions bearing on masculinity and femininity, on gender equality and complementarity, and on various criteria and axes of prestige and stigma [...] are being rewired or reworked in hierarchical and other ways in the context of capitalist development, nation-state formation, and globalization' (Ong 1995: 8). Similarly, Naila Kabeer (2005) observes that unless initiatives are taken to ensure that both women and men in Asia dare to participate, monitor and hold policy makers accountable for their decisions, it is unlikely that the Millennium Declaration Goals of equality between women and men will be met.²

Equality, in terms of recognition and social justice for both women and men, is a key issue in this volume. Recognition can be regarded as a matter of self-realization inasmuch as when a person is denied recognition they are deprived of a prerequisite for wellbeing. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, 'Recognition expresses an expectation that can be satisfied only by mutual recognition, where this mutual recognition either remains an unfulfilled dream or requires procedures and institutions that elevate recognition to the political plane' (Ricoeur 2005: 19). As the chapters illustrate, gendered codes are intrinsic to the problematic of recognition. Local interpretations and evaluations of the roles of women and men establish an order of status and power that pervades socio-cultural and economic patterns. Institutionalized and discursive categorizations of genders, sexes, bodies and sexualities may marginalize particular groups by ascribing them low

social status and hindering them from obtaining equal opportunities and rights (Fraser 2003; Ghosh 2005).

On a global scale, women are subjected to particular kinds of harm including sexual assault and domestic violence, stereotyping, exclusion from public spheres and the denial of full rights. This kind of gendered harm cannot be overcome simply by redistributing social or material resources; instead, a restructuring of the relations of recognition is necessary to rectify the misrecognition of specific groups, because 'misrecognition is relayed not through deprecatory attitudes or free-standing discourses, but rather through social institutions' (Fraser 2003: 29). Whenever institutions structure social interaction according to cultural norms of 'normality' or 'deficiency', a hierarchy is established that reinforces injustice and, thereby, misrecognition. Misrecognition, according to Nancy Fraser (2003), can be understood as a kind of oppression that stunts the subject's possibilities of achieving a 'good life'.

Justice requires that every citizen is able to exercise their freedom and express and satisfy their needs. If a social norm is to be considered just, those to whom it applies must have a voice in its constitution and follow it without the use of coercion (Young 1990, see also Ricoeur 2005). Martha Nussbaum discusses justice, status and recognition in terms of 'what people are actually able to do and to be – in a way, informed by an intuitive idea of a life that is worthy of the dignity of the human being' (Nussbaum 2000: 222–223). She cites women's poverty, low school enrolment, missing daughters,³ high mortality rates, violence and sexual harassment of women as reasons for adopting a 'capabilities' approach in order to identify and compare 'acute capability failure' among women and marginalized groups. Nussbaum has developed a set of minimum conditions necessary to enable a 'good life' (extract from Nussbaum 2000: 232–233; see also Nussbaum 2002; Ghosh 2005):

1. Life: being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length.
2. Bodily health: being able to have good health, including reproductive health.
3. Bodily integrity: being able to move freely, without risk of violent assault.
4. Senses, imagination, and thought: being able to use the senses, to imagine, to think and to reason.
5. Emotions: being able to have attachments.

6. Practical reason: being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life.
7. Affiliation: (a) being able to live with and toward others; (b) having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation.
8. Other species: being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants and the world of nature.
9. Play: being able to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities.
10. Control over one's environment: (a) politically (b) materially.

Lack of human capabilities and, hence, injustice can be seen as manifestations of institutionalized forms of misrecognition. This, Fraser suggests, may result from value systems such as androcentrism which refers to institutionalized norms that privilege a kind of masculinity which denigrates the feminine (Fraser 2003). To improve capabilities, institutionalized misrecognition must be identified and transformed into recognition, in that 'overcoming androcentrism requires changing the gender status order, deinstitutionalizing sexist value patterns and replacing them with patterns that express equal respect for women' (Fraser 2003: 21). The chapters in this volume are concerned with gendered needs for recognition as a means of overcoming gender-specific subordination. Such claims for recognition and justice seek 'to establish the subordinated party as a full partner in social life, able to interact with others as a peer' (Fraser 2003: 30).

THE MAINSTREAMING OF GENDER

In recent decades, a gender perspective has become mainstreamed and globalized. Deriving from second wave feminism, the notion of gender has provided an analytical tool with which to reject the idea that biology determines males' and females' economic, political, social and psychological potential.⁴ As R. W. Connell (2002) argues, a gender analysis helps us to uncover the ways in which the gender order is relational and perpetually provides a reference point for the constitution of identities, recognition and pleasures. At the same time, gender relates to political conditions since gender arrangements also foster inequality, oppression and harm. Naila Kabeer thus reminds us that 'gender relations embody ideas, values, and identities; they allocate labour between different tasks, activities, and domains; they determine the distribution of resources; and

they assign authority, agency, and decision-making power' (Kabeer 2005: 23). International development discourse has profoundly influenced the mainstreaming of gender in Asia. When a gender perspective is invoked in social and development projects, it usually follows the definition set out by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 1997:

Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality (Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, 1997 quoted in Moser and Moser 2005: 12).

Maila Stivens argues in this volume that 'gender' has often been imported into Asia as a less political and provocative term than 'women' or 'feminist studies'. Mina Roces and Louise Edwards similarly point out that 'in many instances the traditional patriarchal paradigm is being challenged by the "development narrative" or by a feminist narrative. Such new paradigms come from the "outside" as part of the globalized ideas of liberal feminism and human rights' (Roces and Edwards 2000: 3). Roces and Edwards summarise:

Nationalism provides a cover of respectability within this strategic use of the development narrative for women's interests [...]. The important function that women have performed over the centuries as icons of nationhood suggests that attempts to alter the perception of woman's place in society would be fraught with fears about the fragmentation of 'national identity' [...]. Western feminism, as enunciated in campaigns for 'rights' has become one of those feared attacks on the 'national woman'. But, when framed within the nationalist rubric, the development of women becomes a patriotic act rather than an anti-male one (Roces and Edwards 2000: 4).

Because various discourses are juxtaposed and entangled with one another, the mainstreaming of gender invites the criticism of making unquestioned assumptions about the status and recognition of women and men and of under-girding dominant nationalist gender orders that are launched in terms of an imagined 'national woman'. In the wake of globalization, Asian nationalism has been launched by nation-states as a means of

counteracting what is thought to be Western values that promote the idea of equal recognition of women and men. Feminist studies have thus frequently been condemned as a foreign influence that disrupts national values. For instance, the Singaporean state has asserted the specificity of the Singaporean woman in response to what has been perceived as antagonistic Western feminism (Chan 2000; Roces and Edwards 2000; see also Göransson and Stivens both in this volume). In other words, in many places in Asia there is discomfort about persistent Eurocentrism in the production of knowledge that is considered both highly political and ignorant of local historical, religious and cultural particularities. Despite the frequent involvement of local groups in defining gender political goals for the countries in the region, critics accuse international development organizations of setting the agenda. Nevertheless, at the same time there is notable enthusiasm for Women's Studies and Gender Studies programmes in Asia. These programmes have gathered strength from the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985) and the UN Women's Conference, and a large number of socio-political problems concerning justice and recognition have consequently been assessed (Stivens this volume).

Hence, all attempts to mainstream gender in the Millennium Declaration Goals so as to put an end to inequality between women and men demand careful negotiations. Caroline Sweetman (2005) recalls how the mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the work of institutions, governments and organizations has been a tedious process fraught with difficulties. Local governments are not always keen on the idea of equal recognition for women and men, even though such goals are stipulated in terms of gender rather than in terms of the rights of women and men. International institutions may promote gender-mainstreaming policies, but 'in terms of the implementation of those policies, however, the evidence is mixed' (Moser and Moser 2005: 19). Aruna Rao and David Kelleher (2005) observe that gender mainstreaming often pervades the level of organizations but not that of local life, where women's and men's status frequently remains unequal. Gender has, as Cynthia Cockburn comments, 'a curious way of being simultaneously present and absent in popular perception' (Cockburn 2004: 24). The Declaration's objectives and the mainstreaming of a gender perspective may be inadequate for dealing with the realities of women's lives and may be only inconsistently implemented, but the goals nevertheless provide a means by which the status of women and men can be assessed (Sweetman 2005).

GENDER AS A NORM

Through the gender mainstreaming process, the notion of gender, however, may come to work as a norm in-itself in that 'gender requires and institutes its own distinctive regulatory and disciplinary regime' (Butler 2004: 41). As an analytical instrument gender inherently holds the power to accentuate the feminine and masculine as binary opposites that normalize, naturalize and essentialize women and men, their bodies and sexualities. Gender, according to Judith Butler, is in many instances used as a regulatory and disciplinary force rather than a tool for critically assessing the ways in which socio-cultural logics encourage the self-governing in women and men (Butler 2004; see also Slamah 2005). Gender thereby becomes a yardstick according to which to judge what is acceptable female or male behaviour, without regard to age, sexuality or ethnicity/race. In a key passage, Butler argues:

In fact, the norm only persists as a norm to the extent that it is acted out in social practice and re-idealized and reinstated in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life. The norm has no independent ontological status, yet it cannot be easily reduced to its instantiations; it is itself (re)produced through its embodiment through the acts that strive to approximate it, through the idealizations reproduced in and by those acts (Butler 2004: 48).

Butler refers not only to pervasive heteronormative forces but also to the broader implications of a normative gender apparatus. Stereotypes and essentialized assumptions about women and men, their bodies and sexualities empower a gender perspective to exert as a norm and in doing so direct perceptions of the roles, powers, status and recognition of women and men. When, for example, national leaders propagate notions of the 'national woman' as essential for the survival of the nation-state, they tend to fashion simplistic images of womanhood that have local resonance.

For a critical gender analysis, corporeality emerges as the primary locus whence a person is situated, and as a material site upon which socio-economic forces are worked out (Butler 1993; Ong 1995). People configure themselves as masculine or feminine according to discourses of femaleness, maleness, femininity and/or masculinity (i.e. gender) (Chanter 2006; Fraser and Greco 2005; Rydstrøm 2002, 2003).⁵ Ong (1995) thus argues that the multiple ways in which bodies reflect society and, conversely, the ways that bodies are symbolized in society, are deeply interwoven. Society's

attempts to regulate bodies, for instance with respect to the reproduction of the population of a nation-state may incite subversion since they amplify institutional power (see also Rosario 2002).⁶

Ong's point is exemplified by queer studies. The application of a queer perspective reveals the privileged and self-evident position of heteronormativity in analysing desires, pleasures and sexualities. More generally, according to Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick (2003), a queer approach also provides an analytical tool for exploring the ways in which women and men of different colours, body capacities and socio-economic and political status are categorized as 'deviant' when they cross the boundaries of the norms manifested in institutions, relations and actions (see also Slamah 2005). Nina Lykke (2003, 2005), on the other hand, pursues an intersectionality perspective for the study of a person's social position. She thus argues for examinations of how the categories of gender, sexuality, class, race/ethnicity and nationality interact in continuously changing constellations that constitute the living conditions for men and women and how they are recognized (see also Sharma and Nath 2005; Rosario 2002; Yuval-Davis 2006).

This volume suggests that a rhizomatic perspective on gender may be more sensitive to the infinite possible intersections between societal categories that cannot be determined a priori without reference to specific local contexts. According to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, a rhizome is a network that 'connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even non-sign states' (Deleuze and Guattari 2002: 21). A rhizome thus is composed of multiplicities connected with other multiplicities in terms of plateaus that, in turn, form or extend the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 2002). The notion of gender can fruitfully be expanded to cover the multitude of factors involved in the ways in which women and men – with their bodies, sexualities, colours and abilities – become females and males. The chapters in this volume illuminate how women and men in Asia craft their identities in close interaction with socio-cultural and economic structures that are tightly interconnected within a complex rhizomatic network. Gender is therefore presented here as a polytopical concept that is continuously constructed and/or deconstructed and thereby provides a repertoire for the politics of recognition and distribution.

THE CHAPTERS

The chapters included in this collection are organized into three groups. The first chapter, by Maila Stivens, stands somewhat alone to provide a state-of-the-art overview of the field of gender studies in Asia. However, since Stivens's chapter addresses the ways in which gender, globalization and modernity are intertwined, her chapter also falls within the realm of the first group of chapters. This first group contains the chapters by Nguyen-vo Thu-huong, Sidsel Hansson and Catarina Kinnvall, and Anne Jerneck. These authors elucidate the ways in which the global and the local influence one another and how these concomitantly nourish flows of commodification, nationalism and labour. The second group consists of chapters by Alexandra Kent, Monica Lindberg Falk, Helle Rydstrom and Kristina Göransson. These authors examine contesting assumptions about family life as they are enmeshed with ideas about marriage, filial piety, sexuality and reproduction. In the last group of chapters, Elin Bjarnegård and Ulf Mellström explore how masculinity is rendered meaningful in local settings and inspires men's actions in the socio-political sphere.

Global Flows and Contestations over Gender

In her comprehensive overview of gender studies in Asia, Maila Stivens reminds us that Asia is both an imagined entity and a region containing a range of geopolitical realities. However, she points out that not only is the term Asia problematic but even the notion of gender calls for critical analysis. Certain epistemological ambiguities are inherent in the notion of gender as it travels across borders to be contested and, ultimately, indigenized. Hence, the meaning gender takes on in particular Asian contexts is contingent. Stivens stresses that when we examine the significance of gender in Asia, globalization and modernity emerge as highly influential factors. Recent socio-political changes in Asia such as these cannot, however, be studied only insofar as they impact on the lives of women and men but need to be analyzed as intrinsically gendered processes that are enmeshed with the four issues that Stivens discusses. Firstly, in the wake of feminist and womanist agendas, the term gender has entered a number of discursive and political domains, including the academy, women's organizations, NGOs and development initiatives. Stivens asks whether gender is a modern and/or post-modern concept and she ponders what the answer to this might mean with respect to Asia. Secondly, Stivens recalls that beyond the Anglo-Saxon world there is no consensus as to the usefulness of the English language

notion of gender, which has undergone many local transformations. Long-term political contestations in Asia regarding how the English term should be translated and how it relates to feminism therefore need to be explored further. Stivens argues thirdly that relativized and pluralized understandings of modernity, phrased as multiple modernities, may be premised on particular understandings of gender. Therefore, it is important to explore whether and in which ways gender and modernity are interrelated. Stivens's fourth concern deals with the relationship between ideas of gendered modernity and the proposition that Asian societies are both formed by and formative of the 'modern', which is presumed to have only recently arrived in Asia. Studies of modernity, post-modernity and gender need to investigate the ways in which modernity and post-modernity are defined and located in time and space. Stivens's discussion finds echoes in the other chapters included in this volume that deal with globalization.

Nguyen-vo Thu-huong's chapter offers a detailed account of how globalization frames the ways in which prostitution in Vietnam becomes a field of tension between knowledge of the real and knowledge of the supposedly 'true', 'authentic' Vietnamese tradition and culture. In its effort to define what is the 'true' Vietnamese culture the government appeals to medical expertise and links prostitution to sexually transmitted diseases as well as labelling it as a 'social evil' and 'poisonous cultural product'. Nguyen-vo sheds light on the importance of exploring the constructions and contestations of images of the real and the 'true' when studying the intimate relationship between the global neo-liberal economy and governance. In order to capture local governmental responses, which are intertwined with a country's socio-politics and history, Nguyen-vo addresses global neo-liberal entrepreneurial and consumerist drives as they correspond with certain freedoms formulated in the West and as they are disseminated via globalization. Nguyen-vo argues that men's fraternizing is a crucial factor for the success of state and private entrepreneurs in Vietnam. For entrepreneurs, the consumption of various sexual services in brothels or karaoke bars has become a way of demonstrating economic power. By taking one another out for a session of purchased pleasures, including semi-sexual or sexual services provided by women, entrepreneurs translate sex into a means by which they can manifest their social power through sexual dominance. Although the Vietnamese government is unable to eradicate prostitution, the profession remains illegal in Vietnam. However, Nguyen-vo concludes that governmental support to the booming business

sector stimulates an economy based on neo-liberal freedoms, including the marketization of masculinist sexuality.

Like Stevens and Nguyen-vo, Sidsel Hansson and Catarina Kinnvall discuss globalization, here by exploring how gender has become a domain of struggle in post-colonial India. They illuminate how Indian nationalist and religious discourses are informed by current processes of globalization, multiculturalism and the 'war on terror', and how these processes fuel a national search for cultural tradition and identity. Cultural and ethnic boundaries between various social groups, processes of globalization and ideas about multiculturalism, the authors argue, have stimulated the revitalization of Hinduism as a marker of Indian identity. The Hindu movement's celebration of a national character is fostered by mythological narratives concerned with the homogeneous, quintessential and ahistorical origin of the 'true' Indian citizen. This recalls the tendencies outlined in Nguyen-vo's chapter. In the struggle to redefine true Indian identity, women and girls are upheld as preservers of ethnic and religious authenticity. Women and girls are recognized not only as the reproducers of the population, and ultimately the Hindu nation-state, but also as the bearers of traditional values that are to be inculcated into future generations. Because of their capacity to be mothers, women are transformed into the embodiment of essentialized values that guarantee the survival of tradition, culture and nationhood. There is no common feminist agenda in the Indian feminist movement; rather, it is marked by heterogeneity. The parameters of class, caste, ethnicity and religion cross-cut the category of woman and there are even women activists who participate in the Hindu movement, which promotes a traditional female role closely tied to the domestic sphere. Although it is impossible to speak of women as a monolithic group, Hansson and Kinnvall stress the importance of examining religion as an identity marker that fosters inequality between women and men.

Continuing the examination of the gendered aspects of globalization, Anne Jerneck provides us with an overview of the ways in which global processes pervade economic growth and the female labour force in present-day Vietnam. By discussing the career options and trajectories for low-income earners, Jerneck illuminates how Vietnam's increased integration into the global economy directly influences the living conditions of a particular group of women. In the flows of migration from rural to urban areas in Vietnam, women attempt to find work in the informal economy in the cities. Studying the careers of women helps to identify processes of change and

continuity in terms of order, variability and contradiction. When women crowd into particular occupations in the informal economy, wages stagnate and women acquire no new strategic power. As Jerneck describes, the entry of more women into the labour market does not therefore automatically entail a more equitable recognition of women's and men's labour – women are simply subjected to segregated integration in the labour market. A dual process of growing and diminishing opportunity for women in the wake of economic globalization can therefore be discerned. Although most of the female interviewees in Jerneck's study are employed in the informal economy, these women often blur the boundary between the informal and the formal economies by working in both. Female migrants employed in private manufacturing may find a job in a state-owned business, or vice versa, and they may move either up or down in the labour market.

Social Values and Local Configurations of Gender

Moving from a global perspective to local configurations of gender, Alexandra Kent shows how higher levels of meaning may offer individual women and men a means to transcend gendered patterns of misrecognition. Kent uses case studies of two Cambodian women to explore how they move beyond mundane social constraints and access higher levels of signification available in the realm of religion. In this way, each of the women experiences healing and recognition as an empowered, ordered and ordering being. Despite formal hindrances to women joining the Buddhist *sangha*, the religious realm offers avenues for women to move beyond some of the risks and inequalities associated with their gender – to an extent de-gendering and setting themselves apart from the world of sexuality and reproduction. The religious careers of the two women described by Kent show something of the malleability of Cambodian gender relations as they relate to Buddhist practice and they make the straightforward application of theories of womanhood or manhood problematic. The ethnography illustrates the sometimes conflicting ways in which gender relationships operate and how these are subsumed within an overarching scheme of security-ensuring order that transcends gender and provides a source of moral critique about the way relationships between women and men, the powerful and their clients, the centre and the periphery are currently being wrought.

Monica Lindberg Falk's chapter speaks directly to the chapter by Kent by highlighting the social position of Thai Buddhist nuns (*mae chiis*) in contemporary Thailand. Structural gender inequality in Thailand is

epitomized in the realm of Buddhism since women do not hold full rights to enter the formal religious domain. Because the Engaged Buddhist Movement in practice does not recognize nuns to the same extent as it recognizes monks, nuns are ascribed a subordinate position in relation to monks. Lindberg Falk points out that even though doctrine recognizes women as fully capable of reaching enlightenment, recognition in terms of status and title is withheld from them. It follows that female renunciants are afforded less material support than are monks. According to Lindberg Falk, two ongoing and parallel processes in Thai Buddhism are of importance for the position of nuns. While the male dominated Thai Buddhist *sangha* (i.e. the assembly of male monks and novices from which women are excluded) has experienced a decrease in political influence, the informal role of women in Thai Buddhism has been increasingly strengthened. *Mae chiis* are now deeply engaged in social work and run projects in the fields of community service, teaching, kindergartens and rehabilitation homes for sexually-abused women. The most significant endeavours of the *mae chiis* have materialized as nunnery colleges or schools. Despite the social commitment of nuns and a long history of Buddhist nuns in Thailand, nuns are marginalized not only by the authorities but also more widely as they are considered to be a threat to women's conventional roles as wives and mothers. In Buddhism women are recognized with ambivalence because they fall in between the lay and religious realms.

Helle Rydstrøm examines how images of ideal family life in contemporary Vietnam inform the recognition of women. In accordance with recent family campaigns launched not only in Vietnam but in the entire Southeast Asian region, Confucian values have been revitalized. Confucian inspired ideals of harmonious and morally sound families are propounded in the campaigns but, in reality, the vision of happy, harmonious and prosperous families frequently is contradicted by male-to-female violence. Domestic violence, Rydstrøm argues, is accentuated by the ways in which females and males, and their bodies and status, are rendered meaningful within a patrilineal social order. When an abusing husband misrecognizes his wife, he may do so due to masculine fantasies of power within a patrilineal hierarchical universe that celebrates sons and their in-born body-capital. Because women are construed as inferior, they have to negotiate their position in the patrilineal kinship system. By enduring and making family life smooth, girls and women are expected to stimulate the building of progressive, happy and harmonious families and, by so doing, avoid the

occurrence of conflicts and violence in the domestic sphere. Women who do not facilitate the preconditions for happy family life, on the other hand, may be blamed for their poor social capacities.

Kristina Göransson explores how women's increased participation in the labour force in Singapore encourages a reinterpretation and negotiation of women's commitment to marriage, motherhood and filial piety in their natal families. Göransson focuses on the cohort of women who were born in the 1960s and 1970s. This cohort is also referred to as the 'sandwich generation' because it consists of people who are caught between the demands of their children and those of ageing parents. By exploring women's different roles as mothers, daughters, wives, daughters-in-law and grandmothers, Göransson examines the ambivalences of intergenerational support among middle-class Chinese women in a context in which filial piety is strongly propounded by the Singaporean state. Respect, responsibility and duty are qualities that characterize filial piety, since it is associated with a person's symbolic and practical indebtedness to their parents. The Maintenance of Parents Act of 1995 emphasizes the family as the locus of responsibility for an ageing population and this effectively transfers a potential future economic burden for the Singaporean state to the sphere of the family. Hence, filial piety is manifested through material and financial transactions from daughters to their parents. Women try to navigate their many roles by balancing the family policies propagated by the Singaporean government with expectations about their contribution to the development of the national economy through paid employment. Here, Göransson points out, unmarried women encounter particular difficulties, as they may fulfil their obligations to their parents but not their duty as reproducers of the Singaporean population.

Masculinity and Socio-Political Recognition

In the last group of papers, Elin Bjarnegård analyzes the Thai parliamentary election of 2005 and discusses how masculinity works as a defining factor in Thai political life. Bjarnegård argues that the authoritative political system in Thailand is inherently masculinized because it is closely related to the military. The masculine culture of the political system is characterized by its exclusivity to women thus resulting in women's limited political participation. In different historical periods the political system has undergone dramatic changes, and the progression away from military dominance towards more democratic practices with competing

political parties and elections has been very inconsistent and fraught with tremendous difficulties. Bjarnegård illustrates the need to critically explore not only men's access to political power, but also how this power is used and/or misused. Rather than focusing on women activist groups working on the periphery, Bjarnegård explores the male-dominated political parties in Thailand, thereby highlighting the ways in which women and men are recognized and even misrecognized in the domain of Thai politics. The political parties work as gatekeepers for the equal representation of women and men, and women are under-represented in the Thai parliament. Bjarnegård concludes that because of the ways in which masculinized power creates imbalances in access to political life and power, men's access to the political domain entails recognition and benefits – for men.

In the final chapter, Ulf Mellström considers how heterosexual masculinity is understood and manifested among Malaysian Chinese men in Penang. Mellström pursues an intersectional understanding of masculinity and analyses how economic powers penetrate groups that are fractured along the lines of gender, class, race/ethnicity and nationality. By drawing on ethnographic data collected from a group of male motor mechanics, he examines how masculinity is construed and practised. The group of men studied is rooted not only in urban diasporic life but also in the world of technology and machines. Common to this group is a perception of masculinity as an essential dimension of what is referred to as a male 'nature'. Gambling, drinking and womanizing are approved of as quintessentially masculine drives that are impossible to change. At the same time, manhood is recognized as a code of conduct that requires that certain virtues and practices be respected. Hard work, honesty and proper behaviour are seen as a means by which masculine 'nature' can be tamed and regulated. Working hard, Mellström shows, is appreciated by his informants as formative of selfhood, not only because of technical skills and experience but also because of the code of practical ethics embedded in work. Using one's male body when working as a mechanic is one way in which a man can become recognized as masculine or even enhance his masculine 'nature'.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

- 1 The focus in this book is thus on Southeast Asia. However, because regional tendencies provide a backdrop for the phenomena discussed both in the individual chapters and in the introduction, Asia is used as a unifying term of reference.
- 2 In 2000, the Millennium Declaration was signed by the leaders and heads of state of 189 countries. The Millennium Development Goals are to (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, (2) achieve universal primary education, (3) promote gender equality and empower women, (4) reduce child mortality, (5) improve maternal health, (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, (7) ensure environmental sustainability, and (8) develop a global partnership for development (Sweetman 2005; United Nations Millennium Declaration 2000).
- 3 According to Martha Nussbaum's figures, 2.4 million daughters are missing in Southeast Asia due to widespread preference for a son (Nussbaum 2000; see also Croll 2000).
- 4 In her pioneering work, Simone de Beauvoir (1974 [1949]) suggested that 'one is not born but becomes a woman' (Beauvoir 1974 [1949]: 295). Beauvoir thus distinguished between a social sex (i.e. gender) and a biological sex (i.e. sex). Sherry B. Ortner (1974), Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead (1981), Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (1974), Gail Rubin (1975) and Heleieth I. B. Safiotti (1978) developed Beauvoir's work further and have become known as part of second-wave feminism.
- 5 Rather than being mutually exclusive or mutually determining, sex and gender emerge as one entity with two complementary dimensions that together facilitate the constitution and practices of women and men.
- 6 Our bodies can be defined as composed of biological material that is bound to discursive formations. As such, the body consists of physical materiality (head, chest, arms, legs, organs, and so on) with individual characteristics such as eye, hair and skin colour, weight, height, and so on, and a female or male biology (i.e. biological sex), all of which are rendered intelligible (i.e. as gender) at particular moments in history (see Rydström 2002, 2003).

PART I

THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL

Chapter 1

Gendering Asia after Modernity

Maila Stevens

INTRODUCTION

The invitation to write this chapter led me to muse on the many adventures of the concept of gender over the years since I personally began engaging with ideas of women and gender in Asia. Looking back at this question against a background of my work on the gendered processes constructing modernity/modernities in Asia also led me to reflect on the complex terrains we enter when trying to talk about gendering Asia and gendering Asian modernity in our late modern, globalizing times. ‘Gender’ has become a key term in a series of arenas, including feminist and womanist theorizing, and in the whole gender and development enterprise. As those engaged with these debates know, ‘gender’/‘masculinities’/‘femininities’ and Asia are all charged but elusive concepts. What *can* we mean when we set out to talk about the gendered processes constructing the contemporary order in Asia? What are the implications of working our way through the changing, shifting and highly contested meanings of gender, not least in their political contexts, to think about the gendering of modern Asia? The task of gendering knowledge about Asia calls for a difficult balancing act, the simultaneous assertion of a politically-situated feminist scholarship and involvement in a quintessentially modern reflexive project which questions the terms of its own propositions and debates.

In my own work I have argued strongly for understanding the modernizing and the globalizing of Asia as systematically gendered processes: the question is not simply one of the *effect* or the *impact* of such change on gender relations, but how we can understand these larger structural transformations as thoroughly gendered processes. There continue to be multiple problems with the terms of the debates into which we are trying to

inject a gendered understanding of social change; and there continue to be multiple problems with the developmentalist models underlying much of the writing about gender both in the Asia-Pacific region and elsewhere. Elsewhere I have discussed the difficulties involved in engendering modernity – and globalization – looking at the problems with the category of modernity once we try to view it from both a gendered and a hopefully non-Eurocentric viewpoint (Stivens 1998a). With others, I have argued that there are many reasons to be uneasy about writing about modernity and gender in the region, with particular tensions surrounding the transposition of Western intellectual concerns to describe and authoritatively analyse gender relations elsewhere (1994; 1996; 1998a).¹ One key point to note here is the questions around the usefulness of the concept of Asia itself: it is simultaneously a highly imagined entity (see Morris-Suzuki 1998) and one encompassing a range of geopolitical realities. Another key point to address is the often awkward relationship between arguments about the gendering of modernity/modernities and proposals that the societies we are looking at have been fully formed within the modern over several centuries at least. We need therefore to underline strongly the ways in which gender relations are constitutive of modern/global orders, not simply *effects* of such orders.

Overlying such concerns is a growing set of epistemological interrogations of the concept gender itself and its many uses and transformations. What kinds of models do we have available to us globally/locally to think about 'sex'/ 'woman'/'women'/gender, man/men, 'public'/ 'private' – and their bedmate 'sexualities'? And how useful, and how problematic, is it to import 'gender' – English word ('Western' concept?) – into other localities? As I shall argue, the term gender has probably become a fully global concept that has also been increasingly indigenized, although often in highly contested and unstable forms.² I also want to argue that global processes both constitute gender relations and are implicated in contests around ideas of gender/sex/woman/women/man/men. Does the use of the term gender imply any escape from the earlier Western-centric hegemony of terms like woman, or does it represent new versions of hegemony? We can see how gender – too frequently – is conflated with 'women', and how the politics of women's rights claims arguing for women's interests contradictorily can be a key factor producing this outcome. This points to how a subaltern positioning as woman can act to evacuate the male referent within the category of gender. From the earlier days of second-wave feminisms, many feminists have argued against such a conflation, arguing strongly for gender to be

understood as above all relational. More recently, Ella Shohat, with many others, has argued for a 'relational understanding of feminism that assumes a nonfinalized and conjunctural definition of feminism as a polysemic site of contradictory positionalities' (2002: 68).³ But, as I shall argue, the workings of 'gender' in the development aid industry in the region in particular have often seen a return to the reading of gender as woman. A further question concerns the use of the term gender in its current formulations, where it often flows with a motley collection of global initiatives issuing from UN and NGO gender programs: is this just another aspect of globalism itself? All these issues do not suggest that we reject the term 'gender'; but we need to explore its manifestations within the new global order. For the purpose of this discussion, I wish to concentrate on several questions:

First, there is the old feminist question as to whether 'gender' is itself a modern – perhaps now postmodern – concept arising within modern/late modern/postmodern orders. Today, we might need to look at how the idea of gender is produced and operates within Asia and within the global order. Gender as a term has entered a number of separate discursive and political domains in the region, including the academy, women's organisations, NGOs and development delivery practices. This entry has followed feminist and womanist arguments for the gendering of various knowledges about and within the region. As part of mostly modernist projects it has in particular been imported to do significant work in Gender-and-Development forums and programs. Writing about the history of women in China, Tani Barlow argues that the subjects of gender histories are themselves embedded in the history of thinking, and it follows that the new terms for women in Chinese are points of access into the material history of the past (2004: 5). Modernist terms like 'woman' are 'constituent elements in "discourses of modernity"' (Barlow 2004: 33; see also Shih 2002).

Second, we need to consider the many long-term political contests among women's groups and scholars outside the West in general, and specifically in Asia, around the translation and use of the imported English term 'gender' and the issue of the subject of feminisms – woman/women/gender. What kinds of evidence do we have about these processes?

Third, how do we conceive of the relationships between gender and modernity/modernities, and globalization(s), especially in relation to problems in posing 'multiple modernities' and problems in conceptualizing gender relations in relation to such relativized and pluralized modernities? As I shall argue, such a question may be premised on particular understandings of 'gender'.

Fourth, we have problems in addressing the often awkward relationship between arguments about gendering modernity/modernities and proposals that the societies that we are looking at have been fully formed within the modern, and are constitutive of it. They are not simply experiencing or 'coping' with a modern life that 'arrived' some time between five centuries and five years ago, depending on which account we have in front of us.

Some feminists in the West may beat their breasts in degrees of despair about the decline of organized feminist politics in a supposedly post-feminist age. But in Asia as in many other parts of the 'non-Western'/Two-Thirds World, gender politics in manifold forms is alive and very well indeed. Viewed from many parts of Asia, Western pessimisms about both feminist scholarship and activism might look highly parochial. The evidence of the vigour of some women's organization campaigns around such issues as domestic violence (e.g. in Malaysia) or polygamy (e.g. Indonesia) and the growth of GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer people) politics all point to the problems with Western feminist parochialism. There is, too, substantial growth in and enthusiasm for Women's Studies/Gender Studies programmes across the region.

SEX/WOMAN/WOMEN/GENDER?

I have suggested that gender, which began as a highly modernist term, has become progressively more contested globally. For many feminist theorists, gender as a concept is seen as perpetually in crisis or at an impasse, or even as an impossibility, with a shifting relationship to its Other, sex.⁴ The crisis is of course not only epistemological, but political. As ever, gender is inextricably entwined or imbricated in the possibilities of social action against male-domination – by both women and men.

How many genders are there? Do the many claims made on the term politically by different women – and men – mean that it ceases to have a singular political sense and becomes multiple and fragmented? And if gender, like its forerunner 'woman', has become fragmented as a concept, can we then no longer use it? Its relationship with its further Other, the concept of Woman, has been particularly fraught: is the feminist object woman/women or is it gender? Such contests have been acute for women of the Third World/South/Two-Thirds World/the non-Western Rest: they have seen rights claims posed in terms of a purportedly universal woman

as reeking of Eurocentric neo-colonialism. And where do men stand in relationship to such contests?

A further problem is the common reading of 'gender' as women, as noted. This is not only lazy, as Sally Baden and Anne-Marie Goetz suggest in their widely-cited piece 'Who Needs [Sex] When You Can Have [Gender]?: Conflicting Discourses on Gender at Beijing' (1998); it also ignores men as gendered beings. This reading of gender-as-woman is embedded in much social science generally but also within Women's Studies/Gender Studies works themselves. The problem is especially acute within Development Studies theory and in development delivery practice. Feminist critics of Women-in-Development (WID) have argued for reconceptualizing the project as Gender-and-Development (GAD) in an attempt to point to the relational dimensions of gender within development processes (Young et al. 1981; Kabeer 1995; Razavi and Miller 1995; Baden and Goetz 1998); but development practice has frequently reverted to understanding 'gender' to connote 'women'.

This far into our contemporary feminist scholarly enterprise it is clear that we still have some way to go to overcome the continuing and often systematic marginalization and invisibility of women – and of men as gendered beings – in social theory. We now have a rich feminist literature about the ways in which gender and women as concepts were marginalized and excluded from the central tenets of social and political thought. Yet, in spite of this, all those working on gender in Asia have encountered significant and continuing, if varying, degrees of resistance to the feminist/womanist theoretical enterprise. These marginalizations continue both in debates about contemporary global processes, and, in the Asian context, in area studies as a whole.⁵

GENDER STUDIES IN ASIA

An important site for thinking through some of these issues is the highly political establishment of Gender Studies/Women's Studies programmes in the Asian region. The incorporation of the category gender into a range of academic disciplines globally over the last thirty years or so has challenged many of their central paradigms. The resulting critical, highly self-reflective practices have stretched and reconfigured the androcentric paradigms of a number of disciplines, and have in turn been reshaped continuously by that process of interchange. Gender Studies internationally of course grew

in response to a political movement first emerging in the West – second-wave feminism. From an early base mainly centred in the Euro-American academy, the study of gender, both within ‘home disciplines’ and within dedicated Women’s and Gender Studies programmes, has emerged as a dynamic, genuinely interdisciplinary project. It has produced a rich body of exciting, critical theory and research exploring the historically-located diversity and complexity of gender relations internationally. Globally it is one of the most energetic, theoretically sophisticated areas of work within the social sciences and humanities.

While Gender Studies can be seen as a very energetic transnational enterprise, outside the West in particular it has faced particular challenges and contradictions, not least the epistemological issues around the concept of ‘gender’ discussed above. Moreover, how does one reconcile, on the one hand, understandings of the gendered continuities shaping histories and systemic global inequalities and, on the other, the need to be attentive to the specificities of histories, regions and localities? There are especial tensions and ambivalences around a persistent Eurocentrism in knowledge production, in spite of much rhetoric about transnationalism: both supporters and critics of feminisms have continuing worries about what they see as the ‘Western’ origins and orientations of feminisms and Gender and Women’s Studies.⁶ It is often assumed that ‘feminist’ and womanist concerns arising within local scholarships in Asia, for example, are merely products of the importing of Western universalising paradigms. Some masculinist critics of feminists in the countries concerned are fond of saying this when issues of women’s rights are raised. (From my own teaching experience in Australia it is also observable that ‘gender’ and Gender Studies are terms that are noticeably more acceptable to Asian students studying for degrees in gender and development than ‘Women’s Studies’, which is often understood in the Asian context as more problematically ‘political’ for their transcripts and potential employers).⁷

In Asia, there is significant enthusiasm for Women’s Studies and Gender Studies programmes. Norani Othman in Malaysia has pointed to the ways that the establishment of these programmes is seen as a significant project in the celebration of a new awareness about women, which has drawn much strength from the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985) and the UN Women’s Conferences (Stivens 2000c: 2109). In Thailand, for example, Churairat Chandhamrong sees Women’s Studies as both a body of interdisciplinary knowledge about the intertwined and complex relationships between life,

society and environment, and an activity whose goal in changing cultural beliefs, values and social institutions is gender equity and social justice. Nonetheless, the programmes have confronted a number of problems, including varying levels of commitment from governments, lack of funding and epistemological issues, which include a stress on utilitarian agendas in research on women and gender.

It is important to note that studies of gender in Asia and elsewhere have increasingly acknowledged and drawn on deepening historical understandings of the earlier manifestations of social critique and rebellion against the givens of various gender orders globally. In Asia, for example, there is a growing archaeology of knowledge about forms of gender divisions and politics in the region in the past (for example Jayawardena 1986; Andaya 2000; Ramusack and Sievers 1999; Reid 1988a, 1988b; Croll 1978; Evans 1998; Barlow 2004; Mackie 2003). The long histories of such claims across the region highlight the ways in which the development of Women's Studies/Gender Studies programmes can be seen as only the latest chapter in a long engagement with the politics of women's rights in Southeast Asia.

The utilitarian agendas imposed by the conditions of intellectual production about gender in a number of Asian countries have posed especial problems. These reflect the role of states and NGOs in commissioning and shaping research, as well as the force of concerned activists' agendas. For example, in 1990, Madhu Kishwar, one of the founding editors of the Indian journal *Manushi*, wrote an essay 'Why I am not a Feminist', arguing that there were many problems with the derivative nature of Indian feminisms (p. 7). She, with others, suggested that the character of research agendas in India was driven by a series of agendas imported by international development agencies. While the continuing hegemony of Western/global knowledge producers is highly problematic, it can also be acknowledged that much funding is in fact driven by the generation of local agendas and therefore involves varying degrees of consultation with local 'stakeholders'. Elsewhere, I have explored what I see as the growth of a feminist public around the series of UN women's conferences and the rise of the 'women's rights are human rights' movements globally (Stivens 2000a). I suggest that such rights claims do not necessarily represent the imposition of universalist rights claims, but can be understood more usefully as the outcome of long-term historical and localized struggles for freedoms and rights, operating

within a context that is already modern/global and has been so for some considerable time.

A further important question relates to one set of claims about gender in the region which has been particularly influential. We have seen the repeated assertions that Southeast Asia as a region represents a persisting older pattern of relatively less disadvantage for women than that prevailing in some other parts of Asia – women in much of Southeast Asia, it is argued, have ‘a relatively high status’ or ‘relative autonomy’; this is seen to contrast with women’s experiences in East and South Asia. Thus East and South Asian kinship and family relations, it is suggested, have tended to be more male-centred and ‘patriarchal’, whereas Southeast Asian kinship has mostly been bilateral (kinship links traced through both males and females), according greater gender equality in inheritance (Coedès 1944: 7–10; Hall 1964: 3; Reid 1988a, 1988b: 146, 162, all cited in Andaya 2004). These advantages are ascribed to women’s economic importance in the pre-colonial economies of the region. Such categorizations, however, can oversimplify the complex histories of interrelationships between gender, indigenous kinship relations, state and religious ideologies and practices from the early modern period onwards. The long and cosmopolitan history of the region, especially the Malay World’s position at the crossroads of global travel for many centuries, has produced enormous social diversity and complexity. Moreover, the model of the autonomous woman has given way in recent decades to more critical versions, in which women’s previous autonomy is often assumed to be undermined by intensifying social change. There is no consensus about what such alleged autonomy might mean in practical terms. This issue calls into question concepts of gender politics, economic participation, ‘autonomy’ (see Stivens 1996 for a discussion), the relation between gender representations and gender experience and the workings of gendered imaginaries. Indeed, a number of writers, including Siapno (2001) and myself (Stivens 1996), have questioned the usefulness of ascribing preconceived notions like gender and autonomy within such arguments. These claims about relative autonomy, however, have had a long life and are strongly supported by such figures as Tony Reid (Reid 1988a, 1988b).

CONTESTS OVER GENDER IN ASIA

It is clear that gender has often been imported into Asia as a term that appears less 'political' than woman or women. It is seen as having less overtly feminist overtones, as being less confrontational and therefore contradictorily often believed to be likely to be more effective politically. It is worth noting that the term 'gender' is often preferred to woman/women by women in Asia fighting within women's movements: they see it as allowing more 'space' than 'women' for negotiation with conservative political forces. Linked to this are the objections to the term feminist on a number of scores. As noted, feminism/s are often construed as a 'Western' import – and in particular as overly concerned with sexualities. 'Feminism' is therefore viewed as politically problematic and on occasion as inauthentic.

In the light of all these contestations, how should we answer in an Asian context my question about whether 'gender', once a modern concept arising within modern orders, has now become a fully postmodern, global concept? It is arguable that this is the case, with gender assuming many and shifting meanings and becomings at the same time; a fully global concept. But it has also become in varying degrees indigenized: we need to pay careful attention to the ways local productions of ideas of gender, especially within cultural, political and feminist contexts, receive, rework and recreate highly local versions of 'gender'.

Let me give three examples of how gender is used in specific locations within Asia and the terms of the contests over its use. A first example concerns 'gender' in Thailand. Peter Jackson has written interestingly on the usages of the concept of gender and sexualities in Thailand from the end of the nineteenth century (2000; 2003; 2004).⁸ In a review article on Van Esterik's book *Materializing Thailand* (2004), for example, he quotes her concerns about the category gender in Thailand, which she notes in a footnote:

The concept of gender itself is difficult to translate into Thai. Even after the [many] gender training workshops conducted in NGOs and universities throughout the country, participants have had difficulty understanding the concept of gender (Van Esterik, *Materializing Thailand*, p. 63, n. 8, cited in Jackson 2004).

Jackson notes that Esterik's footnote describes a workshop on feminism and gender issues held at a Thai university in the 1990s. The proceedings were conducted in Thai yet the English word 'gender' was used at all

times because the participants could not find an appropriate Thai term to translate the nuances of the English expression. ‘This theoretically crucial observation’, Jackson suggests, ‘could have been made the central focus of Van Esterik’s investigation of the specificity of Thai notions of gender and their inability to be reduced to Western concepts. The languaging of gender in Thai and the many ways that masculinity and femininity are discursively represented, monitored, and policed in different “time and place” [*kalathesa*] contexts must be a key topic of future gender research’ (Jackson 2004: accessed 1 May 2005). Elsewhere, again, Cook and Jackson (1999: 4) usefully suggest that

[b]ecause of the difficulty of assuming ready translatability of terms such as gender and sexuality to the Thai context, in places we use the compound expression ‘sex/gender’ to avoid awkward structures, on the understanding that the slash ‘/’ marks a problematic and uncertain articulation, a boundary of ambiguity and confusion undergoing redefinition and reunderstanding in a rapidly changing society. It is one of the purposes of these essays to begin the task of understanding the meaning of the slash that articulates the relationships between sex, gender, and sexuality, both historically and today.

A second example: Indonesian feminists Ruth Indiah Rahayu and Nugroho Katjasungkana (Interview 1997) note some of the contests around the idea of ‘woman’ in their country. When the modern Indonesian language was emerging in the early part of the century, there were a number of terms for woman, including *perempuan* as a basic word meaning woman or female, the Javanese word *estri*, the word *wanita* derived from Sanskrit, and others. But *perempuan* took on a negative implication, with *perempuan jalan* (woman of the streets) coming to mean ‘prostitute’. In the 1940s the nationalist leader Sukarno proposed the general use of *wanita*, which is a more refined kind of word, in an attempt to raise women’s status. When *wanita* was appropriated for the domestic imagery of the New Order, groups reverted to *perempuan* (Interview 1997).

A third example: a parallel controversy made an appearance in Malaysian discussions in the early 1990s about the similar Malay words for woman. These discussions looked at the ways in which there were no *Bahasa Malaysia/Melayu* terms for ‘woman’ understood as a unitary political category (personal communication, Jomo Sundaram). Many women’s organisations in Malaysia have adopted the term *wanita* for ‘women’, often producing neologisms based on this, like *Tenaganita* (an organization

working for women workers' rights, which combines the words *tenaga* [labour] and *wanita* [woman]) and *Puspanita* (again collapsing the term *wanita* into a composite term for a female civil servants' organisation). The term 'gender' was mostly adopted directly into Malay, but not without discussion of the problem of using an imported category. (And not without puns on the Malay word *janda*, which means widow or divorced woman, and often denoting a social status of considerable ambiguity within Malay social orders). In Malaysia, the tensions about the meaning of 'woman' are tied directly to the persisting disagreements within the advocacy groups about what is understood by women's 'interests'. Such disagreements have been deeply embedded within the cultural politics of identity, ethnicity, nationalism and the state's Islamic modernity project (see Stivens 1998b, 2000b, 2006).

POLITICS OF DISCOURSE IN SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

All this points us directly to the central significance in shaping these contests of contemporary gender and development paradigms and the relationships between activists and the delivery of development aid/the consultancy industry. Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead, part of the redoubtable team at the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, Sussex, report on a workshop discussion about how to 'reposition' [the] gender and development [project]: they argue that the workshop debates have pointed to 'the politics of discourse as a key element in social transformation. ... [A]fter initial struggles to develop new concepts and languages for understanding women's position in developing societies, feminist phrases came to be filled with new meanings as they were taken up into development policy and practice' (2004). As they note, 'Gender's generalities have been both a success and a hindrance' (Cornwall et al. 2004). Andrea Cornwall states:

'Gender', like 'participation', acquires a multitude of meaning in the contested arenas of development practice. Considerable differences between feminisms and approaches to development continue to inform academic approaches to GAD (Pearson and Jackson 1998). Much of this sophistication is lost in practice. Despite the pervasive use of the term 'gender', operational frameworks tend to treat 'women' and 'men' as if they constituted immediately identifiable groups by virtue of their sex alone (2001: 9).

As she suggests, narrow definitions of gender and the roles of women and men leave no room to examine the nuanced and complex relationships between women and men and between women and other women (2001). Baden and Goetz's article underlines this point in discussing how conservatives at the Beijing women's conference wanted to bracket 'gender', which they saw as too 'radical' (1998).⁹ They chart the ongoing redefinition of concepts like gender as they become institutionalized.

When gender became an object, however, it was inevitable that men and masculinities as well as femininities and other genders would come under scrutiny. It is important to note that much feminist writing has been implicitly and explicitly about masculinities, and, moreover, about masculinities as a 'problem'. As Lynne Segal notes, women, including non-feminists, have been worrying about masculinity for rather a long time (2001: 232). Cornwall notes, however, that feminisms have rarely depicted men not as problems, but 'as people – sons, lovers, husbands, fathers – with whom women might have shared interests and concerns, let alone love and cherish' (2000, accessed 5 July 2006). A further impetus for masculinity studies has come from observers globally claiming that we are seeing a global 'crisis' in masculinity, which some conservatives attribute to feminism's successes.

There are special problems in conceiving of masculinities, and masculinities in the Asian context. First, masculinity, like femininity, is a highly unstable and problematic term, involved in a constantly shifting opposition to femininity. It is important to reiterate the relational nature of gender.¹⁰ Moreover, as Louie notes (2003), masculinities in Asia have been neglected in the burgeoning masculinities literature globally. As with gender, these instabilities make for considerable complexities, not least the ways in which masculinist language in scholarship about Asia has been linked repetitively to discourses of compensatory nationalist masculinism: this has operated strongly in a number of countries with a trope of emasculation by colonialism, which sees men as unmanned by colonialism (for a Malaysian example, see Alatas 1977). I am especially interested in an overlying question: are contemporary masculinities in the region becoming 'globalized'? As with 'gender', I want to argue that global processes both constitute masculinities and are implicated in contests around ideas of contemporary masculinity.

In what ways might masculinities be important for a study of gender in Asia? To promote gender equity and justice? To explore the gendered

vulnerabilities of men (suicide, risk-taking behaviour)? To examine the supposedly global or local crises of masculinity, the histories of colonialism unmanning men? To consider the implications of rising educational achievements of women, the losses of industrial jobs, and the loss of the breadwinner role? As Cornwall notes, '[i]t is easier to see "gender" as about women and "gender relations" as about oppressive heterosexual relations, and easier to create separatist spaces in which men are excluded by implication. But by so doing we would not only be missing men, we would be missing out on opportunities to make a difference' (2000: 8).

GENDER, MODERNITY AND GLOBALIZATION

I began by suggesting that there are many problems in theorizing the relationships between gender and modernity/modernities/globalization(s) (see Stivens 1998a for discussion). There are especial problems in conceiving of gender relations in relation to relativized and pluralized 'multiple modernities'. The gendering of such debates is, I have argued and would continue to argue, completely necessary, but also awkward. Feminist critiques of Western political thought have pointed to the masculinism of the modernity/postmodernity and globalization debates. In systematically excluding the female, these debates assumed that the modern, autonomous, individual subject is a man (Marshall 1994; Felski 1995; Stivens 1994, 1998a). This task, as I see it, is to explore the intersections of gender and modernity/ies, arguing for the centrality of gender in the articulation of the global processes of modernity, capitalism and globalization, and in the formation of local individual and collective identities. The posing of the question of the intersections of gender relations and modernity/postmodernity/late modernity, is, of course, premised on the prevailing understandings of 'modernity', a term at least as contested as 'gender'.

In 'Theorising Gender, Power and Modernity in Affluent Asia' (1998a) I argued that recent dramatic social transformations in the region are only to be fully understood when they are seen as gendered processes: the object is not simply the effects of such transformations on gender relations, or the emergence of new gender regimes, interesting as these may be. A portion of the literature on gender and social change in Asia, both scholarly and activist, however, has continued to concentrate on particular versions of the 'effects' of such change on 'women': this is a clear expression of the power of both imported paradigms and local political agendas; these paradigms

and agendas are explicable in terms of the contexts in which contemporary knowledge about women in the region is produced.

These contexts, I shall argue, have been critical in producing a scholarly picture of gender and social change which continues to cluster around a group of somewhat reductionist discourses about the experiences of *women* in the Asia-Pacific region. Thus in the Southeast Asian region we have had a long-term concentration in Thailand of issues surrounding prostitution and the traffic in sexualized women, in spite of many protests about this dominant trope. In Malaysia there has been a heavy emphasis on the experiences of Malay women, notably rural to urban migrants seen with their heads down peering down electronic microscopes and latterly as veil-wearing bearers of culture and religion. In the Philippines women have been seen as 'mail-order brides', or 'maids' and 'nannies' to Singapore, Saudi Arabia and other points west. It has sometimes been a considerable task to persuade postgraduates, for example, to widen their interest and enquiries beyond these key tropes. Nonetheless, this scholarship has added to an already rich and growing body of work, and has provided many insights.

What seems most useful to me and to a number of other writers looking at how we might think about gendering modernity and globalization is to argue for seeing both processes as multifaceted or multidimensional.¹¹ One solution has been to argue further for a pluralization of forms of modernity – seeing forms of modernity in the non-West as divergent, multiple or alternate. While I have flirted with such terms in the past, however, I am not sure today if we need to pluralize modernity or globalization. What do students of Gender Studies gain by doing so? And what do they lose?

Joel Kahn (2001), in an important piece on modernity, has argued that there are several problems with the idea of multiple modernities. First, there is an assumption inherent in some of the literature that modernity originates in Europe and is invented there, to be 'exported' and 'indigenized'. Counter to this is a growing body of writing that has argued that modernity only occurs in the context of a system that already includes 'Asia' or 'Africa' or wherever. A second problem is an assumption that European modernity is the real modernity, and others are *parvenus*. There is a further assumption within this argument that the 'Third World' – or even the colonized world – is aberrant. Counter to this is the argument that any modernity is always embedded in particular social and cultural forms (Kahn 2001).

Perhaps arguments about embedded or grounded modernity provide a key with which to move forward from querulous, broken-record routines

about the inclusion of gender in theory-making. An adequate account of modernity would look to locating that account in the concrete, something theorists like Johann Arnason have argued (see Arnason 1997). And once one looks to the more concrete, it should be impossible to ignore gender dimensions of the modern and the global.

CONCLUSIONS

As Ella Shohat usefully observes about feminisms outside the West, '[g]iven that there is no single feminism, the question is, how do we orchestrate these conflictual perspectives in order to rearticulate the feminist terrains of struggle foregrounding the densely woven web of relationships?' (2002: 68). These possibilities have perhaps been outlined and argued for more simply by Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) in her influential arguments about the possibilities of transversal feminisms. She suggests that we are seeing the reconstitution of new versions of universalisms that transcend some of the old difficulties with difference. As Yuval-Davis argues, transversal politics aims to be an alternative to the universalism/relativism dichotomy at the heart of the modernist/postmodernist feminist debate; it is based on dialogue and debate that take into account the different positioning of women (1997: 125).

This chapter has not tried to give any kind of summary of all the significant work on gender coming out of Asia, but has concentrated more on the conceptual issues surrounding the tasks of gendering Asia and Asian modernity. We have a growing body of work about the profound implications for women's and men's everyday lived experiences and identities of (the) complex interplays among modernity/modernities, development (often state-led), consumer capitalist culture, economy, polity and religious practice. Expanding education, the entry of large numbers of women into modern labour sectors, rapidly rising ages at marriage, the decline of arranged marriages, changing divorce rates, and, in a number of countries, notably Japan, Singapore and Thailand, birth rates declining well below replacement level, have all meant widening opportunities for some women, and deepening exploitation for others. In living these everyday lives as gendered subjects, women and men have been producing these new orders – not least through gender-based politics (and through politics based on the search for new sexual citizenships – but that is another issue). Women

in particular have had to contend with their ideological location as keepers of 'family' and bearers of cultural and national identity and honour.

But looking forward, what are some of the key concerns that we might wish to explore in order to continue the task of gendering the idea of Asia? A highly selective list might look at some of the core concerns of contemporary theory-making about the modern and global orders. These include the ever-increasing bureaucratization of every dimension of life; the arguments about secularism versus the supposedly aberrant increasing religiosity of much of the modernizing and modern worlds; the debates about risk society; and the debates about cosmopolitanism. In every case, gender relations are significant dimensions of the concrete practices of the modern being debated, and this is wholly true for Asia, as elsewhere.

FINALLY, A QUESTION: IS THE FUTURE FEMALE?

A couple of prominent male theorists and commentators have taken on the 'gender question', albeit in a separate but quite quirky fashion and albeit on a more global scale. Both Manuel Castells (1997) and Francis Fukuyama (1998) have forecast a future which is increasingly female. Castells deduces that the contemporary patterns in which women are increasingly outstripping men in education, rejecting marriage and parenthood in growing numbers, seeking same-sex relations and so on, may well intensify and become wholly global. Fukuyama argues that world politics has become increasingly feminized in the twentieth century as women have gained political power and exercised it. He suggests that this evolution in the sexual basis of politics should be reflected in changes in international relations as the correlation between gender and anti-militarism decreases the use of force to solve international problems (1998: 24). These theses, seeing versions of a future that is female, are mostly rejected by feminists, who see them as far too optimistic! But they point to some key themes, including arguments about the growing autonomy of 'new women', a trend we can see clearly in the 'new Asia'.

Perhaps we should give one last word to some middle-class Malaysian women reported in a recent *New Sunday Times* story. Forty-something IT specialist May is one of the growing numbers of single women who are staying single way into their 30s, 40s or even 50s, as the story tells us:

'They are caring, intelligent women who hold down jobs that are demanding and fulfilling. But why are they not in any relationship with caring, intelligent

men? Have they been left on the shelf?' the story asks. "Whose shelf? And who cares", she retorts (*New Sunday Times*, 27 March 2005).

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NOTES

- 1 For discussions of gendering modernity in the western context, see Marshall (1994), Felski (1995), and, in Africa, Hodgson (2001).
- 2 *Africa After Gender* (Cole et al. 2007) addresses some similar concerns to those of this chapter. Gender is one of the most productive, dynamic and vibrant areas of Africanist research today, but what is the meaning of gender in an African context? Why does gender usually connote women? Why has gender taken hold in Africa when feminism has not? And is gender yet another western construct that has been applied to Africa, however ill-suited and riddled with assumptions? *Africa After Gender* looks at Africa now that gender has come into play, to consider how the continent, its people, and the term itself, have changed. See also Oyewùmí (1997, 2000) for further African accounts and Barribeau (2003) for a parallel Caribbean account.
- 3 Thus the Subordination of Women in Development group at IDS Sussex, of which I was a member, argued strongly for speaking of 'Gender and Development', not 'Women in Development', as did various pioneering feminist anthropology discussion groups.

- 4 For now-classic discussions of these debates in a mostly western context see Alcoff (1996), Alcoff and Potter (1993), Benhabib (1992), Benhabib et al. (1995), Butler (1990), Elam and Wignman (1995), Fausto-Sterling (2000), Hartsock (1998), Jaggar (1983), di Leonardo (1991), Marchand and Parpart (1994), Marchand and Runyan (1999), Stanley and Wise (1993). For postcolonial feminist critiques, see Alexander and Mohanty (1997), Grewal and Kaplan (1994), McClintock, Mufti, and Shohat (1997), Mohanty (2003), Narayan (1997). See also Saunders (2002) and Barlow (2004).
- 5 I do still check indexes of books to see if they include gender or women: many do not.
- 6 For postcolonial feminist critiques, again, see Alexander and Mohanty (1997), Grewal and Kaplan (1994), McClintock, Mufti, and Shohat (1997), Mohanty (2003), Narayan (1997).
- 7 In 2004, when I was a visiting fellow at the Asia Research Institute in Singapore, I organised a graduate workshop on Gender Studies in Asia. Over 80 postgraduates applied to come for the 20 places. In organizing the workshop, I posed some of these key questions that we confront at this juncture in thinking about gender in Asia, and am grateful for some of the feedback from that workshop.
- 8 For some Asia-based discussions of the intersections between sexualities and genders see Morris (1994), Hawley (2001), Boellstorff (2005), Peletz et al. 2006. Peletz's claim that work on Southeast Asia has consistently conflated gender with women ignores the long history of assertions for the need to understand gender as relational by a number of feminist scholars working in the region.
- 9 The Holy See, some Arab states, and conservative organizations had intervened strongly in negotiations around the term gender at the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Holy See stated that 'the term "gender" is understood by the Holy See as grounded in biological sexual identity, male or female. Furthermore, the Platform for Action itself (cf. N. 193, c) clearly uses the term 'both genders'. It excluded 'dubious interpretations based on world-views which assert that sexual identity can be adapted indefinitely to suit new and different purposes' (cf. N. 193, c). (See Holy See's Final Statement At Women's Conference in Beijing, <http://www.its.caltech.edu/~nmcenter/women-cp/beijing3.html>, Holy See, 1995, accessed 30 June 2006, for this statement).
- 10 For discussions of masculinities, see Chopra, Osella and Osella (2004), Cleaver (2003), Connell (1998), Cook and Jackson (2002), Cornwall (2000), Geng Song (2004), Huang (2006), Louie (2002), Louie and Low (2003), Sinha (1995), and Srivastava (2004).
- 11 Contra the unidimensionality of many social evolutionary and historicist narratives and modernization theory; see Kahn (2001) for discussion.

Chapter 2

The Real and the True: Neo-Liberalism and Gender Governance in Vietnam

Nguyen-vo Thu-huong

INTRODUCTION

Early one morning in June 2002, before the heat had defined the day, crowds gathered in front of the old French-built Opera House in Ho Chi Minh City, which has now reverted back to its theatrical functions after various incarnations throughout Vietnam's post-colonial history. Young faces, uniformed students in lethargic poses, filled the ranks. Surrounding them were banners and posters in primary colours. One large poster depicted a human form shackled to the words Drugs and AIDS. Adjacent to it was a banner exhorting the 'construction of a healthy cultural environment to help push back drug addiction and other social evils'. A red banner hung across an intersection promising to 'sternly punish drug-related criminals to protect social order'. Representatives from local Communist Party and government organs got up to give speeches behind a podium perched on top of the steps of the Opera House, framed by its vaulting entrance. As the sun climbed, the event became a procession announced by loudspeakers with slogans and songs, and flanked by rows of motorcycle police down tree-lined boulevards. It turned out to be an 'anti-social evil' rally, set to coincide with the 26 June International Day of Drug Awareness.

The themes of this anti-social evil campaign – disease in medical knowledge, Vietnamese culture, and social order – come directly from strategies that the government has been using in its approach to the other major 'social evil', that of 'prostitution'. As with prostitution,

tension exists between knowledge about social realities and the truth of Vietnamese tradition and culture. On the one hand, the government refers to knowledge both of real social practices and the (medical) expertise designed to address them. The Ho Chi Minh City Health Bureau has, since the mid 1990s, run a semi-permanent exhibition with photographs linking prostitution to sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS. On the other, it exhorts adherence to tradition and order. In the late 1990s, for example, Governmental Decree 87 inspired similar rallies, street banners and exhibitions in which the government linked prostitution as a social evil to 'poisonous cultural products'. Making this linkage, the government resolved to build a healthy Vietnamese culture to fight prostitution.

The physical surroundings of this latest anti-social evil rally consisted of refurbished posh hotels and high-end retailers carrying global brands, catering to both a tourist and domestic clientele of newly affluent Vietnamese who make their money in the new market economy. Many now populate the various night scenes of narcotics and commercial sex, as Vietnam embarks on the marketization and globalization of its economy after victory against French colonialism, American imperialism and decades of socialism.

If mass-mobilization rallies still give off a familiar smell of the all-encompassing state under the Vietnamese Communist Party, the manner, object and context have drastically changed. The foremost difference lies in the presence of, and reference to, a market, one that fully participates in the current global economy in both consumption and transnational production in the flexible mode of capital accumulation (Harvey 1989), with all of its effects of inequality. Such an economy currently relies on a kind of freedom of choice much celebrated by neo-liberal champions: the freedom to make entrepreneurial and consumerist choices. In the governmental rally, there is a duality of the reality of sex and drug consumption framed as choice in medical terms, and on the other there is the reference to culture as compulsory truth. How are we to understand this evident split in governing activities in the context of neo-liberal globalization? And what does this mean in terms of gender governance and gender inequalities in neo-liberalism?

I argue that the techniques of governance in Vietnam have been shifting from the former Leninist mode, in which the state monopolized power and recognized no society or realm outside itself. Instead, certain features familiar in their use of repression now have a different object and serve a different purpose. As society in Vietnam liberalizes and integrates

into the global economy, the government must now govern the newly privatized intimate desires of citizens and the kinds of 'social problems' like 'prostitution' that such desires create. Governing for the neo-liberal global market requires both a 'realist' recognition and promotion of market freedom on the one hand, and on the other hand measures of repression based on notions of 'the true' – true Vietnamese traditional femininity, in this case. Such differentiated governance is class and gender specific in order to produce different kinds of producers and consumers for the market. This is thus an important source of gender inequalities that intersect with class inequalities. While men's desires are redirected to their wives, women sex workers are blamed for disease transmission and violation of tradition, and are imprisoned. While middle-class urban women are taught how to provide good but clean conjugal sex with new empirically-based expert knowledge to guide their consumerist choices, lower-class sex workers are taught Vietnamese traditional femininity and sub-contracted piecework in rehabilitation camps.

THE SPREAD OF NEO-LIBERAL FREEDOMS AND THE QUESTION OF THEIR GOVERNANCE

Pierre Bourdieu has called our attention to the 'imposition on the entire world of the neo-liberal tyranny of the market' (2001: 9). Similarly, Jean and John Comaroff name our global moment neo-liberal globalization and emphasize its 'fetishism of the free market' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 31), in which the 'rights' of businesses and consumers are guaranteed by law to 'possess, to signify, to consume, to choose' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 40). But as these scholars show us by their example of devoting much time, effort and print to issues of neo-liberal globalization, we are ill-advised to dismiss these neo-liberal freedoms as having been simply fetishized into universals of human aspirations. The relationship between freedom and its governance has been a significant problem of modern times. This diagnosis of the global spread of neo-liberal freedoms raises certain questions in relation to government. The more fundamental question asks how a government would govern with these neo-liberalist freedoms that Jean and John Comaroff have enumerated.

Foucauldian formulations of governmentality have dealt most systematically with this question, and it is these formulations that make possible my starting point. However, the Foucauldian emphasis on 'mentality' in the

singular seems to me inadequate to understand governance, at least in this neo-liberal context. Instead, extending the Foucauldian methodological emphasis on the 'event', with its messy contingency dependent on history, economics and politics, I find fissures in the mode of governance when I examine governmental intervention measures in prostitution. In other words, governing for the neo-liberalist market with its requirements of *unequal and differentiated* populations requires contradictory, or at least paradoxical, strategies that may differ from one specific context to another depending on a government's position in relation to the global politico-economic system and in relation to its own populations.

Foucault's later work on governmentality (Foucault 1991) focuses on certain modes of governance coming out of the West in modern times that must seriously take into account the freedom to choose on the part of individuals who are also sovereign citizens. Such political and social organization privileging freedom may be 'overdetermined', as Charles Taylor would say, because of a 'modern understanding of moral order' centring on individuals and their agency (2004: 20–21). Or perhaps the explanation lies in the Marxist analysis that capital must depend on 'legally free labourers who can move and sell their labour as they see fit' (Taylor 2004: 32). The larger context of colonialism through much of modern times renders Taylor's claim that freedom is central to the modern West's moral imagining at best paradoxical. As is Marx's claim that free labour is central to capital. Rosa Luxemburg saw that capital must also depend on 'unfreedom' either in class rule domestically or internationally where capital's 'predominant methods are colonial policy, an international loan system . . . and war' (cited by Harvey 2003: 137). This is reminiscent not only of contemporary capital's outsourcing to take advantage of labourers who do not have freedom of movement to where their labour would fetch more, but also of the less than free labour produced by metropolitan nation states' racialization of populations and policing of their 'illegal' immigrants within their borders.

Partly in response to criticism directed at his preoccupation with discipline in his earlier work, and partly in response to the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1970s and early 1980s in the US and the UK, Foucault started to work on the puzzle of the art of liberal government within an approach that draws attention away from theories of the state to point it toward the mentality and techniques of governance, coined 'governmentality' (Foucault 1991). Linking the microphysics of disciplinary power to the level of governance,

Foucault finally confronted the problem of freedom. Theorists, whom Alan Hunt has labelled 'neo-Foucauldian' (1996: 167), many writing from the UK at the end of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, have taken this approach further in their exploration of the modes of governance and possibilities for the exercise of freedom at the height of neo-liberalism in the UK. According to them, liberal governance persuades by positing its own limits, its non-totalizing power, in two related ways: (1) it asserts the inviolability of free subjects, and (2) it acknowledges a socio-economic realm with autonomous dynamics knowable through empiricist knowledge generation rather than through either normative or state reason. The second could be thought of as a correlate of the first. Free agency may result in sociological patterns, but it also contributes to the epistemological limits of government and forces it to rely on empiricist knowledge regarding the social realm.

However, our current neo-liberal leaders, who insist on free market forces and free economic agents, are also the ones calling for a cultural and social conservatism that keeps us away from free choice in gay rights or abortion rights, and implementing the use of imprisonment on a massive scale. In the US and the UK, the heartlands of neo-liberalism since Reagan and Thatcher, more and more people find themselves in prisons whose carceral logic precludes any kind of freedom of choice. In the US, seven per cent of the male adult population remains under the control of the criminal justice system (Rose 1999: 271), a rate that Jonathan Simon has lamented as unprecedented in the history of societies (Simon 1998: 577). This contradiction in how freedom may be deployed in the economic sphere but suppressed in the cultural and social suggests we should understand modern governance as it is practised in particular contexts, as contingent on political and economic appropriation and contestation, rather than taking for granted that there is one central concept around which Western or liberal governance may be organized. In our global economic context, perhaps it would be fruitful to see certain freedoms, namely the currently dominant neo-liberal entrepreneurial and consumerist choice, as the features with which particular governments operate through differentiated and unequal treatment, depending on their positions in the global capitalist system and other historically specific factors.

VIETNAM AND PARADOXICAL MODES OF GOVERNING IN NEO-LIBERAL GLOBALIZATION

Vietnam in the late 1980s 'opened up' and joined the global economy after decades of war and socialism, making it a good case study of how a national government adapts to the market and insists on the freedom to choose for entrepreneurs and consumers who may operate in not just the national context but a transnational one. In response to these reforms, scholars have studied Vietnamese politics and governance in terms of liberal factions that are reform-minded, forward-looking, and open to the global economy with its political or cultural values, versus conservative factions that are backward-looking and authoritarian, to explain 'contradictions' in pronouncements and policies (i.e. Porter 1993; Turley and Selden 1993). At the same time, other researchers have noted the commercialization of agencies at all levels of government during Vietnam's marketization (Fforde and de Vylder 1996; Nguyen-vo 1998), and the rapid establishment of global modes of production with the multi-levelled subcontracting system to take advantage of cheap and docile labour in Vietnam (Tran 1998). It seems the 'conservative forces' are not stopping the marketization and globalization of Vietnam. We would need an alternative explanation for the contradictory practices and pronouncements that sometimes promote global exchanges, and at other times toe a conservative, inward-looking 'traditional' cultural and political line, one not particularly corresponding to the proletarian revolutionary discourse of socialist days.

I would propose that we look at this contradiction in governance not as a result of historical residuals but as a paradoxical product of how this government deals with the neo-liberal freedoms of a new transnational market economy. Where history is most evident is not in the presence of conservative elements but in the continued prominence of the Vietnamese state, whose Communist Party and governmental units and officials own and run the majority of big enterprises, including those involved in transnational and cultural production. The Party, government, and the official-turned-entrepreneur classes are the biggest stake-holders in the market, which is a part of the neo-liberal global economy.

Since this economic liberalization, commercial sex has become a fixture in Vietnamese society not just through tourism, but also through transnational business practices. The government has responded in high-profile and far-reaching intervention measures, while also taking into

account the free market with its entrepreneurial and consumerist choice. A redefined 'social evil of prostitution' allows government to work out state–society relations as well as to shape citizens in relation to their most intimate desires in the free market.

The governing of sex and desires in the Vietnamese neo-liberal market does two things in relation to gender inequalities. One, the government's promotion of entrepreneurial and consumerist freedoms in the market has unleashed a new nativist and masculinist sexuality, fuelling the sex trade. Concurrently, a new middle- and upper-class feminine sexuality is also being shaped in relation to consumption. In many ways, the government has privatized desires from their public management within the old Leninist party–state organs. And two, through its responses to the introduction of choice in the economic realm, the government seeks to produce *gender, sexuality and class-differentiated producers and consumers*, employing simultaneously *different modes* of directing the behaviour of a differentiated citizenry. On the one hand, public health intervention may rely on a 'realism' referring to social empiricist and medical knowledge to shape choices on the part of health consumers, like women of the middling and upper classes. On the other hand, policing and carceral rehabilitation will call on coercion and a 'true' traditionalist culture in its mode of governing its target population of lower-class sex workers because Vietnamese 'traditional' femininity has become a labour commodity in global production. Governing with the neo-liberal market entails producing different kinds of producers and consumers with different levels of access to market freedoms as a site of value and meaning generation. What kinds of producers and consumers a government produces depends on historical institutions and the economic–political positions of that government at home and abroad.

Let me try to illustrate some of my claims with discussions of commercial sex and governmental intervention in Vietnam.

THE ECONOMICS OF ENTREPRENEURIAL AND CONSUMERS' CHOICE: THE CASE OF COMMERCIAL SEX

The volume of sexual commerce in Vietnam is difficult to estimate. For one thing, this activity is illegal, and there are few ways to quantify it. One estimate puts it at 144,000 million VN dong (over 10 million US dollars).¹ Another direction of quantification reveals a target population bias in its focus on the number of women involved in commercial sex. These estimates

vary, and most reporters and scholars in Vietnam avoid giving numbers that they have no way of confirming. Most observers, however, seem to agree that these numbers have been growing. One researcher from the Center for the Scientific Study of Family and Women in Hanoi cites a ten-fold increase from 10,000 'prostitutes' in 1988 at the start of *Doi Moi* (i.e. renovation policy) to 100,000 four years later in 1992, to 200,000 in 1996.² Projection from such estimates would put the 2004 figure at roughly 400,000 to half a million women involved in the sex trade.

Although such numbers are unreliable and reflect our preoccupation with problematically conceptualized quantities, they do indicate the prominent presence of a sex market after Vietnam opened its doors to both the market economy and the world. From bars, to 'hugging' Karaoke places, to 'hugging' beer halls, to the myriad forms of 'hugging' cafes in the city centres and small towns as well as along the roads connecting them, commercial sex in different degrees and forms is rather readily available in Vietnam today. Where the government looked at prostitution at the end of the war in 1975 as a vestige of the *ancien regime*, they could no longer do so in the post-*Doi Moi* era. It seems most promising to seek an understanding of this phenomenon in the market economy that the government has adopted.

The first decade after *Doi Moi* saw the introduction of entrepreneurship into how economic activities were conducted. Local economic units first experimented with 'breaking the fence' measures, introducing incentive into production. Party leaders later adopted these and expanded them in Decree 217 of 1987, which gave managers of state-owned enterprises 'autonomy in management and production decisions' (Tran 1996: 70). This decree was followed by various prime-ministerial decisions and laws on private business recognizing different types of private ownership (Lichtenstein 1994). The autonomy or freedom to make entrepreneurial decisions was in place. During this time, the state-owned enterprises enjoyed an advantage over privately-owned ones in many respects. The former had access to capital from factories to machineries, to real estate. State-owned enterprises at this time also enjoyed more or less a monopoly on contracts with outside investors and companies, including the ability to import and export materials and products. Private companies found they had to rely on this system of 'delegated' importation and exportation (*nhap/xuat uy thac*) through state-owned enterprises. Nevertheless, the private companies were usually the ones with the ready cash to start projects subcontracted

from state-owned enterprises, who held most contracts with transnational companies. For example, as Hieu, a woman owner of a private construction company put it, except for a few big companies like this Construction Company No. X, many of the state-owned companies in the 1990s lacked the cash to carry out a contracted project. Subcontracting thus became necessary not just for the usual reasons of specialization and lower costs:

[Among the state-owned companies], there are some which sound big, this or that General Corporation, but they would just exist as a front to get the big contracts which they pass on down to their 'subsidiaries'. Of these, not all are well-equipped or well-funded. My company has worked with the ones that don't have much. They would call the smaller ones like mine to forward the money. I would have to come up with twenty per cent of the value of the contract up front. And then I'd have to cover all expenses after that until I get it back three or four months later (Hieu, interview by author, 2 August 1996, HCMC).

State and private entrepreneurs, whose decisions would result in decisive gains or losses, found they had to procure the various parts of the contract, production, and distribution process from each other as well as from foreign businessmen. Fraternizing became a vital factor in the success of their entrepreneurship. The form in which this fraternizing took place in the formative years of marketization, and has since acquired the longevity of an established practice, is through male entrepreneurs taking each other out to a session of bought pleasure, which often includes sexual or semi-sexual services provided by women. Newspaper accounts abounded which chronicled the mirroring of state company officials in the women and corruption scene.³ More commonplace than these high-profile cases were men like Hoàng, a highly placed official in a big state-owned construction company. Lan, his wife, told me he spent six nights a week in these *bia om* restaurants – establishments that provided semi-sexual services on the premises and sexual service off-premise – negotiating deals, and making or reinforcing his contacts (interview by author, 4 May 1996, HCMC). Or there was the case of Tinh, who was a private hardware supplier. While showing me the nightlife at Restaurant XYZ, Tinh attributed his expertise in these matters to the fact that every single one of his contracts had been signed in one of these 'eat and play' places (conversation with author, 22 May 1996 HCMC). XYZ was a popular pick-up point for businessmen and high-class dancers out from the dancing halls after midnight. Minh and Hang, who had worked as *bia om* hostesses, said most of their customers were there for

business, such as to sign contracts or pick up *ap phe* – money-making deals of all kinds, usually involving a commission (interview with author, 19 May 1996, HCMC). By the early 2000s, such practices had become routinized.

Cong, a light construction supplier, described the business scene in a resort town on the coast: 'It has become a habit. In the establishments that offer *ôm* (hugging), the people who take others out and those who get taken out are all happy.' When asked how things compared to the mid-1990s, Cong replied: 'It's several times more. But it's less visible' (conversation, 6 July 2002, Vung Tau), taking place as it does in hotels rather than at eateries as before. The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women states in their report based on international journalistic accounts of the late 1990s that 'two-thirds of government officials are known buyers of women in prostitution', and that 'after Vietnam shifted to a market economy, prostitution became so integrated into trade relations that business deals are often closed with the use of women as incentive or reward to foreign investors, bureaucrats and corporate representatives' (Hughes et al. 2007). According to a 2002 news report, the government itself found that 'state cadres', including 'state-enterprise directors', comprise 38.3 per cent of all sex clients (Jimenez-David 2007). If you add to this figure of state cadres their interlocutors in the private sector, then indeed this client group seems to make up the main clientele of the sex trade in the late 1990s and at least the early 2000s.

Soon this practice, deemed necessary for business, acquired class and cultural meanings. Entrepreneurs as a group began to consume sex as a way to signify their social dominance based on their economic standing. It seemed like a case of these men enacting their social dominance through sexual dominance (Bourdieu 1984: 475). Since most state and private entrepreneurs' official salary was not an indication of the spending power they commanded, seeking pleasure was a way to sort out the hierarchy of status among men. A mother thought *bia om* was 'a touch of class for men now-a-day'.⁴ A rich respondent to a CARE study stated, 'Going for girls is a fashionable trend ... It's a rich man's fashion' (Franklin 1994: 48). This sorting out of classes of men was predicated on the women's subservience in this trade. This new entrepreneurial class distinction thus constructed itself around a gender difference in both the division of sexual labour (female submission in the pleasure act) and the sexual division of labour (husbands are to support their wives and kids). This was a deep source of feelings of shame and degradation for the women. Minh, a hostess at one

these establishments recalled how a man presided over her initiation into this service/servitude:

Minh: I wasn't yet eighteen. Small. Just a kid. I was called to serve this man. He knew it was my first time with a customer. He told me to open his beer bottle. I didn't know how. The beer squirted everywhere. He yelled at me. He knew it was my first time opening a beer bottle, but he still yelled at me. I cried. He told me to set it on the table. I set in on the table. Then he yelled, 'No, put it under the table.' I put it under the table. I didn't know anything, but thought his tip of 6,000 dong was a lot of money. I was happy to get 6,000.

Hang: Many of these young girls know nothing. The sound of the beer can popping startles them the first time. Then they paint their nails, put on make-up, hold the cigarette to smoke. Then they're ready to sleep with the customers. If they don't, they just won't be able to cover their expenses (interview by the author, 19 May 1996, HCMC).

Consumption of pleasure through the use of women's bodies and submissive services became a way to mark out their class position not only vis-à-vis other Vietnamese men, but also against the erotic consumption of foreign men who had money to spend in the new Vietnamese market. Vietnamese women came to be identified with Vietnamese specialties, particularly food. Hang, a hostess, described her relationship to her male customers at her 'hugging' restaurant: 'In that place, I am their cake. They buy it, they eat it any way they want' (interview by the author, 19 May 1996, HCMC). If foreign tourists and businessmen came to Vietnam for a 'taste of Vietnam' in its women, Vietnamese men of the new moneyed classes – usually the new entrepreneurial classes – would have to distinguish their erotic consumption to mark out their social power. Places that served foods invested with the signification of nativity, and requiring native knowledge to consume, often doubled as places that offered women marked out as embodying this Vietnamese nativity.

Cong, a male entrepreneur told me in 2002 that as the practice of entrepreneurs and government officials (who often doubled as state entrepreneurs) taking each other out for food and sex became routinized, 'dishes like beef, chicken, fish, pork, people no longer like to eat. Now when people play, they like to eat only the most exotic things like game meat, and now even snakes, centipedes, boa constrictors, cicadas and other insects' (conversation with author, 6 July 2002, Vung Tau). This search for new flavours into rural areas left a trail of the exotic, as gustatory delights

and erotic pleasures mingled. There were in the 1990s stretches of ‘fifteen kilometers of eating and playing’. This phrase referred to stretches of highway lined with shops specializing in local culinary flavours mixed with exotic ways in which men could enjoy women. One such stretch was in the Song Cau area. Another ran from the Saigon Bridge to Thu Duc on the Hanoi Highway. According to one reporter for a Public Security newspaper, the Song Cau stretch in central Vietnam acquired its reputation:

[B]ecause here there are many specialty dishes (*mon an dac san*), from the marshes and the sea, that are fresh and delicious. [...] And the red lights come on as night falls. The girls who attract customers to the food are young and agile, with powdered cheeks and coloured lips, alluring enough to serve ‘the gods’ as they reach the desired degree of *bia om* (Phan Van Luong 1996: 6).

As the Vietnamese moneyed classes enlarge their wealth and establish their social standing, less threatened by foreign money, perhaps this nativism in erotic consumption will become less important, even if exoticism remains appealing in the global tourist market. Whatever the prognosis, it seems the government has effectively brought about an economy that relies on neo-liberal freedoms, thereby freeing masculinist sexuality to take market forms.

CONSUMERS’ CHOICE AND EMPIRICIST EXPERT KNOWLEDGE: THE PRODUCTION OF A DIFFERENTIATED CITIZENRY IN PUBLIC HEALTH MEASURES

Prostitution remains illegal in Vietnam. However, the post-*Doi Moi* government can no longer eradicate it in the same way it did back at the end of the war. Entrepreneurs must be allowed to do business: both the male entrepreneurs who fraternize with business partners through the consumption of commercial sex, and the entrepreneurs who run establishments that offer sex on the side in various guises. Consumers must be allowed to buy what they choose, be it a night on the town that ends with bought sex. The illegality of prostitution must not dampen the other parts of commerce (which in many ways depend on commercial sex to thrive). Government intervention in prostitution thus becomes a convenient site where problematizations and justifications are worked out, and modes of control connected to both politics and economics are

devised. The three areas of governmental intervention in the 'social evil of prostitution' correspond to three different government ministries: public health administered by the Ministry of Health, rehabilitation by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, and finally policing by the Ministry of Public Security. Let me first discuss the predominant mode of governing in public health measures and how it is applied differentially to different classes of citizens.

Medicine in Vietnam has lost its revolutionary emphasis on egalitarian but rudimentary mass-based medicine in its current embrace of the privatization of healthcare and the attendant market pressures to acquire the latest technology and expertise (Nguyen-vo 2002). This creates a different network of how public health is to be delivered. No longer is it the exclusive domain of the socialist state; healthcare depends on the chains of public but fee-based hospitals, private clinics, private physicians and private pharmacies. Public and private institutions now link up in a common purpose of delivering healthcare free of the narrative of class struggle. The goal of government has now been partly taken up by entities in the private sector. The link between governmental and private entities is maintained by the discipline of medicine itself with its norms derived from its expert knowledge rather than proletarian programmes devised by the Communist Party. If before, party cadres, in conjunction with the local government clinic, administered everything from dietary supplements to contraceptive devices, now both government and private medicine must rely more on consumers' choice in healthcare, as they become educated about healthy behaviour and vested with greater responsibility for maintaining their own health. There is a new reliance on an empiricist knowledge about actual sexual and commercial practices, and on expert knowledge in medicine about how diseases can be controlled. Medical practices appear to be disciplinary control in the Foucauldian sense of normalization. However, this nexus of expert knowledge and governance works out differently for different segments of the population.

Public health measures aimed at sex workers involve mandatory testing for HIV and other STDs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases) among sex workers detained in rehabilitation camps, and HIV/STD peer education among sex workers. The HIV/STD education provided to sex workers, and even to some of the population at large, has been financed by international Non-Governmental Organizations such as CARE International and *Médecins du Monde*. But measures aimed at sex workers are much more

focused on clinical disease control compared to measures aimed at other populations. One government-run peer education leader tells female sex workers, 'You must use condoms, because otherwise you will infect your clients, and they will infect their wives, and their wives will transmit it to their children. The whole nation will die of this disease' (interview by author, 1 June 1996, HCMC). The links highlight the embeddedness of the sex worker's dangerous body in the body of the nation, and allow for the targeting of her body in clinical procedures like testing and medication, or even traumatizing and invasive ones like abortion. Most sex workers (the majority of whom are women), and particularly the women who end up arrested, come from the lower classes in Vietnam's new economy.⁵

In contrast, male clients are assumed to be consumers with desires naturalized in physiological terms. Self-help manuals, advice programmes and columns (published or broadcast by quasi-state entities) in the language of health science aimed at urban women of the middling or moneyed classes advise these women on how, by investing in themselves, they could make themselves and sex in the home appealing for their husbands or future husbands, so that the latter would not seek the 'dirty' sex available to them in the marketplace. The self-help books ask her to perform a bourgeois femininity that reproduces the bourgeois family with gendered spaces, and gendered roles. In the publisher's introduction to a comprehensive encyclopaedia for women, the Hanoi Publishing House explains its target audience and purpose as follows:

Some ask: 'Why women?' Because nature created two sexes/genders and endowed each with separate advantages to fulfil separate functions. In the area of love, marriage and family, we see this most clearly. The men play the active role, but the decision belongs to the women. ...

Marriage and family in its true essence is an issue that belongs to women. Here, their interests are most clearly expressed, their skills (or lack thereof) most clearly revealed.

[Sex] is a completely scientific topic. Many families with problems like adultery have their deep cause in the partners' lack of sexual satisfaction due to lack of knowledge about the functioning of this machinery, and because they have not escaped antiquated prejudice, viewing sex as something dirty and ugly (*Bach Khoa Phu Nu Tre* 1995: 5–6).

The 'scientific' knowledge in the above passage justifies anchoring women of the new middle classes in domestic spaces, and using these women to

sexualize such spaces of marriage and family. The same encyclopaedia elaborates on the dangers to the conjugal family in these terms:

First, we need to observe that in capitalist society, where everything could be bought and sold, sex becomes a commodity as well. Shameless and unethical merchants sell sex retail and wholesale. ... The sex business [faced with intervention] withdraws to the shadows and claims its victims from there.

In our country, the situation is just as threatening. In recent years, the divorce rate has gone up very quickly ... the divorce rate due to lack of sexual satisfaction is rising alarmingly (*Bach Khoa Phu Nu Tre*: 177–178).

To keep middle-class husbands happy, the women must actively ‘combat’ the ‘boredom’ that usually takes over conjugality. These women are invited to think how they could improve themselves, drawing on ‘expert’ knowledge of health, diets, cosmetology, and particularly sexology, dressed in the language of medical science with normalities and abnormalities. One staple in these manuals is the incitement to knowledge about sex: how it works and how to maximize pleasure. Unabashed sex physiology and psychology, plus sexology which speaks of ‘pleasure spots’, ‘stages’, ‘positions’, ‘variety and techniques’, ‘arousing scents’, ‘appropriate lighting’ of the conjugal bed, and so on, occupy large sections in many of these self-help books. One manual addressed to ‘the girl who is getting married’ explains why it is extremely important for men to be aroused and get pleasure in the sexual act in heterosexual terms based on the necessity of biology:

Why is it [sexual arousal in men] more important? Because the male sexual organ can not be used in normal circumstances; it has to go through a process of profound change in the level of firmness to be functional. And this only happens when the man is sufficiently aroused.

Women, on the other hand, can do it any time, regardless of whether there is desire, even when threatened or coerced.

Unlike men, women do not need ‘recovery time’ in between. Women can do it anytime, are always ready to return to sensitivity, and are the only creatures on earth with the capacity for multiple orgasms (*Tran Bong Son* 1995: 55-56).

Such description of the ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ state of women in the sexual act reads like what is expected of most practising sex-workers. Middle-class wifery here is about out-whoring prostitutes, and doing it all within the hygienic confines of the conjugal bed. From the above description of the

female sex, the same manual launches into a lesson in sexology, dissecting sexual pleasure and how to ensure it. Never since before the revolution has there been such excited discussion about sex and the conjugal bed.

The promotion of health, vitality and pleasure construct the readers as subjects of bio-politics. The erotic desires that take commercial forms in the marketplace are countered in these women's handbooks and advice columns with an eroticization of the conjugal home. Many of these self-improvement projects not only require the consumption of knowledge but also of other products and services in the market place.

We can discern in this governance through health and medicine a reliance on a combination of threat and seduction by medical knowledge in which an empiricist mode of apprehending reality is important. Although differentiated by both class and gender, where the clinical measures targeting sex workers seem more coercive than the discourse of sex, health, and vitality aimed at men and women of the new middling or higher classes, it still posits to some degree the autonomous agency of the sex workers involved, that they must be persuaded to use condoms and get tested, etc. Thus, the empirical data about actual habits, where to find sex workers, the various statistics including rates of infection, etc., become vital. The mandatory testing takes place only in conjunction with practices of policing and incarceration in rehabilitation camps. To the latter we now turn.

COERCION, CULTURE AND GLOBAL ECONOMICS: THE CARCERAL LOGIC OF REHAB

Government Resolution 53/CP of 1994 reinforces Article 24 of the Decrees for Administrative Transgressions by specifying that 'Those who have been identified as engaged in selling sex shall be sent to centres for the purpose of education, disease treatment, and labour' (Nhung Van Ban 1995). The organization of these rehabilitation camps resembles the organization of a low-security prison. Inmates are forcibly committed and incarcerated for the duration of their 'administrative' sentence, which could last anywhere from three months to 28 months if repeat offences or further infractions of camp rules, such as escape attempts, are committed. Confinement also entails a strict regimentation of daily tasks and routines, including STD-education, political classes and vocational training.

Job training teaches the women inmates slow and monotonous work that requires much patience and dexterity. At the two camps in southern

Vietnam for which I have field data, sub-contracted piecework was the centrepiece of the vocational training program. In one camp, women were working to fill orders of false eyelashes, and at another, women inmates were taught industrial sewing and were filling garment orders. The pay regime, though much lower than that paid to workers in a factory, mimicked exactly the piece-rate system of compensation. The difference was that women get penalized for their failure to fill their minimum production quota in the form of corporal punishment and/or money owed to the rehabilitation centre for their incarceration expenses at the end of their detention. If we were to look at this as a function of the neo-liberalist logic – the expansion of the economic enterprise model into a public institution – then perhaps Vietnam, by making inmates pay for their incarceration, has advanced right along with US prisons with their schemes of privatization and employment of prison labour.

Food for thought though that might be, more important would be an analysis of the hows and whys of such carceral practices. This mode of control, as in prisons elsewhere, is clearly coercive. There is little attempt at persuasion like that which we see in public health measures related to prostitution. Women are infantilized in hierarchical structures of authority, in the songs they learn, in the forms of address they use with wardens, and in the forms of punishment they receive for their infractions.⁶

The vocational training program is borrowed from the mode of transnational sub-contracted piece-rate production. The values of labour transmitted are those sought by this system of transnational production (individual incentive and accountability in low-pay piece-rate work, dexterity, docility), the packaging of which usually comes under labels of traditional femininity.⁷ Jobs taught to women train them to be patient, dextrous and docile in their acceptance of authority. But even among those feminine jobs, not all are viewed with equal importance. At the New Center for the Education of Women, the emphasis was on the industrial sewing workshop, as it absorbed most of the inmates' time. From mid-1996 on, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs decided women being rehabilitated had to contribute to the costs of their incarceration. As a result, they had to work on money-making operations. If their earnings fell short of the designated amount, the women would incur a debt to be repaid after they leave the camp (CARE International 1998: 11, 31). The sewing workshop thus increased in size after my 1996 visit, and money-making

schemes expanded to smaller operations in mat making, embroidery, stuffing and match-box making (CARE International 1998: 38).

The sewing workshop was presented to me as a class that taught women job skills. The head warden informed me that the purpose was to train the young women so they could become garment workers doing piecework, not tailors that could measure and cut (interview by author, 5 June 1996, Thu Duc). Wardens scolded the women for making mistakes that required undoing and re-stitching. The head warden allowed me less than twenty minutes of observation in the sewing workshop. While I attempted to talk to the young women about their work conditions, the head warden hovered and tapped her wooden ruler on the table in front of the women. As the wardens were unforthcoming about the whole operation, I was not able to get answers about who supplied the work orders, and how the camp or the young women got compensated for work performed.

I got a clearer picture of a similar piecework operation in the Centre for Social Sponsorship when I conducted extensive interviews with Mai and Hà, two young women who had just been released after spending fourteen months there. Even though wardens could assign various other classes to the women, making false eyelashes was mandatory for all female inmates. This was a piecework operation for profit. The camp contracted or sub-contracted the work orders. Inmates were given quotas to fulfil. They were not compensated for fulfilling the quotas of twenty sets per daily work session. But if inmates managed to produce beyond the quotas, they got rewarded based on the number of extra sets. Hà, the younger of the two women, said she almost always exceeded the quotas and got compensated an amount of 70,000 to 90,000 *dong* (less than seven to nine US dollars at the time) a month. She said the camp director announced the operation yielded a monthly amount of 30 million *dong* (less than three thousand US dollars), a large sum in Vietnam. At the very least, the camp and the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs would have recovered the partial costs of incarcerating the women.

As with other jobs taught in the camp, eyelash-making demanded a high degree of patience and dexterity. The women threaded hair through tiny holes, tied, tightened, cut and evenly spread the strands so that they would not bunch up or leave spaces in between (Mai, interview by author, 27 May and 1 June 1996, Vung Tau). Hà proudly showed me her tiny hands with nimble fingers and said, "They imported the hair. They gave us the materials that we thread, tied, cut. I am very dextrous and quick. See?"

(Hà, interview by author, 1 June 1996, Vung Tau). For Hà, dexterity was an existing ability put to work. But for Mai, it was a different story. As each worker was rewarded or punished on the basis of the quality of each piece of work completed, she suffered for her lack of the necessary qualities. Mai recounted:

The team leaders, they were allowed to beat you if say your work fell short of the required number of products. I got a hundred canes, twenty each night ... A thick cane. That was because the products I was assigned got rejected. For each set of eyelashes that got rejected, I got two canes. For the ten rejected each day, I got twenty canes. They said to thread the hair evenly with no spaces in between. Most of mine had spaces in between. Then it was my fault that my products got rejected. At the end of each work session, I turned in twenty pieces with my name clipped to the bundle. Once they got them, they inspected them and would know who were responsible for the rejects. That was how I got a hundred canes. After that, I begged and begged the head warden to let me out of that work or I would kill myself. He felt sorry for me because I had my little daughter with me in the camp and had no family to take care of us (interview by author, 1 June 1996, Vung Tau).

Whether by careful design or by imagining what occupations would befit women from the lower classes, and limited by the context of Vietnam's place in a global economy operating by flexible accumulation, the government ends up teaching these labour values in the camps. By doing so, the government achieves two functions, one aimed towards a domestic population, and one towards the global economy. The first is an ideological interpellation of women of the lower classes about who they *truly* are in terms of their worth: they are not worth the inflated prices they are paid for their sex work but rather the hard earned piece-rate they are paid by transnational sub-contracted production. Through practices of rehabilitation, the government produces 'true' subjectivities held up for hopefully large numbers of women from the lower classes, those with little education or money: they should embody these values that will make many of them employable in the new economy.

The second function is one of branding this range of values thought to be traditional femininity as authentically *Vietnamese*. One warden explains the content of political or ethical education in her camp: 'We teach them how to be a good woman because they apparently aren't conscious of it yet. We teach them the role of a woman in the family and society – a good wife,

a good mother – with the three obediences and the four virtues’ (interview by author, 5 June 1996, Thu Duc). The warden’s reference to Confucianism may seem to contradict the revolutionary agendas of the Communist Party of its first decades in power from the 1950s through the 1970s. But such a Confucianist formulation of Vietnamese femininity is perfectly intelligible if we take into account, for instance, Madame Truong My Hoa’s statement, as President of the Women’s Union at its Eighth Congress in 1997, that ‘Vietnam is an Oriental country and we preserve the traditional role of women’ (Chalmers 1997). It is an affirmative statement about what Vietnam is; its truth, its essence. Vietnamese feminine labour derives from this assertion of an abstraction of Vietnamese-ness as Oriental-ness, and is then reified into a brand name that can be expected to deliver the qualities of traditional femininity of motivation (read willingness to accept cheap pay), dexterity, patience and docility; a brand that is sought after by managers and contractors of transnational production companies. Conveniently, the reference to Vietnamese traditional culture also helps to justify a coercive mode of control by a narrative of cultural exceptionalism (the this-is-how-we-do-things-in-our-culture refrain evident in the traditionalist references in the rehabilitation camps).

CONCLUSIONS

Governing to produce a citizenry differentiated by class and gender for the labour and consumption needs of the global economy constitutes a major source of gender inequalities in contemporary Vietnam. The rise of commercial sex and its management illustrates a paradoxical mode of governing. The government relies on the mode of empiricist knowledge about what is real in the world of public health but it also promotes the sense of the true self constituted in true Vietnamese values in rehabilitation. There is thus this schizophrenic pitting of modernity against representations of the nation as traditional, vouched for by the production of ‘traditional’ ‘Oriental’ femininity. This raises questions for the Foucauldian ‘episteme’, ‘mentality’ and ‘rationality’ of governance. Such contradiction tells us that we should not expect a consistent logic of governing that differs in degree rather than in kind. What we see is choice in the market supported by the medical discourse of the real, as well as coercion exemplified by rehabilitative incarceration supported by the culturalist discourse of the true, both of which are products of a government governing with neo-

liberalist choice in an economy connected to the global capitalist economy. So, although Confucianist gender values conveniently mark what is 'Asian' for this government, as other markers like Islam or family values might for other Southeast Asian governments, this paradoxical mode of governing gender can be discussed in terms that address the neo-liberalism of our time, rather than Orientalist terms that obscure the connectedness of our world.

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NOTES

- 1 Report on the conference 'Mai Dam: Quan Diem va Giai Phap' [Prostitution: Perspectives and Solutions]. In *Khoa Hoc Ve Phu Nu* (Sciences on Women), no.1 (1999): pp. 36–38.
- 2 Le Ngoc Van (1997) 'Mai Dam Tre Em va Lam Dung Tinh Duc Tre Em' [Child Prostitution and Sexual Exploitation of Children]. In *Khoa Hoc ve Phu Nu* (Sciences on Women), no.1, pp. 37–41.
- 3 See for instance, Nhom Phong Vien CT-XH (1996) 'Khi Nha Dot Tu Noc' [When the roof leaks]. *Cong An Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh*, 29 May 1996, 11; Nhom Phong Vien CT-XH (1996) 'Pham Huy Phuoc, Quyen Luc va Sa Doa' [Pham Huy Phuoc: Power and Moral Corruption]. *Cong An Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh*, 28 February 1996, 11; Nhom

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- 4 'Dien Dan: "Bia om – Vi Sao Van Ton Tai?"' [Forum: 'Bia Om – Why Does it Still Exist?']. Readers' Column, *Phu Nu*, 26 May 1996, 6.
 - 5 One survey of inmates at a rehabilitation camp finds only 5 per cent from well-off families, and 85 per cent had lower than a ninth grade education, of which 17.4 per cent was illiterate and 30 per cent had a fifth grade education or below (Khuat Thu Hong et al. 1998: 6).
 - 6 The exception to these patterns of control and vocational training in the camps consisted of the programme implemented at a camp in Thu Duc by the NGOs CARE International in Vietnam and NOVIB (Nederlandse Organisatie Voor Internationale Bijstand), which taught women inmates living-well knowledge and strategies (i.e. nutrition, arts and culture, safe sex, gender and sexual negotiations), and business skills, and encouraged them to expect good treatment and transparency from programme administrators in the camp. Just as telling was the camp officials' termination of the programme after two and a half years (10/1995–4/1998). Requests to start new CARE programmes at the camp were denied by camp officials (CARE report, 1998, and interview with one of the CARE programme administrators, July 2002).
 - 7 For discussions of flexible accumulation that translates to out-sourcing to countries with cheap labour and other advantages, see for instance David Harvey 1989; and for the feminization of labour along traditionalist expectations, see for instance Aihwa Ong 1990; Chandra T. Mohanty 1997; Angie Ngoc Tran 1998.

Chapter 3

Gender, Multiculturalism and Religious Discourse(s):

Women as Symbols in Hindu Nationalism

Sidse Hansson and Catarina Kinnvall

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we discuss how women are constructed as symbols in religious and nationalist discourse(s). India is a good example of a more general debate on the role of women in fundamentalist discourses. Much of this debate has been played out in the discourse on multiculturalism and the extent to which minority groups or individuals should have legitimate rights-claims. Many feminist scholars argue, for instance, that providing rights for the minority is often done at the expense of individual members of these groups, particularly female members (see e.g. Okin 1999; Roy 2005). India's policy of secularism, which was adopted after independence in 1947, displays a number of features similar to multicultural policies in the West, as discussed throughout this chapter.

Indian feminists have been especially persistent in showing how women's citizenship rights have been negatively affected by this discourse on secularism. To Indian feminists, secularist policies have become yet another item of evidence of how patriarchal religion serves to encourage and legitimize violence, and other forms of oppression, against women. The relationship between patriarchal religious practices and state intervention into religious affairs has been particularly detrimental to women's ability to act as subjects in the public arena. Legal means of addressing the issue of women's oppression have proved futile as long as this structural relationship

remains unchanged. However, setbacks at the level of feminist activism have been followed by promising advances in gender theory. This is discussed at the outset of the chapter, and is followed by a more general discussion of how we can understand the role of women as symbols of religious and nationalist discourse(s) in relation to processes of globalization, multiculturalism and the 'war on terror'.

Of particular importance is the extent to which these processes have intensified the search for tradition, and women as symbols of such traditions, as people are increasingly becoming categorized into religious and national groups. This tendency reflects a larger political problem as culturalist policies encourage essentialist, often romanticized, singular views of culture as unchanging and unchangeable products rather than processes. In India, for instance, there is a tendency to use women as 'pawns' in the struggle for religious and nationalist identity played out between Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist¹ groups, as well as between these groups and the secular² state. It is therefore important to develop and analyze this general debate on multiculturalism and gender so as to comprehend the consequences of Indian secularism for women's citizenship rights. In this chapter we develop this argument to show how the policies of multiculturalism and Indian secularism have benefited those in power and helped them to base dominant discursive practices of right-claims on religion and nationalism.

We then proceed to Hindu nationalist discourse(s), and the extent to which such discourse(s) is built upon the protection of Hindu women against the repression of external others (especially Muslim others). The search for an 'authentic' pre-colonial nation and culture by Indian so-called 'nativist' scholars is of importance here for conceptualizing the role of women in the nationalist discourse. In India we see a clear convergence between a leftist critique of colonialization, Westernization and modernization as framed by the Neo-Gandhians and the surge of cultural values in the Hindu nationalist discourse. The focus on nationalist discourse(s) also has to do with its specific relevance for understanding the recent growth in the number of women activists in the Hindu fundamentalist movement. As discussed throughout the text, of particular importance is how discourses on personal laws in Indian secularism, as well as multiculturalism, are often focused on women and women's bodies in the debate around citizenship and rights. The chapter then concludes with a general discussion of the extent to which globalization and culturalist policies may not be altogether

negative, but how they may actually, in certain circumstances, provide sites of struggles from which emancipatory challenges may be launched.

INDIAN FEMINISTS AND THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION

In this section we discuss how advances in gender theory in India have been linked to a critical feminist engagement with Indian nationalisms and state secularism. The rise of Hindu nationalism from the mid-1980s onwards represented a particularly severe challenge, and it is primarily in this context that religion came to the foreground as a hurdle for feminist activism and analysis. In more general terms, the developments within feminist theorizing in India can be seen as part of a larger global trend where gender studies in former colonies have made a shift from post-Independence nationalist to postmodern and postcolonial frameworks of analysis. In the Indian context this entails a preoccupation with the problems of gender, multiculturalism and nationalism: 'One of the significant contributions of feminist theorising in the last two decades in India has, for instance, involved a sustained critique of essentialist notions of the Indian nation and women that have marked the dominant nationalist discourse' (Chaudhuri 2004: xxi). The shift implies that the privileging of global power relations as a framework for gender analysis has been supplemented with a focus on local contexts and asymmetries. In their analysis of difference and power relationships gender scholars have been especially concerned with the power/gendered relationships involved in nationalisms, and processes of marginalization and 'othering' of women, minorities and underprivileged groups.

This critical feminist engagement emerged among urban professional women in response to a Government report, *Towards Gender Equality* (1974), which revealed that contrary to the promise given by the post-Independence state, gender inequalities were not in the process of being redressed. As a consequence, the complicity between urban professional women and the nation-building project was shattered. Their first post-Independence campaigns were organized around dowry and rape, issues which were soon taken up by broader sections of the female population. At the turn of the 1980s, feminism in India was represented by increasingly diversified groups, such as liberalists, neo-traditionalists, dalits and other marginalized groups.³ Hence, questions were raised about how to bridge the gaps between women and establish a common feminist agenda. Especially

for the leftist feminists, this was a question of how to remain legitimate, gain support and become representative of women at large, including marginalized women, while pursuing a feminist critique of Indian social practices and traditions. As Bina Agarwal later observed, this endeavour entailed the following complexity: as a woman she is confronting patriarchy, as a 'Third World' woman she is confronting Western feminist agendas, and as an educated woman in a developing country she is confronting her own position of privilege (1994).

The liberal-minded and neo-traditionalist feminists, for their part, argued for the development of an 'indigenous' feminism rooted in the cultural diversity of India. Hence, they began searching for traditional sources of women's agency and empowerment, and historical forms of women's resistance. Attention was given to the ways in which women could use traditional settings and the gender-specific spaces accorded to them to covertly resist the dominant gender order, or negotiate with their households and communities. For instance, women's appropriation of religious practices such as spirit possession to wrest concessions from their households was highlighted as an example of women gaining power (Sunder Rajan 2000: 272). Traditional and religious institutional settings were scrutinized as possible spaces for women's informal and non-public agency (e.g. Martin 1996). In the process, religious and 'traditional' cultures were recast as 'traditional gender resources' to be drawn upon in order to communicate with women at large (Kumar 1993). Traditional symbols of women's power were appropriated through the reinterpretation of myths, epics and historical events. Goddesses and epic heroines were remoulded and presented as positive role models for women, and women's religious celebrations became sites for feminist campaigns (Kumar in Menon 1999: 357).

This strategic use of mainly Hindu (Agnes 1995: 138f) cultural symbols and traditions did not only serve the purpose of soliciting support; it was also a way of marking a diminished Western bias in domestic feminism (e.g. Kishwar 1999) in response to an increasingly consistent public critique of feminists. Counter-campaigns were launched in which recast feminist slogans and symbols were used for neo-traditionalist and Hindu nationalist purposes. One of the first instances were the rallies held by the Rana Sati Sarva Sangh, an organization propagating the cult of *sati*, widow sacrifice, in the early 1980s, where women participated and claimed the right to commit *sati* (Kumar in Menon 1999). Hindu nationalist campaigns followed

up and successfully used similar tactics for mobilizing urban middle class women in the aftermath of the case of Shah Bano in 1986, a controversy that marked the culmination of the feminist crisis of representation.

In subsequent feminist analysis, this case highlighted the problems of Indian state secularism. The case of Shah Bano goes back to the early 1980s, when a woman called Shah Bano filed for alimony under section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) from her husband who had divorced her. The husband argued that alimony was impermissible under the *Sharia*,⁴ and the Supreme Court had to give its ruling on the question of whether the provisions of Section 125 of the CrPC were applicable to Muslims. The court decided that the provisions were indeed applicable to Muslims. Following this judgment there were heated discussions within the Muslim community between 'progressive' and 'fundamentalist' Muslims, between women's groups and Muslim leaders as well as on the floor of parliament. This discussion must be seen in the light of the growing Hindutva movement, whose representatives argued that the Muslims were oppressing 'their' women and that the Muslim Personal Law was an oppressive and anti-national Law in comparison to the Hindu Code. This was the point in time when Rajiv Gandhi stepped into the debate. In fear of losing the Muslim vote, he used his large majority to pass a special law in Parliament in 1986 (ironically named the Muslim Protection of Rights on Divorce Act) that made the *Sharia* superior to the country's civil code in matters pertaining to the maintenance of divorced Muslim women (Bose 1997: 128–129; see also Freitag 1996: 224–225; Basu 1996: 63; Palriwala and Agnihotri 1996: 511–519). This law basically deprived divorced Muslim women of the right to maintenance, a right they had long been struggling to achieve.

In later feminist analysis, this instance of state intervention marked a significant move towards state recognition of religious community leaders at the expense of its commitment to gender equality. Further, it revealed the tendency of the state, when under pressure, to pit gender against minority concerns. Consequently, Shah Bano became a case in point revealing the limited emancipatory potential of the workings of the state and the judiciary (Kapur and Cossman 1996; Agnes 1999; Menon 2004). Another cause of distress was the way in which the Hindu nationalists skilfully used the post-Shah Bano debate as a medium for propagating their demand for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC). For the feminists, this proposal aimed at institutionalizing 'gender inequalities and Hindu majoritarianism' (Sangari 1995b: 3381).

As such it represented a subversion of the common civil code, which had been on the agenda of women's organizations since 1937, an offence leaving feminists with little space for manoeuvre in the highly polarized climate of the ongoing debate. By *not* supporting the proposed UCC, the Hindu nationalists could effectively label the feminists as pseudo-secular and anti-women. At the same time, by voicing their opposition to the Muslim Protection of Rights on Divorce Act, they risked being seen as taking up an anti-minority position in alliance with the Hindu nationalists. Incapable of dealing with this dilemma, the feminists remained conspicuously invisible throughout the post-Shah Bano debate. Adding to their disarray was the way in which urban women now turned out in growing numbers to publicly give their support to Hindu nationalism, while the feminists stood divided, especially over the issue of the civil code.

The Hindu nationalists' mobilization of urban women made feminists painfully aware of 'the impossibility of appealing to women as a category unmediated by other identities like religion and caste' (Menon 2004: 3). Gayatri Spivak's influential article 'Can the subaltern speak? Speculations on widow sacrifice' (1993) provided a point of departure for a more critical feminist re-examination of gender and agency in historical sources and traditional settings (e.g. Basu and Jeffery 2001; Chakravarti 1989; Sarkar 1997; Sugiratharajah 2003; Sangari and Vaid 1989). At this point, even the leftist feminists could no longer dismiss religion as a pre-modern patriarchal phenomenon to be done away with through modernization. Some of them wanted to transform cultural feminism by 'wrest[ing] religion from the sole domination of the right and to exploit the spaces within a plural and living tradition of Hinduism for progressive purposes' (Sundar Rajan 2000: 281). Others pointed to recent feminist experiences, and warned that the strategic use of religion meant playing into the hands of Hindu nationalists. In the aftermath of the violent anti-minority campaigns of Hindu nationalists in the early 1990s, similar reservations arose among the liberal-minded feminists, who began confronting the dilemma of advocating multiculturalism while supporting a cultural feminism predominantly associated with religious majority traditions (Falk 1998). In any case, there was a growing consensus about the need for a new common framework, and the notion that it could be established through a feminist revision of Indian state secularism (Chaudhuri 2004; Kumar in Menon 1999).

An early and influential contribution towards this goal is Kum Kum Sangari's (1990) analysis of the post-Shah Bano debate. More specifically,

it is an attempt to carve out a position from which to reclaim the issue of a common civil code. The post-Shah Bano debate, Sangari argues, was entirely premised on Indian multiculturalism as it evolved from the British colonial process of homogenization. Hence, the common frame of reference for all stakeholders in the post-Shah Bano debate was their patriarchal relations to gender and colonial conceptions of religion and nation. In this Indian colonial/multicultural construction, religion is an entity defined mainly by its closure of boundaries and denial of individual exit. Further, the internal cohesion of a religious community must be buttressed by state interventions such as, for instance, Personal Laws. Instead, a feminist analysis must take into account evidence from Indian history and society showing that discrete religions and their boundaries have been continuously challenged by the principle and processes of diversity, and that group identities tend to be established by use of reference to multiple, overlapping and shifting identity-signifiers.

Hence, religion cannot be singled out as the sole determinant of cultural diversity. In regard to gender, Sangari points out that although both the state and religious communities in India are practising gender inequality through similar and overlapping patriarchal arrangements, religious communities are more undemocratic and oppressive in relation to women. Consequently, a common civil code is preferable to reform of the Personal Laws. In order to be an instrument for gender equality, this common civil code must address three key areas: it must establish the inalienable rights of all women, deal with the problem of multiple patriarchies, and encourage religious fluidity and diversity (1995a; 1995b). Sangari's third point of course concerns what she sees as the need to minimize the role of religion as an identity-signifier if gender equality is to be achieved.⁵

GLOBALIZATION, MULTICULTURALISM AND THE 'WAR ON TERROR'

In order to conceptualize the role of women in religious discourse(s) in India and elsewhere, however, it is essential to discuss some general tendencies that have intensified the role of religion as a common identity-signifier⁶ for groups living at home or abroad. Some of these tendencies are clearly related to various processes of globalization, multiculturalism and discourses on the 'war on terror'. Without making any claims to represent the abundance of literature on globalization, it is fair to say that globalization has changed the character of the relationship between those

who have reaped the benefits of the global political and economic market and those who have been left behind – nationally as well as internationally. As Rydstrøm discusses in the Introduction to this book, novel processes of state formation, global economic restructuring and migratory trends have affected categories of gender, race and class. Hence globalization, albeit not a new phenomenon, has involved some real changes in terms of scale, speed and cognition (Kinnvall 2002b). In terms of *scale*, the number of economic, political and social linkages between societies is greater than at any previous time in history. In terms of *speed*, globalization involves a compression of time and space never previously experienced, and in terms of *cognition* there is an increased perception of the globe as a smaller place – that events elsewhere have consequences for our everyday political, social and economic lives, affecting individuals' sense of being. It is this de-territorialization of time and space that impacts on daily life, because in a world of diminishing territorial barriers, 'the search for constant time- and space-bound identities has become a way to cope with the effects of modern life' (Harvey 1993: 4).

In many parts of the world, including India, this phenomenon has been expressed in the language of 'multiculturalism'. As a result of increasing mobility and migration, many societies in the West have been faced with significant challenges in terms of how to deal with groups of people who are increasingly demanding to become counted as agents in their host societies. As Rydstrøm notes in the Introduction, to be denied recognition may deprive a person of a fundamental prerequisite for human flourishing. In all the major areas in which immigrants have settled in Western Europe, Australia, Canada and the United States, various policies of multiculturalism were initiated in the 1970s. These policies were meant to promote and support individuals in their efforts to maintain their language, culture and identity. This invariably led to a new kind of politics among many migrants, often referred to as the 'politics of recognition'. 'Praise of bilingualism and "unity in diversity" encouraged immigrants to reinterpret their "traditions" and to have them recognized by state or federal authorities, in a context of economic and social uncertainty' (Gayer 2002: 239).

In India, this is an older problem that can be related to the particular version of secularism that was adopted after the partition and the creation of Pakistan in 1947, which has forced the government to intervene in religious affairs. India adopted secularism and constitutionalized religious rights as a means to overcome the religious turmoil that had characterized the

pre-independence period and which had resulted in the partition. However, the leaders of the independence movement chose a type of secularism that meant a continuous involvement by the state in religious affairs. Rather than separating church and state, which is common in parts of the West, India opted for the principle of *sarva dharma samabhava* – ‘equal respect for all religions’. As a principle it has required government intervention in religious affairs and support of religious activities so that all Indians have an equal opportunity to practise their religions (see Kolodner 1995; Bhargava 1996). In many ways it can be compared to the way multiculturalism as a policy has been implemented in the West in response to increases in migration and demands for political rights. Thus Indian national leaders claim secular credentials by visiting places of worship of all religious denominations, with equal demonstrations of piety, and the broadcast media allot time equally to the prayers of different religions.

Policies of multiculturalism and the Indian version of secularism thus share some important characteristics. Both the language of multiculturalism and that of Indian secularism emphasize how each group in society is to be protected through the politics of separation rather than integration. This policy often goes together with the liberal emphasis on tolerance and the right to self-assertion and recognition of the minority group’s (often perceived as inherited) identity (Bauman 2001). One of the main problems with the liberal approach, as well as with many Marxist analyses concerned with the expansion of capitalism (such as Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system theory or Johan Galtung’s centre–periphery approach), is the assumption that there exist such things as shared cultures (or shared ideologies) (van der Veer, 1996), where each culture has clear boundaries. As Zygmunt Bauman (1996) and Richard Handler (1994) have pointed out, culture as well as identity must be treated as verbs rather than nouns. Culture must be seen as an ‘ongoing reconstruction of boundaries that are symbolic and not naturally given’ (Handler 1994: 29; cf. Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins 2002: 289).

Unfortunately, the tendency after 11 September 2001 has been to divide the world into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cultures, as discussed in terms of desirable and undesirable ‘civilizations’, where culture (and civilization) is being identified as a noun rather than a verb. The characteristic of this perception is that certain groups of people are selected by those in power (such as American foreign-policy makers) as representatives of particular world-views that threaten ‘our Western’ ways of life. President Bush’s (in)famous

statement about societies having to make a choice of being either 'with us or against us' in the so-called 'war on terror' is a relevant example in this regard. Singling out Muslim men at international airports based on their facial features, clothing or national origin, displays this tendency to homogenize diverse groups of people in the name of potential security threats. Hence it is difficult to ignore how concerns about the economic, cultural and social threats posed by refugees and other immigrants have tended to make their way into security considerations in both Western and non-Western societies. The use of anti-terrorist acts to detain foreign residents for an unlimited time without charging them with a crime is an indication of the tension created by this process, as state rights are pitted against individual rights. In this context, laws and human rights have little relevance when they are confronted by terrorism and threats to security.

Culture viewed as a noun, as an immutable natural essence, thus disregards the unequal power distribution both between and within groups, globally as well as locally. The previous propensity to explain inequalities in racist terms has been replaced by one (neo-racist) which explains asymmetric power relations as the inalienable right of every community to choose its own form of life (Volkan 1997). This 'neo-racism' combines, as Bauman (2001: 135) has noted, the right to be different with the right to indifference, thus justifying the status quo and current structures of power. This means both a continued belief in modernity as progress and a re-fortification of cultural boundaries as people feel increasingly dislocated (Bauman 2001: 141).

In India, the revival of Hindu nationalism has implied a conscious decision to reject Muslim (and other) traditions in favour of the invented traditions of India's pre-colonial past. This has left many minority communities to fend for themselves and to strengthen their own collective identities. Multiculturalist policies have, in other words, helped minority groups to cultivate their language and cultures, while they have been ineffectual in helping these groups in their struggles against discriminatory policies. The way secularism has been implemented in India resembles multicultural policies in the West, as secularism has worked to affirm religious rights for groups rather than acting as a separation between the state and religion. This has often forced the state to intervene in religious matters, thus reinforcing religious boundaries instead of obliterating them. The problem with a number of these policies, as Nancy Fraser has noted (in Bauman 2001), is the attempt to decouple the cultural politics of difference from the social

politics of redistribution when, in reality, we need both recognition and redistribution if structurally marginalized migrants and other minorities are to avoid institutional and structural exclusion.

WOMEN AS SYMBOLS IN RELIGIOUS AND NATIONALIST DISCOURSE(S)

Policies of multiculturalism have thus given added weight to discourses on nationalism and religion and have served as vehicles to interpret security threats in terms of terrorism and migration. As a result we have seen an intensified search for stable communities where gender has come to constitute the 'essence' of identity construction in relation to both nationalist and religious discourse(s). This is especially the case as these discourses are confronted by, as well as dependent on, various narratives of modernity (see Kinnvall 2002a). In this regard, we are witnessing an increasing tension between women's emancipation and modernity and discourses on religious fundamentalism. Both the discourse on fundamentalism and that of modernity affect women's ability to determine their own destinies. By inventing or reinventing tradition, religious fundamentalists define the religious boundaries in ways that reflect the power of the dominant patriarchy – thus confining women to certain traditional (religious) roles. The notion of patriarchy has been widely used by feminists to describe the autonomous system of women's subordination in society, as discussed earlier. Although widely used, one should note that the term has some inherent problems. Implicitly, patriarchy refers to differences based on sex rather than gender, which ignores the fact that women are not usually simply passive recipients and non-participants in the determination of gender relations. Nor are women oppressed in exactly the same ways across different cultures and contexts. Rather, we understand the notion of patriarchy as 'cultural constructs and structural relations that privilege the initiative of males and elders in directing the lives of others' (quoted in Tohidi and Bayes 2001: 18). This is similar to Nancy Fraser's (2003) description of androcentrism as referring to institutionalized values that elevate and privilege traits associated with a kind of masculinity, as discussed in the introduction.

In the attempt to valorise the traditional, Sunder Rajan argues that it is common to make women and girls the preservers of *a true* tradition, religion or ethnic culture – often expressed in opposition to modernity. At the heart of this is the myth of *a* common, essential and ahistorical origin that

confirms *the* homogeneous tradition of *the* community's culture (Sunder Rajan 1993; see also Desai 2002). This pre-occupation with tradition and culture among religious fundamentalists is intimately linked with social reproduction to prevent the decline or death of one's cultural heritage among the next generation (Yuval-Davis 1997). In their preoccupation with Hindu weakness and impotence, for instance, Hindu nationalists have consistently expressed their anxiety about declining Hindu numbers and Hindus as a 'dying race'. Some book examples of this include U. N. Mukherjee's *Hindus: A Dying Race* (1909) and Swami Shraddhanand's *Hindu Sanghathan: Saviour of a Dying Race* (1924). As Manisha Sethi noted in regard to the politics surrounding independence in 1947: 'Physical impotency thus came to stand in for political impotency and inertia. Within this discourse, the Muslim with his alleged "hyper fertility" and "proclivity for violence" came to occupy the position of the predominant Other – more dangerous and hated than even the Britisher' (2002: 1547). One of this chapter's authors (Kinnvall) conducted a significant number of interviews with Hindus in Northern India between 1996 and 2002, representing different regions, class, caste and gender (Kinnvall 2006). The other author (Hansson) conducted field studies among Hindus and non-Hindu groups across India during the period 2004–2006. One of the predominant views among many of the Hindu men, who at the time sympathized with the Hindu right, was an aggressive stance on everything associated with Muslims. Such responses were often framed in the context of a 'Muslim takeover' and related to acts of transmigration and globalization. As the following quote illustrates:

There is a rise in Muslims in India. They are spreading and migrating from abroad because of Gulf money, the breaking up of the Soviet Union, the Talibans. What is happening is that while Hindus have small families, Muslims have large ones which affect the rise in Muslims in this country (interview with a 54-year-old Hindu male in Ahmadabad).

This discourse on Hindu impotence and Muslim fertility has been recreated in various versions of Hindu nationalism. It has been taken as an excuse for a more aggressive and disciplined Hindu male as voiced in RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh – the Association of National Volunteers)⁷ propaganda and camp activities. In such propaganda there is a constant preoccupation with the Hindu nation as being far more tolerant with regard to issues of sexuality than the nation proposed by the Muslims (using Bangladesh and Pakistan as examples). The magazine *Organiser*,

for instance, which can be seen as the representative voice of the RSS, frequently has stories about Muslim women wanting to marry Hindu men to become part of the 'liberal' Hindu society (Sethi 2002: 1547). Hence in the search for the Hindu nation, it is the female that needs protection from the demonized hyper-sexual other – in this case the Muslim. A VHP (i.e. Vishwa Hindu Parishad, or World Council of Hindus) leaflet that was distributed during the Gujarat riots in 2002, in an attempt to alarm Hindus in the area, is a good illustration of this:

Caution Hindus! Beware of inhuman deeds of Muslims. Muslims are destroying the Hindu community by slaughterhouses, slaughtering cows and making Hindu girls elope. Crime, drugs, terrorism are Muslim empire (quoted in Pinto 2002: 294).

The female, as Tanika Sarkar (1999) has noted, is portrayed as the source of authenticity, of nation-making and of freedom from repression by external others (i.e. Muslim, Christian and also Western forces). Hence, Hindu nationalists often praise the nature of Brahminical Hinduism and it is common to hear Hindu nationalists (women included) complain that Muslims may marry four wives in accordance with Islam, while Hindus are not allowed to perform the ancient practice of *sati* (widow sacrifice – a long celebrated, but now illegal, practice of female self-sacrifice within the Hindu tradition). This Hindu nationalist rhetoric is often combined with a criticism of women's employment, divorce, widow remarriage and sexual preferences like lesbianism (Sarkar 1999; Kolodner 1995; Sethi 2002). As one man in Pushkar expressed it:

Whatever happens in India today is the Muslims' fault, like robbing, raping, blasts, bombs, demolitions, etc. It is only the Hindus that are affected by family planning, not the Muslims as they have their personal law and are allowed to have four wives (interview with a 49-year-old Brahmin male, owner of a jewellery store in Pushkar).

Underlying this rhetoric is the search for a proper 'national character'. Such a 'national character' is almost exclusively race *and* gender based, concentrating upon the male body and sharpening gender differences as a result. The national stereotype represents those who protect the inside from outside aggressors at the same time as it discriminates against those who look 'different', making looks and appearance a major differentiation (see George L. Mosse 1995: 168). This idea of the nation as providing an inside

is closely connected to the idea of the family, and is based on the primordial notion that individuals 'naturally' belong to a family, and consequently they 'naturally' belong to the nation. Those who are not defined as members (e.g. because of lack of citizenship) are defined as being outside the nation or not being full members of the nation. As a discourse, it constructs minorities as assumed deviants from the 'normal' and excludes them from important power resources (Yuval-Davis 1997: 11). Identity formation in most cultures is thus modelled on ideals of what it means to be a man or a woman, where manhood is traditionally framed around courage and leadership – a man is a fighter, warrior, protector, hero, provider and initiator. Those who do not live up to these acclaimed ideals are perceived as weak, emotional and less capable of rational decision-making – as mere 'women'. As Castles and Davidson (2000; see also Mojab 2001) have noted, the control of female sexuality and reproduction is crucial to nationalism, something which renders resistance difficult as charges of national betrayal loom large in people's consciousnesses.

Traditional gender relations thus come repeatedly to constitute the 'essence' of cultures as ways of life to be passed from generation to generation (Yuval-Davis 1997). For many people this involves defining the kinds of behaviour they find unacceptable in modernizing societies. This can be illustrated by two male Hindu voices in Ahmadabad and Jaipur when discussing the effects of the media:

What I mostly dislike about foreign influences is Western fashion and how it has made Indian women starting to wear Western clothes. (Interview with a 32-year-old Hindu salesman in Ahmadabad)

TV has affected people in a bad way. We pick up the wrong things from the West, like fashion, sex, morality and ways of dressing. In Mahabharata it was a fight for truth. In today's television scenes women are always raped or abused – we learn the bad things rather than the good things. (Interview with a male Hindu driver in Jaipur)

As a number of post-colonial feminists have pointed out in relation to Hindu nationalism, it is much easier to make an idea powerful if it can be framed in the discourse of 'anti-Western', since that allows for the glorification (and unification) of pre-colonial culture (see e.g. Spivak 1993; Sunder Rajan 1993; Sarkar 1999; Kinnvall 2002). 'Women in their "proper" behaviour, their "proper" clothing, embody the line which signifies the

collectivity's boundaries' (Yuval-Davis 1997: 46). As Fatima Mernissi and Karen Browne have noted:

In groups led by men whose identity is constructed in important ways by their confrontation with an external 'other', great weight falls on the need to control the other 'others' (women) in their midst (cited in Tohidi and Bayes 2001: 39).

These men, as described by Mernissi and Browne, constitute what we refer to as 'hegemonic traditionalists', those who take upon themselves the task of defining and interpreting 'proper' behaviour as a way to assert their authority over the community. Various venues, such as schools or religious buildings, often become places for hegemonic traditionalists and their followers to re-interpret the collectivity's boundaries and assert control over 'their' 'womenandchildren' (to use Cynthia Enloe's (1991) terminology which implies the treatment of women as children). 'Tradition' is here similar to the concept Tohidi and Bayes (2001: 37) use to refer to fundamentalists as members of new religio-political movements that posit themselves, in one way or another, as political as well as ideological and socio-cultural alternatives to secular modern states and discourses. What these fundamentalists choose as being important parts of the past are both highly selective and male-centred. As Tohidi and Bayes (2001) have noted in regard to various fundamentalist groups, certain patterns of conservative and regressive gender ideologies seem to be similar despite striking differences in aims and goals. Hence, control of women, sex segregation (physically or conceptually), and the use of physical and spatial means to obscure feminine sexuality are often part of a traditionalist discourse. Women (and girls) thus become the embodied representatives of tradition, religion and, perhaps most importantly, of the nation. This is what Yuval-Davis (1997) refers to as the 'burden of representation'. The fact is that women are made to represent national unity and distinctiveness, as reflected in nationalist discourse.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN HINDU NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

In the prevailing nationalist discourse in India, women as symbols for national unity can be found in the relationship between the state and religious groups as well as in the relationship between Hindus and Muslims. The state has been asked to protect religious groups in two ways: through

the demands made by spokespersons of the Muslim community for the exemption of the Muslim religious minority from the (secular) Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC), and through demands by the Hindu right for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC). The problem with these laws in regard to the status of women as symbols is probably best illustrated by the Shah Bano case from 1986, discussed earlier.

This episode had some serious political consequences. It provided a propaganda tool for the growing Hindutva movement, which could now argue that the government was only pseudo-secular and actually pro-Muslim, thus questioning its legitimacy in view of the secular constitution of India. More importantly, however, it served as a good illustration of how women and their bodies have become pawns in the struggle between the secular state and religion, as well as between different religious communities (see Kinnvall 2006). This is true about Indian women in general, but is particularly striking in the case of Muslim women. There are nearly sixty million Muslim women in India, part of one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. Despite these significant numbers, they remain absent from and silent in the worlds of politics, the professions, the bureaucracy, the universities and the public and private sectors. At the same time, they probably constitute the most politicized group in the Indian context. Not as women in their own right, however, but by being subsumed and then made visible in the debate about minority rights versus minority appeasement, personal law versus uniform laws, secularism versus communalism and modernity versus communitarian traditions. The government, as Hasan (2000: 271–280) notes, has thus succeeded in constructing an identity where women's rights are secondary to religious rights.

This became even more pronounced under the previous Hindu nationalist government when it redefined Indian nationalism to become a reinvented version of Hindu cultural nationalism. The Shah Bano case illustrates how the 'woman' (in this case the Muslim woman) needs to find protection through the realization of a Hindu Indian state, a *Hindu Rashtra*. This is built upon the belief that a 'real' Indian nation existed before the 'invasion' of the Muslims and before the colonization of the British. Implicit in the struggle between the pre-colonial and the colonial nation is the idea that the Hindu nation is also an amorphous female (the nation as mother) who through her absorptive power is able to threaten both the aggressive Muslim male and the rational Western male (see Inden

2000: 86–87). At the same time, however, only the Hindu state can protect ‘her’. Hence, between all these constructions stands the ‘real’ (Muslim and Hindu) woman, over whom the fighting takes place. This woman is the object of contention at the same time as she represents the essence of the unified body – the nation. As argued in the introduction to this book, a nation-state’s propounding of a ‘national woman’ tends to rely upon local, simplified images of women that are generated by ideas about masculinity, femininity, reproduction and the survival of the nation. This can be illustrated by the words of Jawaharlal Nehru; ‘(i)t is curious how one cannot resist the tendency to give an anthropomorphic form to a country... India becomes *Bharat Mata*, Mother India, a beautiful lady, very old, cruelly treated by aliens and outsiders, and calling upon her children to protect her’ (quoted in Tickner 1996: 154).

In searching for the nation, Indian nationalism has, in other words, needed to demonstrate that the nation it wishes to create has always existed. It is this belief in the primordial quality of the nation-state that has served to underscore both the figure of gender in the postcolonial encounter and to buttress the argument that there was no alternative than to rely on the Westphalian notion of the nation-state⁸. There was nothing left to imagine, as Chatterjee (1993) has so succinctly expressed it. However, Chatterjee also argues that another nation, or domain of national culture, existed in the nationalist project that more closely represented the ‘inner’ domain, the spiritual, from which the colonial state had been excluded. It is here, he argues, that nationalism launched its most creative and historically significant project, that of fashioning a modern national culture that was not Western. Chatterjee sees this domain as the true and essential one, as the imagined nation which remains sovereign even when it is in the hands of a colonial power.

Two areas are distinguished in Chatterjee’s account of this inner domain; one is language and the other is family. In the former, language, he talks about language as a zone over which the nation had to declare its sovereignty by producing something distinctly Indian, such as an Indian culture that was different from Western culture. The latter, the family, was to account for a new patriarchy where the new woman was to be modern, but not Western. This required women to exhibit certain signs of national tradition, different from those displayed in the West (Chatterjee 1993: 6–10). Chatterjee’s line of arguing is close to that of so-called postcolonial ‘nativists’. Hence, neo-Gandhian cultural nationalists such as Ashis Nandy and T. N. Madan have

argued that rather than separating facts from values in line with Western secular thinking, there is a need for a proper understanding of pre-colonial religious culture (see Desai 2002; Juergensmeyer 1996; Smith 1996). In this regard, Madan has expressed the hope that traditional culture can become the basis for a new Indian unity. Nandy has insisted on making a clear distinction between the Hindutva type of political ideology and Hinduism, where the latter is regarded as a 'faith and a way of life' that permeates Indian culture. In describing this culture, Nandy (1983: 84–85) emphasizes how the colonial encounter was designed to hide the real self – the deepest social consciousness of the victims – from the outsider. Partha Chatterjee, in his emphasis on the 'real' inner domain, joins this culturalist discourse when he wishes to launch a new historical nationalist project to 'fashion a "modern" national culture that is nevertheless not Western' (Juergensmeyer 1996: 133).

One problem with this emphasis on the inner domain as 'real' is the belief in a unified inner story which only reflects the modular nation as one in which differences can be glossed over. Chatterjee's inner spiritual nation is also a re-imagination of a unified body. Furthermore, as argued by Sugata Bose (1997: 73), Chatterjee's analytical binarism 'sharply separating inner spiritual from outer material domain leads to an ahistorical exaggeration of the "sovereignty" of anti-colonial nationalism in the former and its deterministic subservience in the latter'. Bose also notes that this emphasis on an inner domain misses some important aspects concerning the relationship between nationalist thought and colonial knowledge at a time when the figure of gender became central to the colonial encounter (1997: 56–59).

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN FUNDAMENTALIST MOVEMENTS

The leaders of the Indian National Congress did not see a contradiction in professing an Indian nation that rested on Hindu religious tradition, as this tradition was viewed as tolerant and as based on indigenous religious pluralism (Deol 2000: 40). This choice of intertwining religion and politics was heavily influenced by independence leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi who employed a discourse that often resembled the Hindu notion of dharmic obligation. His continual reference to 'Mother India' intentionally invoked characteristics of Hindu religious worship⁹, despite the fact that he was a champion of Hindu–Muslim unity; he often took a communitarian

view. Gandhi was thus ambivalent in his calls for religious tolerance and universalism since he often based such universalism on Hindu beliefs and practices.

It was this inclusive Hindu tolerance that alienated the Muslim League, and was at the heart of the two-nation theory articulated by M. A. Jinnah, which suggested that Muslims and Hindus were separate nations, offering Hindus and Muslims a nationality associated with a socio-religious community. As a policy Hindu tolerance became manifest in the notion of secularism as *sarva dharma samabhava* – equal respect for all religions. The Indian concept of secularism has thus been described as an idealization and romanticization of Western nineteenth-century universalist ideas (Panikkar 1997: 18–19), because it maintains religion in play and enhances religiosity by preserving and projecting religious identities. This, it is argued, has increased the social distance between religious communities.¹⁰

The notion of secularism was difficult to combine with the ‘nation as mother’ discourse, as it left little space for the accommodation and expression of religious diversity between and within religious groups. The tendency to conflate mother country with Mother Goddess (as in Bankim’s song *Bande Mataram*), was not popular among the Muslims, since it tended to sanctify Hindu narratives at the expense of other alternative stories. The ‘nation as Mother as goddess’ has thus been an important source for Hindu nationalism. In symbolic terms, it has taken the physical shape of the cow and the female, which together have communicated a great variety of cosmological constructs. These constructs, as van der Veer (1996; 1999) points out, are used to reinforce the notion of the nation in bodily (essentialist) form as human beings depending entirely on the cow in life as well as in death, as the child depends on the mother. While the cow refers to family and nation alike, her protection refers to patriarchal authority and to the Hindu state, the ‘rightful kingdom of Rama’ (*ram rajya*).¹¹ It is within this logic of religious discourse that the protection of the cow and Hindu women become the symbols of the nation-state in opposition to the Muslims.

This focus in Hindu religious discourse on the protection of Hindu women seems to be at odds with the rise of women’s militancy in the Hindutva movement. In this sense, we are confronted with a dilemma. Not only have Hindu women participated in large gatherings organized by the RSS–VHP–BJP¹² combine, but they have also been engaged in actual incidents of communal and even sexual aggression against Muslims. Hindu

communal forces have been able to mobilize women far more easily when adopting the ideology of the modern version of Kali or Durga (the main goddesses in the Hindu pantheon who are both motherly and warrior-like) than has been the case for women's movements in general (Agnes 1995). The fact that women have found it easier to direct external violence against Muslim men and women than to protest against violent husbands or rapists from their own community reflects how both gender and communal relationships are shaped by asymmetrical power structures. Such existing power structures also reinforce stereotypes of the 'Indian family' (read Hindu family) as a haven, far from the materialist and modern world, where women are respected and honoured (see Palriwala and Agnihotri 1996).

It is within this context that we must understand Hindu nationalist women, '*Ram bhaktas*', as seemingly virulent and avenging while not actually upsetting the traditional patriarchal hierarchies of personal relationships. In this sense, women activists within the Hindu Right are not a new phenomenon, but can be traced to the cultural nationalism of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, which created a particular image of Indian (Hindu) womanhood. Within the discourse of 'nation as mother as goddess', women were seen as breeders and their bodies as vessels or reservoirs of future Hindu warriors. Rather than being passive victims, women were supposed to become empowered to self-defence (*atmaraksha*) by manifesting valour (*virya*). 'A new image of woman embellished by arms and preying on the predatory Muslims began to be cultivated' (Sethi 2002: 1547; see also Sarkar 2001).

This image of the new woman is closely connected to the sexual obsession with allegedly ultra-virile Muslim male bodies and fertile female ones found among many Hindu nationalists. Stories and rumours (often circulated in the vernacular press or passed on by word of mouth) of Muslims' uncontrolled breeding and imminent outnumbering of the Hindu majority have whipped up feelings about Muslim fertility rates among Hindu nationalists (Sarkar 2002), as discussed earlier. This anxiety regarding a comparatively less potent Hindu maleness is related to the rise of women in the Hindu nationalist movement. As explained by Manisha Sethi (2002: 1548):

By their (Hindu mothers and wives) courageous and brave deeds, they were to strike terror in the hearts of the Muslims and evoke awe and inspire action among the Hindu. As wives their bravery was to shame and shake their men out of slothful cowardliness by putting into question their masculinity

and ability to protect their women and religion. /.../ As mothers, they were perfectly suited to nurture in the young the qualities of fearlessness, patriotism, love for the nation and of course hate for the Muslim.

This reproductive quality of women is stressed by both the *Rashtra Sevika Samiti*¹³ and the *Durga Vahini*, the female wings of RSS and VHP. These organizations experienced a dramatic growth in 1989–1990, when the *Sangh Parivar*¹⁴ provided them with previously unknown prominence. Thousands of *karsevikas* (women volunteers of the Hindutva movement) participated in the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992 (see note 7), and were active in the bloody riots that swept across India in its aftermath. The women of the *Sangh* came mostly from conservative, urban, middle-class and upper-caste backgrounds and were for the first time entering the work force, as well as the educational and political sectors. Although many of these women criticized male domination, discrimination and violence against women, there was a tension within the movement itself. Much of its structure was, however, generally contained within a conservative discourse – ‘a modernized and somewhat loose and flexible version of brahminical patriarchy’ (Sarkar 1999: 141). In this regard *Samiti* elders were (and are) concerned about the decadent influence of the West, especially as it affects young girls.

Apart from such concerns, the emphasis among women Hindu activists has mostly been on women’s unique position as mothers and wives. Through this position they have the power to infuse Hindu values in the family and especially to children. This in turn provides them with the possibility to shape the nation and its citizens. It is not possible, in other words, to see the growth of women Hindu activists as separate from the Hindu discourse on ‘mother as nation’, *Bharat Mata*. Devotion to the ‘motherland’ goes hand in hand with traditional concerns of service to the family, defence of the self, religion and the community. Within this context, India’s ‘ancient’ and ‘glorious’ culture is celebrated as the main vehicle for women’s emancipation – often contrasted to secular feminism or as a way to make women turn away from Western women’s movements, or as a celebration of Hinduism vis-à-vis Islam. In this regard, Hinduism is celebrated as providing an accepting and tolerant environment for Hindu women’s autonomy and self-realization. This is then contrasted with the view of Islam as being disrespectful and oppressive towards women, thus implying that oppressed Muslim women can only be saved by enlightened Hindu women (see Hansen 1995; Sarkar 1999, 2001; Sethi 2002).

This stereotypical view of Islam and of Muslim men can be particularly powerful when combined with traditional female notions of selflessness and chastity. The explicit sexual imagery used by some women Sangh leaders in their attempts to provoke Hindu men to prove their 'manliness' and 'virility' is evidence of this tendency. In the words of Sahnvi Rithambhara, a young *sannyasin* (female ascetic):

If you do not awaken, cows will be slaughtered everywhere. You will be responsible for these catastrophes, for history will say, Hindus were cowards. Accept the challenge...¹⁵

This appeal to Hindu men to attack Muslims provides an explicit connection between the Hindu nationalist movement in general and women activists in particular. In reference to the recent Gujarat riots¹⁶, for instance, Tanika Sarkar (2002) explains this preoccupation with manliness and virility (and lack of) – the sexualization of self and other – as being partly responsible for the horrific killings of Muslim women and children. The aim, according to Sarkar, was not only to possess and dishonour these women and their men and to 'taste' what had been denied to them, but also to get an explanation of what they thought was Muslim virility. In Sarkar's interpretation, the cruelty involved in the physical destruction of womb and vagina symbolized an end to the sources of pleasure, reproduction and nurture for Muslim men and children. The killing of Muslim children signified an end to Muslim growth, while the burning of foetuses was aimed at achieving a symbolic destruction of future generations, of the very future of Muslims themselves (see also Dutt 2002).

Although it would be difficult to show any direct involvement by women activists in the horrific actions against Muslim women in Gujarat, women activists are part of the same Hindu nationalist discourse as the Hindutva movement in general.¹⁷ The Hindu nationalist discourse is always played out in relation to a demonized Other, and allows women to become militant activists at times of crisis, while being nurturing mothers and obedient wives when the crisis is over (Sethi 2002). The symbolic function of women is reflected in the imagery of *Bharat Mata*, which serves as a justifier for who is included in the nation (the *Hindu Rashtra*) and who is not. As we have discussed, women have become symbols of the religious nation both in the struggles between Hindus and Muslims, and in the negotiations between their group representatives and the state. In a similar way, women have become the bearers of tradition in Western multicultural settings.

Feminists in the West, like feminists in India, have been grappling with how to confront this tendency without alienating the women involved.¹⁸

CONCLUSIONS

It is within this religious national process of identity construction that gender becomes a contestable domain. As demonstrated by the example from the Gujarat riots in 2002, 'woman as the other' emerges within the discourses of various politics of recognition. The use of 'woman as other' becomes a way for representatives of groups, and sometimes even states, to reassert control in times of crisis. As symbols of motherhood, women come to represent a combined 'essence' of the past, of tradition, culture and of the nation. It should be emphasized, however, that such an essence is always constructed and never primordial, thus going against the view that identity is something one is born with. Instead, identity must be seen as a 'process of becoming' (Hall 1997), where women's many overlapping identities reflect current patriarchal power structures in any society.

At the same time it should be noted how this process of religious identity construction also opens up arenas for the contestation of meanings and definitions. As we have shown in this chapter, Indian feminists and gender scholars are actively engaged in this contestation. They continue to protest against the essentialized, often negative, representations of women and other groups, giving voice to protest and sometimes perhaps even compelling the state to recognize that there exist numerous sites of conflict. This emphasis on sites of conflict recognizes the possibility of changing existent gender relations in Indian society. However, one should be aware of the danger of reactionary social forces free-riding on feminist initiatives, or of unforeseen alliances springing up between women's groups and reactionary social forces. For instance, Indian women's fight against pornography is often sympathetically viewed by the moral right; their demand for a ban on abortion following sex-determination tests is supported by right-to-lifers; their demand for a common civil code is endorsed by Hindu nationalists; some women activists in Gujarat and elsewhere support violent agitation against Muslims. The question of gendered inequality can thus be deflected on to other areas in official discourses and representations. At the same time, hegemonic history writing is being scrutinized as women and other groups increasingly question such usages and the labels and stereotyped categorizations associated with them.

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AUTHORS' NOTE

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NOTES

- 1 We use the term 'fundamentalist' to refer to new religio-political movements that pose themselves as alternatives to secular modern states and discourses. In India, the term 'communalist' is often used to refer to a similar phenomenon. The term 'communalism' brings to the fore the sectarian politics of community-based shared experiences and beliefs, regardless of whether such beliefs are based on religious, nationalist, linguistic, caste or other cultural constructs. The Hindu Right is often described in a modernist discourse similar to the fundamentalism above, meaning that it is irretrievably linked to post-Enlightenment forms of Western knowledge. Although there is some truth in

this, the problem with this interpretation is the tendency to see modernity as the main problem rather than Hindu nationalism itself. This fails to address the problematic tendencies of the Hindu Right in regard to its violent, authoritarian, majoritarian and anti-democratic practices (see Sarkar 1999).

- 2 Part of the problem of Hindu nationalism can be found in the way secularism came to be the guiding principle of post-independence India. This is discussed later in this chapter.
- 3 Since its beginnings in the 1920s the women's movement in India has been a highly diverse phenomenon (see Kumar 1993). At the same time, only a limited number of women's organizations were publicly visible. This situation changed dramatically in the early 1980s.
- 4 Sharia refers to traditional Islamic law, also known as Allah's Law. Like most religious cultures, Islam classically drew no distinction between religious and secular life. Hence Sharia covers not only religious rituals, but many aspects of day-to-day life.
- 5 For a more recent discussion of gender and Indian multiculturalism in the colonial/postcolonial and global contexts, see Roy 2005.
- 6 For a discussion of the concept of identity-signifier as a term referring to those aspects of the relationship between self and identity that take precedence at any particular time in an on-going identity construction, see Kinnvall 2004b.
- 7 The RSS (the Association of National Volunteers) was created in 1925 by the Brahmin K. B. Hedgewar. Since its formation, the basic structural unit for the RSS has been the *shakha* (literally 'branch'), which is a group consisting of around 50 persons – mostly children and adolescents – who assemble daily for sessions of ideological education and ritualized physical training. Members (*swayamsevak*s) from the upper castes are dominating in these assemblies. The aim of the *shakha* is to become the focus of unification for the Hindu nation (see Jaffrelot 1996; Bhatt and Mukta 2000).
- 8 The idea of the nation-state is commonly described as originating from the Treaty of Westphalia concluded in 1648 in what was to become Germany. Since then it has become an almost universal principle, built upon the intellectual foundation that a nation should be the basis for identifying distinctive groups of people who are to produce their own government. Nationalism, in this classical version, has been considered the movement in which the nation-state is regarded as paramount for the realization of the social, economic and cultural aspirations of 'a people', characterized by a feeling of community based on common descent, language and religion (see e.g. Giddens 1984; Calhoun 1997).
- 9 See Kolodner 1995, who further argues that Gandhi attempted to broker a compromise between secular and religious forces by applying the Hindu ethical norms of *satyagraha* (the force of truth) and *ahimsa* (non-violence) to the nationalist movement.
- 10 This argument has been made and developed by many scholars (see Panikkar 1997; Deol 2000; Bose 1997; Kolodner 1995; Bidway et al. 1996).
- 11 This emphasis on *Ram rajya* must be understood in light of what happened in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh in 1992, when the Babri mosque was demolished, an event that had repercussions throughout India. Although Hindu nationalism possesses relatively deep roots in India, the movement has taken a very different form during the last decade. Never before could Hindu nationalists have been able to mobilize 300,000 Hindus to engage in religious activities as they did in Ayodhya. The mosque itself, which originated in the 1500s, is (in Hindu nationalist discourse) supposed to have

- been built on the Hindu god Rama's birthplace (between 900,000 to 5,000 years ago, depending on the 'priest' consulted, as Kolodner (1995) has noted), and Hindu nationalists have long argued that the mosque should be demolished and a temple built there instead. The VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) instigated a campaign to 'liberate' the site of Ramjanambhoomi from the Babri Masjid 'occupation' in 1984. In many ways it has been a ticking bomb since independence, but tension increased during Rajiv Gandhi's rule for various reasons. For details on the Ayodhya event, see Gopal 1991; Dutta and Sarkar 1994; Kolodner 1995; Davis 1996; Desai 2002.
- 12 The VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad – World Council of Hindus) is a non-governmental organization that was formed in 1964 to spread 'Hindu ethical spiritual values' and to establish links with Hindus in other countries. The BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party – Indian People's Party) is the political arm of the RSS and was established in 1980.
 - 13 The Rashtra Sevika Samiti is the female wing of the RSS. It was founded in 1936 with daily shakhas that provided physical martial arts as well as ideological training. It remained, however, a marginalized organization up until the late 1980s.
 - 14 The *Sangh Parivar* refers to the 'brotherhood' of interconnected Hindu nationalist groups affiliated with the RSS, which includes the BJP, VHP and others – also known as the RSS family.
 - 15 Speech by Sadhvi Rithambara, who together with Uma Bharati has emerged as a powerful icon of the Hindu nationalist movement (quoted in Sethi 2002: 1551). Rithambara (as a member of the Durga Vahini) was a prominent figure during the Ramjanambhoomi campaign, when she openly encouraged violence against Muslims: 'Khun Kharaba hona hai to ekbar ho jane do' (If there has to be bloodshed, let it happen once and for all) (quoted in Sarkar 2001). Here it is important to note the extent to which RSS ideologues have been openly critical of what they refer to as Mahatma Gandhi's effeminate policies, which they argue have been responsible for turning Hindu society impotent and imbecile.
 - 16 On 27 February 2002, the Sabermati Express pulled out of Godhra railway station. As it left, the train was stoned by an angry mob and some twenty minutes later, a coach had been burned to ashes along with fifty-eight passengers. The passengers on the train were said to be *kar sevaks* (volunteers of Hindutva) who were returning from Ayodhya after attending a Ram temple-related religious ceremony. Who the attackers were is unknown but somebody decided that all Muslims had to be taught a lesson. Retaliation was swift and merciless, even clinical, and was particularly significant in its cruelty – often directed against women and children – and over the next few days more than 2000 Muslims were killed throughout the state of Gujarat. For full descriptions, eye-witness accounts and thorough analysis, see Sarkar 2002; Sodhi and Mukarji 2002; Varadarajan 2002.
 - 17 It should be noted that women activists seem to be declining in numbers. For instance, in the early 1990s the Samiti was engaged in a variety of programmes, such as running courses for newly married Samiti members and orientation courses for wives of RSS men. All these programmes have now been discontinued. Socially and geographically there has also been a decline and the Samiti admits that it has still not succeeded in recruiting rural women (see Sarkar 1999).
 - 18 See for example the debate in Okin's (1999) influential book regarding the extent to which multiculturalism is bad for women.

Chapter 4

Globalization, Growth and Gender: Poor Workers and Vendors in Urban Vietnam

Anne Jerneck

INTRODUCTION

As an agrarian, but rapidly industrializing society with increased socio-economic inequality, Vietnam provides an interesting case for studying how increased marketization, economic growth and structural change impact the livelihoods and ‘careers’ of urban workers and vendors. By focusing on conditions relating to work and income in the formal and informal economies in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh Cities (HCMC), this chapter highlights low-income-earners’ labour situation in globalizing Vietnam as well as their perceived options, constraints and sacrifices. Livelihood refers to a person’s access to material and immaterial assets as well as his or her agency and achievements in relation to income-generating activities.¹ ‘Career’ is here understood as job opportunities, ambitions and aspirations which reflect order as well as contingencies in a person’s life (see Bradley 1996). Creating a career and a livelihood is thus a dynamic process which involves continuity and change.

In my discussion, I take into account four global–local processes of importance for industrialization and social change. Firstly, the massive flow of foreign investments from rich to poor countries; secondly, the international division of labour; thirdly, labour migration to urban areas within or across national borders; and fourthly, the expansion of urban formal and informal labour markets (Dicken 1998). Together these global processes induce changes in local structures, institutions and human agency. In respect to Vietnam, the global processes are indicated by an expansion of foreign-financed labour-intensive industries (especially in

Hanoi and HCMC), growing migration and urbanization and the creation of informal income and work opportunities amongst the urban poor.

Gendered (in)equality and (in)security in the livelihoods of urban low-income-earners is a concern to which I pay special attention. By drawing on Naila Kabeer (1999) and Ruth Lister (2004), who show how entitlements and capabilities are gendered, I identify the gendered aspects of the 'careers' of the poor in urban Vietnam. I thus argue that gender is intertwined with work and income in terms of the capabilities of 'doing' and 'getting by' (seeking, grasping, losing or creating short-term income opportunities) versus 'achieving' and 'getting out' (long-term plans for future work including intentions and actions to change one's social status).

In order to identify how working conditions and formal income opportunities in an Export Processing Zone (EPZ) are shaped by globalization compared with a domestically oriented urban labour market, I apply a comparative perspective. I employ a 'factory floor perspective' on the working life in the Tan Thuan Export Processing Zone in HCMC to compare those findings with other formal or informal workplaces either in HCMC or Hanoi (Rigg 2003). Observations and interviews carried out in Vietnam provide the data. I have studied various labour markets and interviewed a broad variety of workers and vendors as well as people in academia, media, governmental units, women's organisations, labour unions and factories. In total, nearly two hundred female and male workers and vendors, aged between 17 and 70 were interviewed.² All the interviews were done in Hanoi or HCMC (in March and November 2000, and in March 2001) by the aid of Vietnamese research assistants who did the language translation.

Now let me briefly outline some characteristics of globalization of relevance for Vietnam as they impact gendered inequalities in the formal and informal economy.

GLOBALIZATION OF STATE, MARKET AND LABOUR

When countries deregulate labour to become flexible and competitive in the fight for foreign capital, the world undergoes a 'Great Transformation' (Munck 2002) in terms of a global division of labour with an increased influx of both formal and informal workers (Barrientos and Kabeer 2004; Standing 1999). The globalization of labour amplifies gendered insecurity and inequality. Women's share of labour is increasing not only in formal

employment but also in low-paid, casual and largely unprotected work (UNDP 2005). This causes at the same time a qualitative *labour divide* in formal and informal labour as well as an economic *gender divide* (Benería 2003; Breman 2003).

Apart from gender, there are other aspects of inequality and insecurity related to labour. Across the globe there is a sharp *generational divide* because youths have fewer income opportunities and suffer more than double the average unemployment rate (ILO 2005; WB 2005). In countries with a young age structure and a high absolute number of youths, like in Vietnam, a lack of jobs for the young may cause both individual and social problems. Yet, it is notable that according to international and Asian figures, the share of youths in Vietnam's labour force is high, whereas the share of child labour is low and decreasing (ILO 2005: 27). The global division of labour, in addition, highlights alterations of the ways in which global–local and urban–rural spaces and locations are used and understood by people (Drummond and Rydström 2004; Pettman 1996). Although rural poverty in industrializing societies is deeper and more widespread than urban poverty, thereby creating a *spatial divide*, accelerating migration and urbanization, driven by people's hopes of achieving better living conditions in urban areas, tend to minimize the rural–urban gap (UNHSP 2003). However, such hopes are challenged because many migrants newly arrived from the rural areas do not have formal employment, decent housing, social security and the necessary networks, while also being under pressure to provide for themselves and to remit money to family and relatives (Potter et al. 2004).

Even though higher wages and productive jobs in Vietnam made urban poverty decrease dramatically from 25 to 6 per cent from 1993 to 2003 (ILO 2005), the prospect of a continued rapid expansion of the urban labour market is bleak. High productivity gains make GDP grow faster than the creation of new jobs, thus causing a situation of jobless growth (ILO 2005). Moreover, market liberalization and lower social security trigger the influx of migrant job seekers, who put pressure on formal employment and fuel the competition for income opportunities in the already crowded informal economy (Van Arkadie and Mallon 2003). With widespread rural poverty and high urban unemployment due to lay-offs from state-owned enterprises, Vietnam's employment situation causes inequality and insecurity (ILO 2005: 11; WB 1999).

Capitalism may increase literacy rates, health standards and life expectancy, but global capitalism also creates great diversity in outcomes

and experiences for different regions, localities and people (see Harvey 2000; WB 2001). Despite efforts to reduce poverty, we live, according to the World Bank, in a world of 'poverty amid plenty' (WB 2001: 3). This inequality relates to labour and labour-intensive industrialization in Eastern Asia. Post-1945 capitalism in Eastern Asia included land reforms, profound agrarian change and labour-intensive industrialization which brought 'growth with equity' and 'shared growth' (WB 1993), but later on the region faced increased social disparities (ILO 2005), manifested by the *class divide* between the 'old poor' and the 'new rich' (Scrase et al. 2003: 6).

Since the early 1990s, after impressive reductions in poverty and at a relatively high position on the Human Development Index, Vietnam is a telling example of how the initial stage of shared growth is now jeopardized by increasing inequality, albeit from low levels (ILO 2005; UNDP 2005: 121–122; Van Arkadie and Mallon 2003). The question is, however, whether such inequality can be remedied by redistribution only, or if restructuring is also needed to achieve recognition of the poor and their full participation (Fraser 2003, see also the Introduction in this volume).

STATE, MARKET AND LABOUR IN VIETNAM

Due to Vietnam's introduction of the *doi moi* policy in 1986, the economy and society changed rapidly in a relatively short time (Van Arkadie and Mallon 2003). *Doi moi* implies a shift in development strategy, including administrative, industrial and agrarian reforms. Changes began in the late 1970s but only reached an official status in 1986 with the political move from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy. As an agrarian country, Vietnam strives to increase production and productivity in agriculture while promoting labour-intensive industries and services (Fforde and de Vylder 1996). In the opening of the economy to an external influx of capital and technology, the Vietnamese state lost its former monopoly on foreign trade. The role of the state as trader was thus weakened while its role as manager of foreign aid was strengthened (Forsberg 2007; Jerneck 1995). Moreover, combining market forces and private ownership with state intervention in an effort to industrialize and reform the economy, means that the role of the Vietnamese state as owner, producer and distributor is challenged while the role of entrepreneurs, including micro-entrepreneurs, become more active (Jerneck 1995; Van Arkadie and Malon 2003; WB 2005).

Vietnam is special compared with other developing countries because the state dominates the industrial sector as an investor, producer and employer. Foreign capital outside the EPZs is mainly attracted to create joint ventures with state-owned enterprises rather than with private firms (HEPZA 2000). Despite Vietnamese efforts of increasing employment, many poor people and areas are marginalized in the export-led growth strategy (ILO 2005; Nguyen Thang 2002; Van Arkadie and Mallon 2003; UNDP 2005; WB 2005). Vietnam differs from many other developing countries owing to the fact that in the young age group (15–24) more women than men migrate to urban areas for employment and income opportunities (GSO 2005: 12). The labour-intensive industries and services of the formal economy cannot absorb so much new labour (HEPZA 2000; UNDP 2003). Therefore, the flow of migrants (in addition to the natural population increase) has resulted in an expanded informal urban economy, which absorbs many (but not all) migrants, especially in the south (Van Arkadie and Mallon 2003). In the self-employed informal economy, often dominated by women, competition is increasing, thus suggesting that a pro-poor gender-sensitive growth strategy is needed; women are generally the poorest of the poor and, in the case of divorce, single mothers often have sole responsibility as providers (see Kabeer and Tran Thi Van Anh 2000; Nguyen-vo 2004; UNDP 2005).

Vietnam has a high labour-force participation rate of 81 per cent and a high female labour-force participation rate of 78 per cent. Over the last two decades, women's share of the labour force varied between 48 and 50 per cent and the absolute number of women workers has been increasing steadily; mainly because of increasing numbers of youth entering working age. However, due to a decisive slowdown in population growth from the late 1980s, the number of new entrants to the labour market has stabilized. Many new jobs are created in the national employment programme of vocational training and job centres, but since the labour force increased by 30 per cent from 1990 to 2003, the government has not been able to keep pace (ILO 2005: 25–27, 41).

Even if the private sector has absorbed 90 per cent of all new entrants to Vietnam's labour market this might change now that GDP growth is exceeding job growth and putting increased pressure on Vietnam's formal and informal labour markets (ILO 2005; UNHSP 2003; WB 2005). In the 1990s, Vietnam did not give high priority to labour guarantee; market-oriented ideals where citizens must create income opportunities and find

jobs for themselves similarly were encouraged. Responsibility thus was transferred from the state to citizens, meaning that the role of the state as a socio-economic protector was weakened (Jerneck 1995).

GENDERED FACTORY WORK

Foreign-financed industry in Vietnam attracts more women than men. This is a general pattern in the global division of labour where women play a dominant role as cheap industrial labour in assembly work, especially in respect to garments and electronics production (Benería 2003; HEPZA 2000; Thomas 2004; Tran 2004; UNCTAD 2002). Women's wages are lower and their productivity is believed to be higher than men's (Elson and Pearson 1997: 192–193). The rationale of the gender divide with women located in low-paid, labour-intensive, high-productivity industrial work is constructed due to stereotypical assumptions about a 'natural' gendered division of labour. This division of labour is produced in accordance with ideas regarding 'innate capacities and personality traits of women and men, and by an objective differentiation of their income needs' (Elson and Pearson 1997: 193).

Hence, it is widely taken for granted that due to women's capacity to bear children, men are the main breadwinners. Moreover, because women's talent for assembly work is defined not as an acquired skill but as a natural female trait, it can be approved of as an abundant and cheap capacity. Such assumptions would usually result in lower wages for women (Elson and Pearson 1997: 193). However, many women are in fact heads of households and thereby the main providers (Kabeer 2004; UNDP 2005). Similarly, many daughters have been taught by their mothers sewing and other traditional female skills, meaning that they have acquired an informal, but invisible, training. The social invisibility of training and lack of recognition of such skills are 'intrinsic to the process of gender construction' (Elson and Pearson 1997: 193).

The major labour force in factories operating on Foreign Direct Investments is low-skilled temporary workers who are often internal migrants or come from neighbouring countries. Due to their position as low-wage temporary labour with high turn-over rates, these working women have few social rights (Rigg 2003). Their situation is doubled-edged because jobs in foreign owned or foreign dominated firms offer certain economic opportunities and social empowerment to young women (emancipation),

while working and living conditions often make women vulnerable to abuse (exploitation).³

GENDERED INFORMAL WORK

If work itself proves difficult to define, then defining informal labour is even harder (see Kambhampati 2004: 242). This is so because the population in many developing countries and their demand for income, goods and services is growing much faster than the creation of formal jobs. As a further aggravation of the employment situation, many formal urban job opportunities are lost due to structural adjustment, starting in the 1980s with big lay-offs in government employment, especially for women, and a casualization of the work force. Moreover, due to out-migration from villages and rapid urbanization, many developing countries face an increasingly crowded urban economy (Rigg 2003). In this setting, new immigrants, many of whom tend to be excluded from formal employment, often establish small businesses whereby competition increases further (UNHSP 2003). In such a competitive environment, job seekers belonging to a fast growing work force must now look for supplementary earnings, rely on self-employment or get involved in informal activities. The role of the informal economy in creating jobs and incomes is therefore indisputable, especially in services (Dasgupta 2003). Informal labour compensates for much of the formal economy's failure to provide jobs, goods and services and in some urban areas informal employment even accounts for 60 per cent of total labour (UNHSP 2003: 102). Many countries thereby end up with pseudo-urbanization and very limited formalization of economic activities and relations (Kambhampati 2004). Attitudes and policies towards informal labour do vary widely from neglect or harassment to cooperation with international agencies who strive to empower informal labourers by supporting their entrepreneurship and innovation capacity (UNHSP 2003).

Methodological individualism, as a fundamental principle of economic theory, assumes that the size and shape of the informal economy is the result of random choices. However, it cannot explain why certain options to choose from are available (or not available) in the first place and why women as a group tend to enter informal rather than formal employment (Arizpe 1997). Nor can it explain why many individuals are stuck in informal work with few options of mobility and why it is difficult for workers in informal

activities to break into formal employment, where recruitment is based on standardized and impersonal procedures (Kambhampati 2004). Structural explanations of the growth of the informal economy indicate that the labour surplus produced by agrarian change is not always matched by an expansion of industrial jobs and many job-seekers waiting for formal jobs therefore survive intermittently in low-income jobs or in self-employment and actually end up permanently in informal labour not by individual choice but by necessity (Arizpe 1997). In a study of 289 full-time mainly male street vendors in New Delhi, Sukti Dasgupta (2003) highlights the situation of self-employment in informal services in a rapidly expanding city due to in-migration. She finds that aspirations for other jobs and 'careers' among vendors and their spouses hardly ever translate into upward mobility and she stresses the structured agency of these vendors rather than personal choice as decisive for the dynamics between the formal and informal economy.

Women and men enter informal labour for different reasons. Women's participation in informal labour not only exceeds their formal participation but also expands worldwide in both rural and urban areas (Ward and Pyle 2003; UNDP 2005). Men may gain more income from informal than from formal work. During economic restructuring informal work provides upward mobility in the sense that formal employment in the public sector provides status and security, while informal side-line activities offer earnings that increase the standard of living (Brydon and Chant 1989; Ward 1990). When boundaries are blurred, it is difficult to distinguish informal from formal work. For women, informal work is usually a strategy for economic survival used in addition to formal paid labour and household subsistence activities (Beneira and Roldàn 1987). Due to protective legislation for female labour in formal employment and women's inferior legal and social status in many societies, women face obstacles when seeking certain employment, loans and credit, and many women therefore resort to informal labour (UNHSP 2003).

For example, women who have no formal occupation turn domestic duties into economic activities by offering such services to other women who can afford to pay. The dividing line between formal and informal is therefore tenuous for women engaged in domestic work. This is often the case with female heads of households who are the main breadwinners, who constitute an average of one third of the world's households and as many as one half in some countries (Bruce 1989; Nash 1988; Ward and Pyle 2003). By

doing home-based informal work, women seek to avoid the contradictory pulls of economic necessity *versus* childcare, household duties and the expectation that women should work mainly inside the home. Earnings, albeit low, from combining childcare with paid work may increase a household's living standard and empower women within the household. If recognizing women as primary and not only secondary earners, the norm of the male breadwinner is contested and households need to be addressed as consisting of multiple, or even only female, breadwinners (Barrientos and Kabeer 2004).

In the short term, women home-workers and entrepreneurs may benefit from informal incomes, but in the long term many women work under isolated and hazardous conditions and never experience any economic or social mobility (Massiah 1989). The meaning of ethnicity is also pronounced in informal labour. Although differences exist among immigrant groups, immigrants are most often economically vulnerable and located in low-paid service and assembly work (Sassen 1988), or low status and/or high risk jobs like construction work (men) and prostitution (women) (Torres 1999). Immigrants are central to global informalization when they work in subcontracting networks in manufacturing or in services such as domestic labour or sex work and trade (Kamel 1990; see also Nguyen-vo in this volume). Formal or informal subcontracted and sub-subcontracted work is often unregulated, with no rights or protection, and is thus detrimental to low-income earners. Issues of security and equality are therefore complex both in formal factory work and in informal work; not least when they overlap. Working for low wages in formal employment should be a preferred alternative to hard work for lower and less secure incomes in the informal economy in so-called home-based subcontracting (Kabeer 2004). This is illustrated by a 40-year-old woman in central HCMC:

I live in this house with some other women. We work for nearly nothing for a man who is a subcontractor to a garment company and he also owns the house. We work all the time. My life is zero (Field notes, HCMC, November 2000).

GENDER INEQUALITY IN URBAN WORK IN VIETNAM

In 1986, Vietnam complemented the principles of state planning and egalitarianism with market forces and modernization. This had numerous implications for the livelihoods of the poor. Data from national and

international surveys focusing on migration, employment in export zones and restructured state-owned enterprises (GSO 2001, 2005; HEPZA 2000; ILO 2005; Kabeer and Tran Thi Van Anh 2000), as well as provisional estimates of the informal economy (Institute of Economics 2000), clearly indicate that in Vietnam many women and men leave agriculture in favour of urban-income activities, although migrants on average earn considerably less than non-migrants (GSO 2005). The global trends of migration and female crowding into certain areas of the economy, such as assembly work, also hold for Vietnam (HEPZA 2000; Nguyen-vo 2004; Tran 2004). Feminization of the expanding, mainly foreign-financed manufacturing sector involving chains of subcontractors and sub-subcontractors with home-based work is clearly seen. Women's 'segregated integration' into the economy is evident in economic domains such as the female-dominated garment industry, which while aimed at global markets has its roots in the production of garments for the once socialist bloc. Men, on the other hand, crowd into the construction and transport industries.⁴

My interviews indicate that many new opportunities for finding a job and generating an income opened up with *doi moi*, especially in manufacturing and services for women, and in construction and transportation for men. The relaxation of migration regulations is followed by a reinterpretation of space when job seekers find opportunities far away from their place of origin. It is not unusual that young people move long distances from the Hanoi area to Ho Chi Minh City (GSO 2005). Migration may also be a way of escaping arranged marriage and patriarchy (Zhang et al. 2000). Increased and changing inequality in connection with accelerated growth is also evident in my material. In many instances the importance of rural farm work as a secure income basis diminishes for the young generation in times of market-oriented agriculture while urban construction work (men) and factory work (women) become alternative avenues (Zhang et al. 2000). Yet, it is only in larger statistical samples that increased and changing inequality patterns like market-based poverty are confirmed (Kabeer and Tran Thi Van Anh 2000; ILO 2005; UNDP 2005).

MIGRATED WORKERS IN URBAN VIETNAM

According to my data, young migrating women and men from rural areas create a new lifestyle for themselves as they enter the urban setting of industrial work and city life, most often a lifestyle shared with peers with

whom they share a dormitory close to the factory or a room and household with friends from work. Men in construction work also often live together on work sites together with men from the same village. Young migrants may enter new forms of subordination in the hierarchical structure of the factory world or insecure conditions in the informal economy, yet they also leave rural patriarchy at least temporarily (see Nguyen-vo 2004).

We are young. We came to HCMC to earn a living and also support family if we can afford it. It only took a few days to find work in this garment factory. We live together in a dormitory and make friends so housing and company is also easy to find. In our free time we can enjoy city life and even look for a boy friend. Some of us have parents who look for marriage partners for us at home in the village but we are not interested in that so a job here helps us escape. Our jobs are not the best so we might look for jobs in the Zone where they pay more. In the city you can at least change your life. (Field notes, HCMC, March 2001)

Hence, even if wages are low and work is hard and controlled, these migrants experience freedom outside working hours. When it comes to manufacturing work and formal employment, mainly in the Export Zone and in private firms producing for the global market, women's 'flexible supply' (Benería 2003:78) in terms of working hours became evident as shown by a telling example at the Taiwanese Sweneo Company in Tan Thuan EPZ, HCMC, in four interviews in small focus groups with a total of twenty-two mainly migrant female workers aged 24–30:

All of us want to earn more so we are ready to work more. We also want good relations with the company so six to eight months of the year when it is really busy, like in autumn and spring, we work until eight at night to meet all the orders even if the normal work day is 7.30 to 16.30. Moreover, if we are on time in the mornings for a full month we get a little extra pay but if we are fifteen minutes late one morning there is an instant penalty and we lose half that day's pay. Even if we work more and most of us have worked here for four to five years we cannot save. We are single and send money to our families in the countryside or pay our money directly to our mothers if we live with our family here in HCMC. Many of us are the main breadwinners in the household. (Field notes, HCMC, March and November 2000)

The Sweneo interviews can also be interpreted in terms of how these young women are 'getting by' in the sense of their daily toil to make ends meet and escape poverty but with few chances of 'getting out' in the sense of

taking strategic steps to create a substantially better livelihood elsewhere. Moreover, their experiences make reference to practical needs in terms of housing, food and a little pocket money but not being able to improve 'strategic interests' in terms of collective action for improved working conditions or as a future vision of a more equal society (Lister 2004). This corresponds with the arguments in Kabeer (1999), in terms of the demands of 'being' a good worker, 'doing' your daily job including extra orders from the employer, but not really 'getting' anywhere or 'becoming' something in the sense of 'achieving' a higher status, because you are constrained by cultural norms asking you to share with your family of origin. At Sweneo in the EPZ, as in large garment firms such as Saigon Garmex or Chien Thang and Thaloga in Hanoi, young male workers were promoted because they were appreciated as better tailors or as good leaders suitable for becoming heads of the production line. This would increase their incomes and facilitate a quicker 'career', thus an important gender aspect (see Tran 2004).

Women's flexible supply in terms of temporary contracts, part-time work and unstable working conditions can be seen in many parts of the economy, not least where the formal meets the informal. Women as home-workers producing or assembling items for light industry firms in their homes blur the boundaries between formal and informal work (Benería 2003; Ward and Pyle 1995). Their work is also a sign of informalization, which again is not really seen as expanding women's opportunities into formal employment, where working conditions are more equal and secure (Portes et al. 1989). As many of these firms are part of very complex and often informal chains of subcontracting or even sub-subcontracting, working conditions are neither regulated nor improved and many women end up as informal workers at the deep end of huge supply chains (Barrientos and Kabeer 2004; Standing 1999). This is clear from an interview with a thirty-eight-year-old mother of three:

I work for a private firm which gives me material for sewing at home. But it is very irregular and the pay is low even if I work many hours. So you see it is hard and insecure and not a very good option for me and my family. I must look for another job but it is difficult (Field notes, Hanoi, March 2000).

Long-term social and economic oppression of women in many Asian societies, which in turn is rooted in gender ideologies, has resulted in 'low aspiration wages' for female workers in the sense that as a woman you are prepared to work for low wages for long weeks due to the fact that wages

have been very low for so very long (Standing 1989). Many low-income earners' daily practice of extending domestic duties like cooking for the family into serving meals to strangers in public in the informal economy is a typical sign of women's 'segregated integration' into the economy. Women enter an expanding field with income opportunities, but due to crowding and competition in this informal domain of the economy, combined with the fact that food preparation (only) belongs to women's traditional field, women make few if any 'strategic power gains' from this activity and thereby 'achieve' very little (Kabeer 1999). Women's chances of social mobility from this informal platform must therefore be seen as meagre. Yet, this example, just like many others, shows the 'multiplicity of effects' of women's participation in the labour market (Benería 2003: 78). Being active in the economy and earning an income may still render women some autonomy and increased 'power to choose' even if 'winners are weak' (Kabeer 2000). This is illustrated by an interview with a neatly dressed forty-year-old woman with red nails and a modern hairstyle who was interviewed at her own centrally located outdoor lunch stall in Ho Chi Minh City:

I used to have a job as a hairdresser's assistant but in 1990 I wanted more flexibility. I invested 1 million VND and started a lunch business here in this street in District 1 in downtown Saigon. I work all days except Sundays and my working day starts at six when I go the market. I prepare food until 11 and then I start serving. At night my family eats the leftovers. You need talent like good cooking skills in order to be successful in this job and you need some assistance from your family so sometimes my husband helps me with heavy tasks. My business is legal so I pay 300,000 VND to the district every month as a tax. I earn enough to feed my family and send my three children to school but we cannot save. I hope my children will get stable careers. [An average monthly wage for migrants is 957,000 VND in 2004 (GSO 2005)] (Field notes, HCMC, March 2000).

Saving was an issue in almost all interviews. Whenever people have a chance to save they save, be it for the sake of security and as a safeguard against ill-health or for improved housing, siblings' or your children's education, celebrations like weddings and other ceremonies or the old age of parents. Remittances contribute to anything from daily consumption and long term investment to social security and social cohesion (see Adger 2000). Women appeared to be more concerned about savings than men; as illustrated in my data from Thaloga in Hanoi:

We need to save in case we get sick or need better housing, but mainly we save to educate our children, both sons and daughters. (Field notes, Hanoi, March and November 2000)

Younger workers in their early twenties, both men and women and mainly migrants, often mentioned that they save money to help educate younger siblings. This can be interpreted as a deliberate strategy among parents or other relatives to promote the next generation by upgrading their chances to improve their 'careers', thereby transferring the capability of 'getting', 'becoming' and 'achieving' to the next generation. Middle-aged female workers often mentioned that they hope that their children would get a better life than themselves. A seventeen-year-old migrant girl whom I interviewed meets the middle-aged female workers' hopes for the younger generation. The young woman came to HCMC at fourteen with six years of education to stay with relatives and work for a bakery. She hence sells bread in the streets of HCMC from early morning to late evening. Surprisingly, she manages to save money to support the schooling of her two younger brothers, and the explanation may simply be that she never has a chance to take any time off. As she pointed out to me, 'for leisure, I do housework'.

VANISHING AND EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

The dual process of vanishing and emerging opportunities was clearly seen in Vietnam in the late 1980s when many state employees, voluntarily or involuntarily, left inefficient state bureaucracies and unprofitable state-owned enterprises to become self-employed in the informal economy. This happened when the role of the state as a protector diminished through many institutional changes. When former job opportunities in the public sector thus vanished in the 1990s this caused higher unemployment for women than men. Some of this 'shedded labour' ended up in the informal economy where it created new income opportunities, often in female-oriented activities such as cooking and food serving as an extension of women's household based gender duties; as seen in this interview with a forty-nine-year-old woman in Hanoi:

With *doi moi* came the new Government Regulation 176 on labour in the state sector. Due to that I had to leave my clerical job in the state sector here in Hanoi without any pension or security. I was forty years old. Many of us who became redundant were encouraged to set up our own business

and the state paid us a nominal sum, actually very little, to get started, but we got no skills training. On the basis of my cooking skills that I learned as a mother and wife, I set up this lunch restaurant in my neighbourhood. I needed a permit from the authorities to run my business but I am still part of the informal economy so the police may come around any day and ask me to clear my chairs and tables from the street corner where I serve a daily meal for local construction workers. The police have already been there several times but until now they ask for money only. You can consider it a rent or you may see it as corruption. You know, if I could choose I would rather go back to my former job. It is very hard work and a risky business to operate in the informal economy. I need assistance from my son for the heavy part of setting up and clearing my restaurant every day. And when it rains I have very few customers so it is very unstable and insecure to run this tiny outdoor restaurant. (Field notes, Hanoi, March 2000)

THE FORMAL AND THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

At the outset of research, and in accordance with most studies on the topic, I considered the formal and the informal work to be analytically and empirically separate. However, according to my data there are interesting overlaps and interactions between the formal and informal economy in the Vietnamese context. Firstly; the borders between them are transgressed in the sense that one and the same person may be working in and be dependent on incomes from both parts of the economy for a livelihood. In this sense, the sectors are linked rather than distinctly separated. Secondly; traits from the formal economy – such as the operating principles of wage-labour and increasing scales and profit-making – spill over to informal labour. Similar patterns of exploitation emerge in both economies despite the fact that informal labour is mainly to be associated with self-employment or entrepreneurship among the poor (see Bebbington 2004; de Soto 2000). The overlap also works in the opposite way, when informal relationships between employer and wage-workers, as we see in respect to informal labour, may replace the institution of labour contracts in formal employment. This paves the way for an informalization of the relationship between employer and employees in formal employment (Barrientos and Kabeer 2004; Benería 2003; UNHSP 2003). By identifying the linkages, I would argue, it is possible to outline the complexities of livelihood practices as well as gendered patterns of exploitation and empowerment (Breman 2003).

SOCIO-ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Concerning the mobility of low-income-earners, recent research from urban India indicates that upward mobility from informal to formal labour is rare in spite of clear intentions and aspirations among the poor (Dasgupta 2003). My findings show that mobility works both upwards and downwards. As a first example, migrants working in private manufacturing may find a job in a state-owned enterprise or start working for a foreign company in the Zone to increase their income. That is a sign of upward mobility in terms of increased wages and security in working conditions. As a second example, and often due to close-downs and lay-offs in the public sector and state-owned enterprises, especially in the early phase of *doi moi*, I have observed situations where workers or civil servants become self-employed in the informal economy. This is downward mobility in terms of loss of both status and income, especially since these former employees may lack the entrepreneurial skill needed in the informal economy to set up a business. There are also situations where self-employed vendors become workers in the informal economy or vice versa and where the direction of mobility is not easy to define because an informal job can generate a higher income temporarily.

There are only few examples in my material, however, of self-employed or wage-workers in the informal economy becoming wage-workers with formal employment, mainly due to the fact that they lack the required education, skill or aspiration. The most common pattern in my observations, in cases of any mobility at all, therefore seems to be downward mobility from a contract-based job in the regulated formal economy to a self-based income opportunity in the unregulated informal economy. For example, I met several former high-ranking civil servants who had fallen from grace to become petty traders in marketplaces in HCMC.

INCOME IN THE FORMAL AND INFORMAL ECONOMY

Another starting-point in my research was to expect income from formal work to be higher than income from informal work. According to my data, daily incomes from the informal economy seem to be higher than income earned from formal wage work. Yet, it has to be remembered that the making of an income in the informal economy is much more exposed to unpredictable conditions like weather, personal or family health, and 'clean up campaigns' by the police that serve to chase away unregistered businesses

like petty trade and petty services from the streets. These conditions increase risk-taking and insecurity while also causing great fluctuations in a person's income, whether daily, weekly or seasonally rooted fluctuations.

Moreover, with rapid urbanization the demand for formal employment as well as the competition in the informal economy increases; but since it is known that low-income-earners in the informal economy often provide for other low-income-earners, such as new migrants in the city (Dasgupta 2003), this may balance the consequences of increased competition, at least in the short term. On the other hand, it may increase the economic burden on low-income-earners who are already short of income and may hamper the chances of new-comers to find an income opportunity for themselves. The chance of earning higher wages in the informal economy is definitely weak due to the fact that many self-employed entrepreneurs have to hire their equipment at high rents, while some may have to pay for the service provided by an agent who arranges a job option in the informal economy. Finding income opportunities for migrants entering the city is therefore a type of service job in the informal economy that some urban dwellers earn a living from, as heard from this young cyclo driver in Hanoi:

When I arrived in Hanoi I had to see an agent who could find me a job. He was actually a mediator. I paid him and then he took me to another agent from whom I could rent a cyclo. It was quite expensive. I had to sleep in the cyclo after a hard day's work because I could not afford any housing. Regularly I have to pay money to the owner of the cyclo. (Field notes, Hanoi, March 2000)

This cyclo driver has difficulties in 'getting by' in his daily life, not to mention 'getting out' (see Lister 2004). Considered from a livelihood perspective, this cyclo driver's 'access' to 'assets' were mediated through social relations that made him economically dependent (Ellis 2000). As a comparison, I interviewed middle-aged cyclo drivers in HCMC who rented their cyclos on a daily basis from an agent and slept in the streets in their cyclos. Their income was stable but too low to make any changes in their livelihood.

URBAN-RURAL LINKAGES

It is common to consider decision-making in the case of migration as more of a household-based livelihood strategy than as an individual choice (see e.g. McDowell and de Haan 1997). This means that the household, or the

head of household, is in charge of decision-making on labour division between, for example, agricultural, industrial and service labour. My impression is that most young migrants whom I interviewed made the decision themselves to migrate for work but with their parents' consent. When it comes to economic bonds between migrating members and the rest of the household of origin, it is clear that most migrants, especially women, remit money regularly to their family of origin; something which is also confirmed by my informants and by data from the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (i.e. GSO 2005). It is a common practice to set aside a certain sum monthly, and many companies assist workers administratively in making remittances a couple of times a year or annually at New Year. Yet, when migrants' civil status changes due to marriage and increasing household expenses like improved housing and child-rearing, then it seems, according to my data, that remittances diminish or even cease.

Considering patterns of social and spatial recruitment to various types of work and employment, it seems that young migrants with secondary schooling are over-represented in industrial work and in the export zone, whereas city dwellers by origin are over-represented in the state-owned sector or as self-employed in the informal economy. Migrants with only primary education seem to end up more often in informal jobs as day labourers, for example in construction work and transportation for men and in bakery sales and domestic work for women, or in other sporadic wage-labour with high dependency on employers. Fewer migrant men than women work on contract, which causes more insecurity and concern for labour protection amongst men (see GSO 2005). This is illustrated by an interview with four young male construction workers (24–26 years old):

We left our village because we had no working opportunities. In urban factories employers ask for high school education which we don't have so we must look for construction work instead. Here we have regular working hours and are paid weekly but there are no stable contracts. We often know that there is work for us a few months ahead and after that we move along together to another place. Workers from the same village often move around and work together and when new migrants from our village arrive in Hanoi we introduce them to our boss. Our lives are hard and poor but we can make it and we solve our housing problem by living at the construction site. Some of us have a dream of becoming a seller of construction material rather than being a worker because when you become a father you don't want your children to see you in this dirty and dangerous kind of job. So

you see, we aim for marriage but it can be difficult to find somebody who understands us. (Field notes, Hanoi, November 2000)

Networking creates security and comfort among migrants while also functioning as a sort of recruitment strategy for both employers and potential employees; something which is also confirmed at a larger scale by other surveys (GSO 2005).

MOTIVES FOR MIGRATING

The most explicit or urgent motive for migration is to earn a living but other motives like improving education and skills, escaping patriarchy and initiating adulthood along with the general temptation of the 'bright lights of the city' can be strong and decisive as observed in various publications and also stressed by construction workers themselves (GSO 2005; Potter et al. 2004):

I think life as a farmer is a quiet and happy life in a beautiful setting but it is also hard and poor and you cannot earn enough to make a living. The city is noisy but a civilised place where you can live a modern life with news and education, leisure and opportunities. Here you can make a career and be a good role model for your future children. (Field notes, Hanoi, November 2000)

Many migrants said that they were homesick, especially at the beginning of their stay, but few were planning to return to their place of origin except to visit. This may indicate that they eventually are recognizing themselves as city residents. A Vietnamese migration survey thus observes that most migrants stay in their new environment (GSO 2005). Considering all the references made to their responsibility towards parents, siblings and children, women workers often recognized themselves as carers. This was especially true for female migrants who made regular remittances to their parents. In interviews with human resource staff in garment companies, migrants more often than regular city dwellers were recognized as diligent workers ready to take on overtime. They were also recognized as good savers and good carers who remitted part of their salaries to their families of origin in the countryside (see GSO 2005).

Working overtime seems to be more common among migrants than among city dwellers. The motive for this being the strong urge to save money for various reasons, mainly family-based reasons such as assisting parents

in financing the education of a migrant's younger sibling(s), health care for sick relatives, improved housing for the family of origin or for setting up some kind of side-line activity in the home village. The main motive for saving part of one's income is the effort to educate siblings or children in order to increase their opportunities in the labour market and thereby help them to get what is thought to be a better life.

CONCLUSIONS

'Career' is spatially, temporarily and analytically determined. It links actors and their agency to the structures and institutions of a certain urban setting. When 'career' is used to describe actual employment and self-employment among low-income-earners, it relates to livelihood strategies and practices. There are a great number of labour and income opportunities available in Vietnam's urban economy, and there is great variety in how respondents make use of those in order to construct a 'career' for themselves.

Women's growing entry into transnational corporations and the urban informal economy, which has increased women's total work-load, calls for special attention (Benería 2003). In order to highlight women's work and the role of their efforts, it is important to observe where and how women's work is done and whether it is done regularly, irregularly or intermittently, and whether it is paid. If the boundaries of the dual and triple work-shift are fluid for women, then work should be analyzed as a continuum from formal via informal to household work, as also argued by Kathryn Ward (1990).

The ways in which poor women's 'careers' intersect with a woman's 'doing', 'having', 'getting' and 'achieving' in respect to job and income opportunities must be understood against the backdrop of the origin, dynamics and boundaries of informal labour and its role in a particular society. Although women may do identical work to men, women's work often ends up being classified by economists as informal, reproductive, subsistence-oriented or unpaid. In other words, women's work tends to be neglected. However, and as I have shown in this chapter, women's way of engaging with, and cruising in between, the formal and informal sectors obscures the boundaries between various rigid categories frequently applied by economists.

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NOTES

- 1 I follow Frank Ellis in defining livelihood: 'A livelihood comprises the assets (natural, physical, human, financial and social capital), the activities, and the access to these (mediated by institutions and social relations) that together determine the living gained by the individual or household' (Ellis 2000: 10).
- 2 Group interviews were of two to three hours, while individual interviews were of 30–90 minutes. Follow-up interviews were shorter, more focused and theoretically sampled.
- 3 These arguments make reference to Ester Boserup (1970), who studied woman's role in economic development to show how women become marginalized in processes of agrarian transformation and industrialization.
- 4 'Segregated integration' is a term borrowed from Yvonne Hirdman (2001).

PART II

CONTESTING FAMILY LIFE

Chapter 5

Shades of Gender and Security in Cambodia

Alexandra Kent

INTRODUCTION

There have been many scholarly attempts to analyze gender orders. Much of this work has focused upon social relations between men and women and the gendered injustices embedded in these. Studies of women, particularly in developing countries, have also tended to ‘highlight how women are used to symbolize the state of “tradition” in their society or how women are subjected to structures of dominance’ (Derks 2005: 15). It has been noted that in Asia the female subject is frequently portrayed as the representative of national sovereignty, such that violations of the female body become substitutes for violations of the nation and vice versa. Less attention has been afforded the cultural resources available to men and women to transcend socially and symbolically rooted gender inequalities.

The closer one looks at the workings of gender *in situ*, the more multifarious, ambiguous and even contradictory the concept becomes. Interest has therefore grown in viewing gender as unfixed and as continually taking shape according to the specificities of the historical moment and cultural context (Ong and Peletz 1995; Wang et al. 2008). As Connell claims of masculinity, femininity too ‘is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture’ (Connell 1995: 71). When we appreciate the subtlety and elasticity of gender, we may better understand how individual actors may appropriate gender symbolism in creative ways according to the exigencies of changing circumstances (Ledgerwood 1994).

The Cambodian material I present below moves us beyond the level of social and political relations. Although the gender order operative in Cambodian everyday life tends to entrench the misrecognition of women, gender is also multilayered. This chapter intends to show how higher levels of meaning may offer individual women as well as men an avenue through which to break free of social patterns of misrecognition, furnishing a realm in which both may express themselves and be recognized in liberating ways. Ultimately, the ethnography illustrates how the various and sometimes conflicting ways in which gender relationships operate are subsumed within an overarching scheme of security-ensuring order that transcends gender.

This chapter uses case studies of two Cambodian women to explore how they move beyond mundane social constraints and access higher levels of signification available in the realm of religion. In so doing, each moves from a condition of personal 'disorder' towards a condition of recognition as an empowered, ordered and ordering being. The material is analyzed by borrowing and adapting some of the ideas that Roy Rappaport developed in his study of the 'cognized models' and liturgical rituals of the Maring of New Guinea (1979). I intend here to show how, by navigating multiple and overlapping levels of meaning, these women negotiate and even invert gender ordering in ways that are transformative, emancipatory and healing.

GENDER AND VULNERABILITY IN CAMBODIA

In a post-conflict setting such as Cambodia, which in recent history has witnessed some of the most devastating destruction imaginable, current insecurity is shared by men and women alike. It is inevitably related to memory and experiences of brutality and disruption. It is also related to the intensifying competition for rapidly diminishing resources in the new, rapacious political economy (Hughes 2003), the culture of impunity, and the corruption and politicization of the judiciary (Heng Sreang 2006; Henke and Chhim 2006).

Cambodians today share a deep anxiety about the loss of tradition and the dissolution of moral order. The powerful among them draw upon this anxiety – securitizing culture and identifying threats to it – in order to muster legitimacy (Hughes 2007). Members of the Cambodian elite are generous donors to temples and are quick to criticize potential rivals through reference to moral and religious norms. The poor, who are fully

aware of the moral dubiety of the powerful, also struggle to support their temples, often in the hope of generating a source of religious authority that might exert moral restraint upon those above them (Kent 2006).

Although much insecurity is common to both genders, women suffer particular kinds of vulnerability in this context in part due to the feminization of morality in Cambodian political rhetoric (Edwards 2008); women who commit moral crimes and threaten securitized order may be legitimately stripped of any right to security. Prime Minister Hun Sen's recent political sermons include castigating and demanding an apology from a Khmer actress for appearing on television in non-traditional, licentious outfits. Murder of women and attacks involving throwing battery acid into women's faces have been ignored or sanctioned at the highest political level. In July 1998, one of Cambodia's most popular actresses was shot at close range and later died from her wounds. Her diary revealed that she had been Hun Sen's lover and it is widely held that her murder was orchestrated by Hun Sen's wife. Nothing has been done in this case to bring anyone to justice. In December 1999, a teenage entertainer was doused in sulphuric acid, which left her grossly disfigured. She was reported to have been the lover of an Under-secretary of State, and the attack was supposedly carried out by his wife and two of her bodyguards. The *laissez-faire* attitude of the government in these cases and the judicial permissiveness for those who can pay their way out of judicial embarrassment have spawned a spate of similar attacks. The rhetorical equation of female subordination with national cultural ideals means individual female transgressors easily become scapegoats in the climate of concern about moral decay in Cambodia.

It is against this background of the gendered politics of insecurity that efforts to recreate moral order and security through religion can be understood. Despite the formal hindrances throughout the Theravada Buddhist world to women joining the Buddhist *sangha* – they may not become fully ordained, wear orange robes or conduct alms rounds – the religious realm nevertheless offers avenues through which women may transcend many of the risks and inequalities associated with their gender. By following the precepts and taboos associated with special spiritual status, women can to an extent de-gender themselves by setting themselves apart from the world of sexuality and reproduction. Ascetic practice brings spiritual power and, in popular consciousness, a layperson who violates the sanctity of an ascetic pays a high karmic or supernatural price.¹ Entering the religious realm moves women from the position of 'threat to moral order'

into a position in which they may acquire recognition as regenerators of morality. The religious realm offers women some hope of protection, power and transcendence of gender vulnerability.

SECURITY AND THE SACRED

In his study of Maring liturgical rituals, Rappaport (1979) distinguishes three integrated sets of understandings and principles as characteristic of Maring liturgical order, and indeed of liturgical order more generally: codes of conduct, cosmological axioms, and ultimate sacred postulates. He then shows how these operate dynamically, mapping epistemology onto metaphysics and, conversely, shaping everyday factual knowledge according to notions of ultimate meaning.

Codes of conduct are the moral norms that structure everyday life. They are characteristically contingent and flexible. Though they are informed by higher understandings of the cosmos, they are immediately concerned with pragmatic knowledge, rules and taboos. This is the level of tradition, particularly with regard to gender, which may adapt and change over time. Cosmological principles, which are less amenable to modification, consist of the distinctions by which the universe is thought to be organized: oppositions between qualities that are, on the one hand, associated with the ultimately sacred but which, on the other hand, manifest in physical and social phenomena, typically the relationship between the sexes (Rappaport 1979: 118–119). At the highest level of meaning in liturgical orders are ultimate sacred postulates, or final truths about the world. These are durable and relatively immutable. They are devoid of material significance and remote from social life. They sanctify the entire system of understandings in accordance with which people conduct their lives, and in this sense they provide an assertion of the way the world in fact *is* and *ought to be*.

I suggest that this tripartite division of levels of meaning – codes, principles and postulates – provides a helpful means of teasing out the ways in which gender symbolism is sometimes formulated and appropriated by present-day Khmer in attempts to establish meaning, order and security.

SHADES OF GENDER

I have suggested elsewhere that Khmer notions of security and wellbeing are deeply rooted in religious understandings (Kent 2006). Within Khmer Buddhist theory is the notion that security – the harmonious continuance of the world – depends upon righteous leadership and the integrity of a powerful centre. By righteous leadership is meant that which is inspired and restrained by the dictates of *dhamma*.² By perpetuating and nourishing *dhamma*, the ideal ruler ensures harmony in the universe; he is the *cakkavatti*³ – the ruler who turns the cosmic wheel and provides protective shade (Khmer, *mlup*) for his subjects. Real Cambodian leaders have over time appealed to these ideas with varying degrees of success in their pursuit of legitimacy.

In the real world, a ruler's power is balanced in an 'ambiguous symbiosis' (Harris 1999) with the *sangha* (brotherhood of monks). He should be deferential towards the monastic order, and the monks should remain to some extent free of his secular control, but at the same time he is responsible for patronizing the *sangha* and maintaining its purity and strength. This uneasy marriage between secular power and the representatives of transcendent, eternal righteousness is the cultural linchpin of Theravada Buddhist society.

From the Khmer perspective, all threats to human security are ultimately collapsible into a single idea – departure from the final order ordained by *dhamma*. The holistic nature of the Khmer cosmos means that when human beings fail to respect the dictates of *dhamma*, they throw both civilization and nature (the Khmer terms for which both derive lexically from *dhamma*⁴) into disarray. As for Rappaport's Maring, for the Khmer too, 'truthfulness, reliability, correctness, naturalness, and legitimacy are vested in conventions and conventional acts by their association with ultimate sacred postulates [here, *dhamma*]' (Rappaport 1979: 212). Accordingly, world order, or security, in Khmer culture is to be found through reference to *dhamma*.

Like Giddens (1990), Rappaport seeks the roots of ontological security in early childhood experience, in the mother–child relationship and early pre-social experiences of dependency and trust. Rappaport considers this internalized and personal sense of security that is acquired in early, non-discursive, mammalian emotional processes to be the precursor of religious or 'numinous' experience – an undifferentiated experience of love, fear,

dependence, fascination, unworthiness, majesty and connection (Rappaport 1979: 212). This maps neatly onto the Cambodian case, where both mother and the Buddha-king (*dhamma* incarnate) share the fundamental quality of providing protective 'shade' (*mlup*) to their dependents (Hinton 2005).

According to Rappaport, the primordial experiences of childhood, or the later numinous religious experience of the individual, may be reinvigorated by becoming laced to the community's sacred postulates with the help of symbol and ritual. Although private sentiment and public expression may fuse and reinforce one another in ritual, this does not always happen. Participation in ritual – regardless of sentiment – signifies acceptance; this alone, Rappaport asserts, makes ritual socially and morally binding. By offering a resolution of the vulnerabilities of femaleness as it is conceived at lower levels of meaning, participation in the symbols and rituals associated with higher levels of meaning, particularly *dhamma*, may induce acceptance of moral re-ordering.

CONDUCTING GENDER IN CAMBODIA

Codes of conduct that propagated a regulatory and disciplining Cambodian gender regime, written exclusively by men, traditionally portrayed the ideal Khmer woman not as strong or powerful but as virtuous and self-sacrificing for the welfare of her family or society (Ledgerwood 1990). Through her own virtuous behaviour, particularly in relation to sexuality, a woman would be rewarded with acknowledgement and status enhancement for herself but also for those males related to her.

Perhaps as early as the fourteenth century in Cambodia codes of moral instruction were formally composed, mainly by Buddhist monks. These are known in Khmer as *chbap*, and they were written in verse to be used for the moral edification of the populace at large. They include specific codes for men (*chbap broh*) and for women (*chbap srey*), and these are still taught in Cambodian schools today. The *chbap srey* contains instructions for women to respect their parents and husbands and create a peaceful and safe environment in the home. A woman must be frugal, soft and sweet in speech, always forgiving of her husband and she must never reveal any tensions in her household to gossiping neighbours. Success in following the dictates of the *chbap* may be rewarded with great boons – such as rebirth as the mother of the future Buddha. However, breach of the rules can bring

rebirth in a state of gender disorder, as a hermaphrodite in hell (see Harris 2005: 86–88).

Like the ideal or *Dhammika* ruler (Heng Monychenda 2008), a woman's maternal duties are to provide 'shade' – safety, order and prosperity – for those under her care (Ledgerwood 1996). As noted, the concept of shade resonates with broader themes concerning moral order in Khmer society. A woman and her household are a feminine microcosm of the ideal masculine kingdom; a woman should be as solicitous for her family as the ruler should be for his subjects. The theme of protection by shade recurs also in the former puberty rites for girls, known as *chuol mlup* (literally entering the shade); the young girl was shielded from both the sun and the predatory gaze of men.⁵

At the level of everyday codes of conduct for Khmer women there are, however, also contrasting ideals of womanhood. Women are expected to behave as hard-headed businesswomen in certain public, economic spheres, such as local market-places. Ultimately, though, this is for the benefit of their families. Formerly and still to a large extent today, female dynamism in the market-place was not echoed in the realm of politics. Like elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia, Cambodian women have attained political recognition through kinship links to powerful males, whom they should support but not challenge (Frieson 2001).

The traumatic decades of warfare, the Khmer Rouge focus upon rural/urban distinction as significant, and the promotion of gender egalitarianism wrought changes to experiences and perceptions of womanhood. Ledgerwood (1996), for instance, describes how at a political rally she attended in 1993 a male politician made a speech in which he made reference to one of the women seated beside him. She was a 'big mother', a general in the politician's army, but she dressed in white like a Buddhist renunciant. This woman, the politician explained, would not address the audience because she was 'too strong'. Her elevated status seemed to derive from an appeal to both tradition and to recent history. Her sexuality was annulled by her attire, suggesting the gender-neutrality of religious renunciation, while her secular status combined traditional ideals of hard-working village wifery with the dynamism of revolutionary womanhood.

The return of refugee women from periods overseas has similarly brought new impulses including ideals of strong womanhood as represented through political action (Lilja 2006). The codes of conduct that are salient for a particular historical epoch can thus be modified quite readily. This

does not necessarily impact upon more resilient, persistent higher levels of meaning.

GENDER PRINCIPLES OF THE KHMER COSMOS

In Cambodia the mystical powers of maleness and femaleness are continuously expressed in legend, myth and ritual practice, and these principles of differentiation influence behaviour. Cambodia's origin myth tells of how the land was born of a marriage between a foreign (Indian) man and an indigenous *nagi*, or dragon princess of the watery underworld. One version of the myth tells how a Brahman named Kaundinya steered his ship close to the shores of a waterlogged Cambodia bearing a magic arrow. The *nagi* paddled out to greet him but he shot her boat with his arrow and frightened her into marrying him. Kaundinya then presented his wife-to-be with clothing, and her father, in exchange, drained the sodden land for them to live on. This union, as Chandler (1998 [1983]: 13) notes, is that of culture and nature, of sun and moon. These principles are the fundamental oppositions that bring the universe into existence. The theme, of course, is that nature – portrayed as wild, creative, inhospitable and naked femaleness – must be tamed and clothed by her male custodians in order for civilization to arise. Female powers are highly ambiguous; they are both life-giving and life-taking, generative or protective but also destructive.

This ambiguity is also borne out in the symbolism of the earth goddess, who is known in Cambodia as the Neang Khanghing Preah Thoranee (Lady Princess Earth) (see Guthrie 2001). The earth deity is also a popular figure in neighbouring Thailand where Wright (1990) describes a Thai legend in which her rapacious powers are unleashed when the relationship between human and nature becomes unbalanced. Wright observes that this tale shows how merit-making came to replace human sacrifice to a hungry earth deity thus transforming the ancient system of exchange between the worlds of the living and of the dead (Wright 1990: 49).

The notion of merit-making as a pacific form of sacrifice to the earth deity is also found in Cambodian temple consecration rituals (Kent 2007). The nine stones that are buried to mark the sacred monastic boundary of the pagoda bear connotations of gender; the stone buried in the central pit before the shrine of the Buddha is associated with the powerful male world-ordering Brahmanic god Indra, while the eight peripheral stones that demarcate the *sima* or monastic boundary are associated with the earth

goddess, who often appears on the stones placed over the buried stone to mark its site (Giteau 1969).⁶

Although she does not appear in the Pali canon, the earth deity's biography is popularly related to the Buddha's achievement of enlightenment (Guthrie 2001). The story is that as the Boddhisattva was approaching enlightenment, sitting deep in meditation, the evil Mara brought warriors, wild animals and his evil daughters to try to prevent the Boddhisattva from succeeding. However, the Boddhisattva put his right hand to the earth and as he touched her, she rose up to become a beautiful woman who drove Mara and his entourage away. In many Cambodian images she can be seen wringing out her long hair to produce a torrent of water, which drowns Mara and his army. Through her protection of the ultimate – and masculine – manifestation of merit and vanquished desire, the Buddha, she secures the continuance of the world.

While the Khmer case, like the Maring one, stresses the principles of reciprocity and interdependence between the two gendered realms, there is also a sense in which the masculine centre is the source of order, while the female periphery is a source of vitalizing but potentially chaotic energy. This takes concrete form in taboos surrounding women's procreative power. Menstruating women are thought to be able to halt silk production if they come too close to the silkworms; if a pregnant woman trespasses upon the construction site of a bridge or dam (sites of controlling water) it is held that the construction will fail. Stories abound in Cambodia of such women being killed and then buried in the foundations of the structure to reinforce it – her powers now being harnessed in the service of material civilization and order.

Judy Ledgerwood (1990) has shown how the gendering of the spirit world is enacted in the social world. Female creative power and attachment can be tamed by masculine ordering power in concrete ways. The *goan krok* is a desiccated foetus, originally taken from the body of a live woman and used by her husband or another man as a protective amulet. It is said to work only if the woman agrees to sacrifice both her own life and that of her child to her husband. The husband should then place the foetus before a Buddha image to imbue it with the Buddha's power.

Another example is the spirit of women who die a violent death while still virgin, or who die in childbirth. These spirits, known as *bray*, are dangerous and unpredictable and they hunger for the lives of other young or parturient women. However, their powers can also be harnessed; a

bray may be ritually installed into the pedestal under a Buddha statue in a temple. Here she is overpowered by the Buddha and she protects him and punishes anyone who desecrates the temple. *Bray* also reside in the temple's racing canoe that is used for the annual water festival races. Her power is domesticated for use in vitalizing the canoe by the chanting of monks, but she remains dangerous for pregnant women who risk miscarriage if they walk in front of the canoe (Ang Choulean 1990).

The ordering of gender, as Ledgerwood (1990) explains, is about the maintenance of hierarchical order. If female power is restrained and governed, it is invigorating, supportive and protective. It is only when the feminine is not subordinated that it becomes destructive and chaotic. 'The relationship of female to male is like the relationship between client and patron, between laity and *sangha*' (Ledgerwood 1990: 59). Gender hierarchy is thus a fundamental opposition by which the ordering principle of cosmological hierarchy is sustained.

PROFANE PERIPHERY – SACRED CENTRE

The Pali Buddhist word *dhamma* is rendered in Khmer as *thomm*, a polysemic term meaning ultimate reality, the nature of being, right, virtue, the order of things, moral principles, nature, duty, and piety. *Thomm*, itself eternal and unalterable, provides a ground upon which the cosmic cycles of integration and disintegration are founded. In a narrower religious sense, the concept refers to the Law of the Buddha and the ethical principles that stem from it. *Thomm* is available in its most concentrated form in the heart of the Buddhist temple. The images are also embodiments of power: the Buddha image situated in the shrine of the ordination hall, *vihear*, is traditionally ritually transformed from a piece of stone into a vital being upon installation; he is both world conqueror and world renouncer (Swearer 1995; Tambiah 1976).

The Buddha is thus seen to be the ultimate world-ordering centre of the universe, the most succinct embodiment of *dhamma*. As I have described elsewhere (Kent 2007), the central stone of the *sima* monastic boundary, placed right before the Buddha, occupies an analogous position to the centre-point of a *mandala*, which resonates with the notion of a shade-providing 'potent center providing integration, order, protection, purity, and benefits to the peripheral space/followers that it encompasses' (Hinton 2005: 111).

In Cambodia and elsewhere in Theravada Southeast Asia, the transition from chaos to order as being from feminine periphery to masculine centre is expressed also in the ordination ritual. Men who are about to be ordained are referred to as *neak* (*naga*), the most common meaning of which is the dragon-snake of the underworld. The *neak* is an indeterminate creature, part human and part beast. There are several versions of the story of how the *neak* once transformed itself into a human and was ordained as a monk, and how it one day transformed itself back into a snake. When the Buddha heard of this he ordered the *neak* to return to lay life since animals were forbidden to enter the monkhood. However, in acknowledgement of the snake's devotion, the Buddha decreed that all ordination candidates from that time on would be referred to as *neak* in commemoration of the conversion of beast to human (Sou et al. 2005). There are clearly allusions here to the distinction between the wild and the civilized, between nature and culture. However, during the period when aspirants for ordination are referred to as *neak*, there is also a certain feminization of their appearance (Thompson 2005). They are often dressed in colourful sarongs of the style normally worn by women and they wear a cloth over the left shoulder of perhaps embroidered white cloth or some colourful, feminine fabric.

At the most concrete level, this seeming feminization of the boy/man would seem to accentuate the social transition towards civilized manhood. At another level of meaning however, the shaving of the head and eyebrows enact a sort of degendering, which opens a gateway towards the transcendence of female/male, of death/life, indeed of all distinction. This offers refuge in the Ultimate Sacred. Since this Sacred is the source from which all order emanates, when disorder threatens, *dhamma* is the place to seek reordering *pre-order*.

This transitioning between the feminine wilderness and the epitome of civility, the monks, cannot be neatly transposed onto the social world of men and women. Both men and women can make transitions between the two cosmological gender poles and in so doing seek refuge in the Ultimate Sacred – the Buddha, *dhamma* and *sangha*.

ASCETICISM AND GENDERED BOUNDARIES IN CAMBODIA

Despite the structural hindrances to female entry into the *sangha* of formalized Buddhism, there has been a rapid expansion of female religious asceticism since the revitalization of religious practice began, following its

abolition under the Khmer Rouge. Women who shave their heads, live in a monastery or hermitage, wear white clothing and follow either eight or ten of the Buddhist precepts, are known as *don chee*⁷ in Cambodia. Their transformation from women into *don chee* to an extent neutralizes their femaleness and distances them from the world of sex and procreation. There are women who mix routines according to their family and economic circumstances: some, for instance, follow five precepts and live at home to care for family, but on the Buddhist holy days will follow eight. These lay devotees are known as *upāsikā*. Although Heike Löschmann (2000) has estimated some 10,000 nuns in the country, given the heterogeneity of the group and the absence of formalization, it is difficult to gauge exactly how many there are.

With few exceptions, nuns are middle-aged and above. While it was traditionally proper for a young man to spend time as a monk in preparation for the responsibilities of adult life, a young woman should look forward to marriage and offspring. This has partly to do with the fact that it is her offspring who support her if she decides to enter the temple, whereas it is the merit-making community that supports the monks. Also, having young women staying at the monastery at night would pose particular challenges to those in charge.

Clearly, the gender order in everyday Cambodian codes of conduct seems to exclude women from the religious realm proper. However, large numbers of Cambodian women enter religious life though not necessarily through the pagoda as such. The two examples below show that the realm of religion also enables women to transcend the limitations and strictures of gender and to invert normal hierarchy in interesting ways. When women do this they seem to move from a condition of deep insecurity towards security and they can also access the power to become providers of security for others. They move through the levels of meaning to tap into the highest level, the ultimately sacred.

LOAK KRUI

The first example of a religious woman whose practice seems to transcend some of the divisions of the gender code of conduct outlined above is a nun who runs a meditation centre not far from the town of Siem Reap. Her clients and the local people refer to her as Loak Kruu ('Sir' teacher). This is the only case I have come across in the three years over which I

have been conducting research on Cambodia in which a woman has been given a male gender title. Loak Kruu is in her early fifties and follows eight precepts. She is married with five adult children. Three of her children still live with her husband in the local village while Loak Kruu lives permanently at her meditation centre. Her husband is the principal of the local primary school and teaches meditation in the evenings. In 1995 Loak Kruu was still a laywoman who followed five precepts but she attended the inauguration conference of the Association of Nuns and Laywomen of Cambodia,⁸ and it was there that she decided to shave her head and become a *don chee*.

She subsequently learned how to practice insight (*Vipassana*) meditation under the tutelage of the Venerable Sam Bunthoeun, who founded a large *Vipassana* centre some six years ago at the foot of Oudong Mountain, about half an hour's drive from Phnom Penh. *Vipassana* is a new, post-war development in Cambodia, though older informants claim that the meditation method itself was known and practised long ago. The movement led by Sam Bunthoeun has gathered substantial funds, particularly from its main donor, Sok Im, who is apparently an independently wealthy urban lady who has taken over some of her husband's business ventures. Sam Bunthoeun was assassinated in early 2003 and as yet no killer has been identified.⁹

In his lifetime, Sam Bunthoeun established a formal curriculum for the study of *Vipassana* and in this way trained monks, *don chee*, and laypeople as teachers who disseminate the teachings all over the country. The *Vipassana* movement is a rather rarefied and whittled down version of Cambodian Buddhism, which has traditionally been interwoven with non-Buddhist practices. This 'purity' creates certain tensions, but it has also in some respects democratized and theoretically enabled both *sangha* and laity, men and women, like Loak Kruu, to acquire a form of Buddhist expertise on relatively equal terms.

Loak Kruu's first child was born in 1974, a few months before the Khmer Rouge took control of the country. Some twenty days after the birth she heard gunshots and fainted, probably from fear, she said. After this she suffered from 'lack of blood' and heart problems. When the Khmer Rouge regime ended, she was left with chronic low back pain. When she began learning *Vipassana*, she explained, she began to bleed from her uterus and the blood she lost was black. After this, she was cured and she said this taught her how to control fear.

She then began teaching others back in her home village. Her students included monks from the local temple, and soon grateful learners started to make donations. In 1997 the head monk of the local temple donated an area of temple land immediately adjacent to the temple area to her for use in the establishment of a meditation centre, which Goonatilake (2003) has described as a 'hospital without medicine'.

LOAK KRUU'S CLIENTELE

The donations helped Loak Kruu to build several concrete cottages and a central hall. When I met her in 2006, people were consulting her for a variety of physical and psychosocial complaints, ranging from stroke, broken bones, back pain, insanity, depression to incest. The majority were women, who outnumber men by a ratio of five to one (Goonatilake 2003). Some of these people end up staying permanently and built their own wooden cottage. A substantial community of some sixty people was resident there at the time of my visit.

When I visited her, an elderly monk was staying in one of the concrete cottages, together with a young novice. He said that he intended both to learn meditation and to be given the means to put to rest fear from the past. Both the monk and the novice referred to their new teacher as Loak Kruu. The monk had formerly been a fruit farmer. Before the Khmer Rouge regime he had had a wife and eight children, but his wife died in 1975. The monk said that during the Pol Pot era he had stayed on a mountain in Kompong Thom province:

Pol Pot wanted to kill me. He planned to kill all the people of Cambodia. There was no freedom to walk anywhere. It was a prison without walls. Whenever I heard shooting I always hoped it was someone who had come to free us. The Buddha always taught good so if we study *dhamma* we can become good.

The monk had remarried in 1979 and he had had a further two children, one of whom had married while the other was working and studying in Malaysia. When he was ordained in 2000, he left his land and house to his children and wife, who passed away in 2003. He told me he had for some time been suffering from heart problems and often felt afraid. He had tried to meditate but did not really know how to. He and the novice had been at Loak Kruu's centre for only five days when I met them but already the monk

said he was feeling better. He was, clearly, seeking not just knowledge and accomplishment but healing. He planned to stay for one month with Loak Kruu to learn meditation properly. Then he would go back to his temple and teach the monks there since they all wanted to learn.

A young woman I met at the centre had become one of Loak Kruu's closest assistants. She was then probably in her early thirties. One of her legs was deformed and she had a severe limp. She told me that her father had died when her mother was expecting her. When she was seven or eight years old her mother also died, leaving her in the care of her drunkard stepfather. On one occasion, he sent her to buy alcohol for him but she was afraid, so he beat her so badly that he broke her leg, which never healed properly. She then went to stay with a great-aunt, but from that time on she had been unable to walk. However, about two years before I met her she had had a dream and in it seen Loak Kruu, whom she had never met, sitting on a lotus flower. Shortly afterwards someone she knew told her about Loak Kruu and she came to find her. She learned to meditate and soon found she could walk, although falteringly. She has remained at the centre serving Loak Kruu ever since.

Loak Kruu's other clients also told stories of frightening life circumstances. Loak Kruu said that a group of five young gangsters had once sought her out. She did not know why. But she taught them to meditate and not long afterwards three of them were ordained as monks.

Loak Kruu offers a tangible service and she is rewarded materially by the support of the temple and by donations from local villagers and patients. This makes her practice sustainable and relatively autonomous. The fact that she is addressed with a male gender-marked title suggests that she has in some respects moved beyond the apparent constraints of womanhood. Her de-gendered spiritual agency is, admittedly, housed in a woman's body and as such she falls within conventional gender order. However, although she is beholden to the male *sangha* for her land, and to an extent for her legitimacy and right to practise, Loak Kruu's real agency defies and overturns male superordination. Even monks who are older than she consult her – not simply for her authority as an instructor but for her power as a healer and provider of security. Both Loak Kruu and the monk transcend gender in the healing encounter.

THE WOMAN WHO BECAME A MONK

On 17 May 2006, the Khmer magazine, *Chivit Kamassan*, published a remarkable story of a woman who dresses in orange monastic robes, a practice that suggests fully ordained or *bhikkhuni* status. Cambodia has never had an order of fully ordained Buddhist *bhikkhunis*, so this woman's story is therefore quite exceptional.

The story concerns a fifty-four-year-old woman known as Bhikkhuni Toun Chan Thy, who has dressed in monks' robes for the past sixteen years. Her mother explains in the article that she had twelve children, eight of whom died, leaving her with two surviving sons and two daughters:

When I gave birth to Toun Chan Thy there was no amniotic fluid. When the midwife saw this she didn't know what to do so she invited the head monk to come and do water blessing for my daughter and me. When he arrived he took out a knife and cut the amniotic sac open and took out the baby, but Toun Chan Thy was unconscious for about half an hour. The baby was born with a *songvaa*.¹⁰ The monk said my baby was no ordinary person but a *neak mean bon* [literally person of merit].

The baby continued to be sickly and her mother sought help from fortune tellers, who told her the child was taken care of by a *pāramī*¹¹ and that this was why she was sick, but the mother refused to believe them. The daughter continued to be sick until she was thirty-eight years old. In 1990 she fell unconscious for forty-seven days and no one was able to stay at home and take care of her. Everyone expected her to die so they would cover her body with a white cloth when they left the house, but her heart continued to beat. Although she drank and ate nothing for the whole period, she continued to look strong. When she finally awoke her sister took her to the provincial hospital where an intravenous drip was inserted. But Toun Chan Thy apparently ripped this from her hand and ran home. She behaved like a mad woman and talked to herself. Sometimes she cursed her mother and sometimes she took a knife to battle against ghosts. Her relatives remembered about the *pāramī* and decided to make an offering to it. After the third offering had been made they noticed an improvement in Toun Chan Thy's condition. Then one day Toun Chan Thy asked her mother to buy her a monk's robe and bowl because a *pāramī* had ordained her the previous night.

The villagers criticized her harshly. They called her a 'mad monk' and a *prey baisaach* (evil spirit). Distressed by this, she tried to remove her robes,

but every time she did this she had another convulsion. The *pāramī* told her to do alms rounds in the village but she pleaded with him not to make her do this and he agreed.¹² She simply follows ten precepts, which includes not eating after noon or handling money.

In the article, Bhikkhuni Toun Chan Thy explains: 'I don't want to be like this, because I am a woman. Nowadays only men become monks. But if I don't do this I will not be able to get rid of my disease.' She explained that she must now perform water blessings, fortune telling and healing to help others: 'My *pāramī* requires me to walk in the eight directions to heal people.'

Like Loak Kruu, Bhikkhuni Toun Chan Thy heals both herself and others as she experientially ascends through the hierarchy of meaning, beyond social order towards that which is ultimately sacred.

CONCLUSIONS

The religious careers of the two women I have described above show something of the malleability of Cambodian gender relations as they relate to Buddhist practice. They make the straightforward application of theories of manhood or womanhood highly problematic. As Wang et al. (2008) make clear, gender is *relational*, and several gender discourses, or overlapping levels of gender discourse, may coexist in any particular case. The lived relationships between individuals can therefore be negotiated by drawing upon the multiple and overlapping levels of meaning.

Rappaport's tripartite scheme – codes of conduct, cosmological principles and sacred postulates – has, I believe, been helpful in making some sense of the complexity of Cambodian renderings of gender. An understanding of Cambodian everyday gender codes clearly fails to take account of the full spectrum of Cambodian cultural reality. Despite, or perhaps because of, the limitations and rigours of everyday codes, some people move beyond them reaching into the cosmological or spiritual sources of meaning that can enable them to burst gender constraints. The women discussed in this paper, for example, have found liberation from the codes by which women are misrecognized in the Buddhist religious realm. Each in her own way has achieved a form of spiritual power or authority that allows her to breach conventional wisdom and everyday custom. Reaching into the cosmological realm of morally righteous *pāramī* enables Bhikkhuni Toun Chan Thy to feed that power back into the everyday world, reinvigorating it and healing

its 'disorder'. Similarly, Loak Kruu brings the powers of meditation, which, like *pāramī* are ultimately couched within the order of *dhamma*, to bear upon worldly disorder.

Although these women both acquire and provide protective shade, Bhikkhuni Toun Chan Thy does so in a manner more completely divorced from womanhood/motherhood. Through her attire, she appropriates the masculine symbolism of a powerful, shade-providing centre, though the reference to celibate monkhood is to an extent not only de-feminizing but also emasculating. The move away from the sphere of sexuality and reproduction neutralizes the most obvious differentiating feature of gender.

By drawing upon higher levels of meaning in this way, some Cambodian women may be able to access the protection and empowerment offered by asceticism. There are many cases in Cambodia of women who enter the nunhood following experiences of sexual abuse.¹³ By shaving the head and wearing renunciant clothing a woman may deflect sexual danger. A man who flouts the *dhamma* by violating the body of an ascetic takes major *karmic* risks, which at least in most cases operate as a deterrent. There are also examples of female victims of abuse, who, by becoming religious renunciants, have managed to earn status and, importantly, morally poignant power (Kent 2008). These women are not simply exercising female agency in opposition to male ascendancy, but their agency is valued and accredited – recognized – by male monks who just as readily tend to neutralize gender in their dealings with these women.

I have proposed that the numinous experience described by Rappaport may alert us to the feeling of security enjoyed analogously by both the well-cared-for infant and the well-protected royal subject. In Cambodia, I suggest, the righteous carer in both instances garners legitimacy through reference to the undeniable and ultimately sacred order of the universe, *dhamma*. It follows that when the relatively more powerful party departs from the moral order ordained according to *dhamma*, it is a source of deep insecurity for his or her dependents. If this is the cultural logic, then it makes sense that the people I have described here have intuitively moved from situations of fear, uncertainty, danger, and poverty towards *dhamma* in their pursuit of security. Although everyday moral dictates are informed by ideas about *dhamma* and the everyday codes of conduct may make *dhamma* more readily accessible to men, *dhamma* itself is pre-gender, above gender. The monk who sought relief from his fear at Loak Kruu's

meditation centre demonstrates that Cambodian spiritual logic is not rigidly constrained by a gender asymmetry. In fact it opens possibilities for dispensing with everyday codes of gender conduct and allows gender to be negotiated or simply ignored.

The way in which Cambodians seek recourse to the spiritual realm suggests that this realm can provide a source of moral critique about the way relationships between men and women, the powerful and their clients, the centre and the periphery are currently being wrought. The coalescence of the numinous and the undeniable yields a potent admixture of potential, unquestionable knowledge from which stems a resonant cultural critique. This admixture may regenerate hopefulness about the world and be profoundly healing – perhaps particularly so for women since it is an arena in which they may legitimately accumulate power over men.

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NOTES

- 1 Tragically, there are cases in present-day Cambodia of *don chee* (Buddhist renunciant women) being raped, even on pagoda premises.
- 2 *Dhamma* (Pali) means both the teachings of the Buddha but also the conditions of nature and the duties that must be performed in accordance with the laws of nature – ultimate social and cosmic order.
- 3 A woman cannot become a *cakkavatti*.
- 4 The Khmer word for *dhamma* is *thomm*. *Arayethomm* means civilization, *thomma-jeut* means law of nature.
- 5 I am grateful to Eve Zucker for making this point.
- 6 This pre-/non-Buddhist gendering of architectural space seems to be widespread in the region. It recurs, for instance, in the men's *guol* houses of the Mon-Khmer group known as the Kātu, who live along the Vietnamese-Lao border (Luu Hung 2007; Kaj Århem personal communication).
- 7 There are also laywomen who observe certain ascetic rules.
- 8 This Association was pioneered with sponsorship and guidance from the German non-denominational Heinrich-Böll Foundation. Sponsorship terminated in 2006.
- 9 Rumours abound about who might have been responsible. Some believe the assassination was arranged by Sok Im's jealous husband, others claim it was politically motivated since Sam Bunthoeun was said to encourage monks to vote, something that the Supreme Patriarch Ven. Tep Vong, who is popularly associated with the ruling CPP (Cambodian People's Party,) was at that time discouraging.

- 10 This is a special term referring to an umbilical cord that is strung over the baby's shoulder at birth, like the robe of a monk. It is popularly considered to be a sign of special powers.
- 11 The term *pāramī* is a Buddhist technical term derived from Sanskrit/Pali and means 'perfection'. It refers to the ten perfections achieved by the Buddha that enabled him to reach *nibbāna*. In Cambodia the term is used popularly to refer to virtuous spirits, which usually make themselves apparent through a medium. Pāramī usually take the form of mythical or historical personalities (Bertrand 2004).
- 12 Buddhist renunciant women in Cambodia are not known to have ever performed alms rounds. The suggestion that she should do this is therefore radical. Had she done so she would have risked more scorn, hence her pleading with the spirit.
- 13 I am grateful to Erik Davis for sharing his observations on this with me.

Chapter 6

The Struggle for Recognition and Justice: Gender Inequality and Socially Engaged Buddhism in Thailand

Monica Lindberg Falk

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to explore gender relations in the realm of socially engaged Buddhism in Thailand. It raises questions about how the position of Thai Buddhist nuns outside the Buddhist *sangha* affects their religious standing and the possibilities they have to fulfil their monastic social role in relation to the laity.¹ According to Rita Gross, misogyny, the hatred or fear of women and the feminine, is not widespread in Buddhist texts (Gross 1993: 22). However, the ambiguity of female renunciation seems always to have been present. Buddhist women have found obstacles in many areas of their spiritual lives. For example, religious practices, instructional opportunities, meditational forms and institutional structures, which are routinely available to lay men and monks, are infrequently or never available to lay women and nuns. The disciplinary rules that govern the monastic lives of nuns have clearly delineated them in relation to monks. Although women by doctrine are fully capable of reaching enlightenment, the recognition of the final goal in terms of title and status has often been withheld from them at various points in Buddhism's history. Moreover, female renunciants are often refused the kind of material support that male renunciants receive. Nuns receive donations but their material support is considerably inferior to that given to comparable monks and their communities.

In Thailand, structural gender inequality is brought into sharp relief in the realm of religion. Gender relations represent cultural ideas and values

that assign authority and executive power (see also the Introduction in this volume). Thai Buddhist nuns have existed in Thailand for centuries (Chatsumarn 1991: 36). However, in contrast to monks, they are almost invisible in society. Thai nuns are excluded in public spheres and are denied the right to formal recognition of their religious role (see also the Introduction in this volume). Consequently, the long history of Buddhist nuns in Thailand has not meant that they have gained formal religious authority; instead, they hold a secondary standing in the temples. The number of nunneries is small when compared to the number of monks' temples. The nuns' ambiguous and inferior religious position, combined with their generally low level of education, has hampered them in their monastic social role. The ordained life of men is highly respected and ordination raises their social standing. For women, on the other hand, ordination is not widely appreciated and it is not in line with the Thai gender order.

For centuries, Thai temples have been centres for community activities and social engagement and lay people have turned to the monks for support and advice. In contrast to the temples, nunneries have not had a similar central position in communities. I have argued elsewhere that the *mae chiis* at nunneries have better conditions for their monastic training than *mae chiis* at temples and that holds true for *mae chiis* living in the area where Ratburi Nunnery is located (see Lindberg Falk 2002, 2007). *Mae chiis*, who live predominantly as housekeepers for the monks, have no chance to develop an ordained life that fully contrasts with the lay world. Nor do lay people recognise those nuns as knowledgeable, wise religious persons to whom they can turn in times of crisis. At temples, the nuns risk having their time consumed by household chores and services to the monks, with the result that they are left with limited time for studies and Buddhist practice. Furthermore, the nuns at temples are not entitled to officiate at ceremonies or allowed to go on alms rounds; prohibitions that further emphasize their unrecognized religious position. Today, more nuns are educated than before and they have the capability to fully act in the monastic role. However, lack of recognition and justice is still subordinating Thai nuns on the basis of gender (see also the Introduction in this volume).

Being ordained implies having a particular relationship with the lay community. Those who have renounced the world are expected to develop knowledge and wisdom through study and meditation, to teach the laity, and also to provide a refuge in times of suffering. Monks have always had better conditions than nuns for fulfilling these duties. A morally pure

Buddhist *sangha* is considered to be essential for lay people to attain religious merit and, for reasons of religious legitimacy, it is important that the boundary between the lay and ordained realms is maintained. There is a widespread fear that secularism as well as supernaturalism will weaken Thais' traditional adherence to Buddhism, which would lead to the legitimacy of the entire political structure being undermined and social order threatened (Jackson 1989: 57). The involvement of Buddhist monks and nuns in social issues is sometimes the object of criticism, and such monks and nuns may also be derided because of the lay character of social activities. The position of Thai Buddhist nuns (*mae chiis*) simultaneously belonging to the secular and to the religious realms demands special caution when it comes to involvement in secular matters. Social engagement may threaten vows and thereby undermine the religious authority of ordained persons. By extension, traditional interpreters of Buddhism fear that any erosion of the vital boundary between the lay and the religious realms will degrade the religious realm. This would mean in turn that the *sangha* would not be morally pure and the monastics would lose their capacity to transfer religious merit to the lay people (see e.g. Jackson 1997: 80–88).

The Thai nuns' equivocal position outside the Buddhist *sangha* brings both benefits and drawbacks, which become evident in the nuns' relationship with lay people. Monks' and nuns' engagement in social issues is usually on a voluntary basis. This chapter focuses on the significance of the engagement of Thai Buddhist nuns in social issues that also concern lay people. It highlights certain conditions that facilitate this social engagement and gives examples of nuns who practise socially engaged Buddhism in Thailand. The ethnography presented here is based on research conducted between 1996 and 2006, including one and a half years of fieldwork among Thai Buddhist nuns in 1997–1998 and interviews and observations I conducted during visits ranging from 1996 to 2005. The primary data was derived from ethnographic research, such as participant observation, interviews and informal discussions with nuns, but my research also included interviews with monks and lay people. During fieldwork in 1997–1998, I lived together with nuns at a self-governed nunnery in Central Thailand.² At the nunnery I participated in the nuns' daily activities and partook in ceremonies, teaching, training courses and various meetings that the nuns attended. I visited nuns at temples and nunneries in all regions in Thailand, and interviewed more than one hundred nuns, ranging from twelve to more than eighty years of age. I also gathered full-length life stories from

key informants. Following that research I carried out a project on socially engaged Buddhism in Thailand.³ During 2004 and 2005, I conducted participant observation and interviewed monks, nuns and lay people involved in social activities concerning education, poverty-alleviation and HIV/AIDS. Currently I am working on a project on Buddhism's role in the recovery process after the tsunami of 2004.⁴

GENDER AND ENGAGED BUDDHISM

The Thai Buddhist nuns and female monks (*bhikkhunis*) share the foremost aim of 'Engaged Buddhism', which means putting equality into practice. Endeavours such as the struggle undertaken by engaged Buddhists to restore the right of women to receive full ordination as Buddhist female monks connect engaged Buddhism to the global struggle for gender equality.

The term 'Engaged Buddhism' was coined by the Mahayana Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh in the 1950s to bring to light the potential within Buddhism for social activism. The term was used to describe those who promoted peace and social activism and environmental awareness (see Queen and King 1996). Today, 'Engaged Buddhism' covers many different activities, including social work, poverty-alleviation, ecology and development programmes, political activism and human rights agitation. The common unifying component is that people who apply the label to their activities perceive themselves as manifesting Buddhist principles in concrete activities aimed at benefiting people other than themselves. Apart from Thich Nhat Hanh, some important figures include the Dalai Lama from Tibet, the Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and the Thai social reformer Sulak Sivaraksa (Sulak Sivaraksa 1988, 1992). The expanded term, 'Socially Engaged Buddhism', emerged during the 1980s and has been applied to a growing worldwide social movement, which seeks to adapt Buddhist principles and practices to contemporary social issues (see Queen and King 1996).

In the Theravada tradition, the Buddhist text known as the Pali canon is of fundamental importance and is used daily by monks and nuns at the temples. In Thailand, as in other Theravada countries, there have been various efforts to make the Buddhist worldview easily comprehensible for people in contemporary society. Special efforts have been made to interpret the tradition in a socially, economically and politically relevant manner. Donald Swearer (1996) identifies two developments that have

emerged in Thailand. One he refers to as fundamentalist-like movements and the other he characterizes as liberal and reformist. The well-known monks, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Dhammapitaka, and the country's best-known lay Buddhist intellectual and social critic, Sulak Sivaraksa, are examples of liberal advocates of institutional reform and represent Socially Engaged Buddhism in Thailand.

The monks' role has shifted over the centuries. In Thailand today, the government has taken over many of the social activities that were traditionally the responsibility of temples and monks. These include education, health care, social work, community support and development. Generally the position of the temples has shifted from that of a community-based and engaged institution to that of an institution concerned primarily, and more or less exclusively, with religion alone. In recent decades, the Thai Buddhist *sangha* has lost a great deal of its influence in the political field, while, parallel to this, the informal role of women in Buddhism has been considerably strengthened. Women are still not permitted entrance into the Thai *sangha* and their role in Thai Buddhism is not formally recognized, but through the *mae chiis*' independently governed nunneries and their increasingly better educational standards, the status of *mae chiis* has improved to become more like that of the monks. However, the alterations of the monks' significance in relation to politics have not necessarily made the role of monks less important in lay communities (Jackson 1997). In Thailand, as in many Southeast Asian contexts, new and modern forms of Buddhist practice and beliefs, grounded in the ancient form of Buddhism, continue to emerge. Beginning in the early 1970s, a handful of monks began independent rural development projects based on their interpretations of the Buddhist teachings. These provided a sharp critique of the capitalism promoted by the government. These monks feared the effects of growing consumerism and the dependence of farmers on outside markets (see Darlington 1998). The emergence and growth of the so-called development monks paralleled and accompanied the rise of NGOs engaged in alternative development, such as Wildlife Fund Thailand and projects for ecological recovery. The involvement of Buddhist monks raised the issues from being merely economic or political considerations to being placed on a moral plane concerned with the suffering of both humans and wildlife, resulting from the destruction of the forests and watersheds (Darlington 1998).

Since the 1980s, monks who are engaged in social activities have become increasingly involved in initiating rural development projects,

such as village credit unions and cooperatives, rice and buffalo banks, local handicraft production and marketing, and self-reliant and integrated agricultural programmes. Monks have also initiated projects specifically aimed at ecological conservation. The projects initiated by independent development monks are predominantly grassroots, small-scale activities.

Several *mae chiis* have informed me that the teaching of the important reformer Buddhadasa Bhikkhu had been an important source of inspiration for them. He made Buddhism comprehensible for common people by integrating modern views and a distinctive forest tradition. Buddhadasa's interpretation of canonical texts attracted not only many *mae chiis* but also an educated following among lay people. Jackson (1988) points out how important it was to Buddhadasa's thinking that lay men and women have access to the same spiritual insights as monks. Buddhadasa's teaching could be seen as an authorization of the *mae chiis* as religious specialists, and of women's capability to attain *nibbāna*, the final Buddhist goal, enlightenment which entails liberation from the mundane world and a complete liberation from suffering (see also Stevens and Nguyen-vo in this volume).

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu became a Buddhist monk in 1926, at the age of twenty. After a few years of study in Bangkok, he established a centre in the south of Thailand. In 1940 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu accepted an invitation from the Buddhist Association of Thailand to give a lecture in Bangkok, after which his movement began to expand among the urban middle class, particularly in Bangkok, and became an urban religious movement. Buddhadasa's interpretation of the *dhamma* found a large following among urban elites, while also providing an ideological base for Buddhist social activists on the periphery, both monks and laity, who were critical of the establishment and the Buddhist civil religion identified with it. Buddhadasa's doctrine of faith in the ethical teachings of the Buddha, as well as in science, reason, modernity and democracy, has been attractive to many educated Thais. Many of those involved in the student movement of the 1970s, which was the main force for social change at that time, found inspiration and guidance in Buddhadasa's teaching. The well-known social activist Sulak Sivaraksa, mentioned above, is profoundly influenced by the life and work of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (Santikaro 1996: 182).

A number of well-known nuns and female *dhamma* teachers have also been deeply influenced by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. One is Upasika Ki Nanayon (known as Acharn Kor Khao-suan-luang) and another is Upasika Ranjuan Indarakamhaeng, a former university lecturer who has been a

resident of Suan Mokkh, Buddhadasa's monastery and meditation centre, for many years and is today one of Thailand's most respected *Dhamma* and meditation teachers (Santikaro 1996: 181). Buddhadasa Bhikkhu felt that the status of women had been declining steadily since his youth and that this decline should be reversed. Perceiving women's important contributions towards solving problems in society, he wanted to establish a centre for women wishing to become *Dhamma Mothers (dhamma-mata)*, 'those who give birth through *Dhamma* (Santikaro 1996: 185). Buddhadasa Bhikkhu is held in high esteem by the *mae chiis*. Several of Buddhadasa's disciples, monks and lay people, are involved in various training and educational programmes given especially for nuns and organized by the International Network of Engaged Buddhism (INEB).

SOCIALLY ENGAGED THAI BUDDHIST NUNS

Despite the fact that gender equality is one of the foremost aims of the Engaged Buddhist Movement, leading socially engaged women are seldom mentioned. However, there are many nuns who are socially engaged and possess a great commitment to their work. In Thailand, nuns who live in temples have a subordinated position in relation to the monks, and are commonly excluded from contact with the lay people in their role as monastics. At nunneries that are governed by the nuns themselves, the nuns' roles are more like those of the monks. One example is the prominent nun, Mae chii Sansanee Sthirasuta, who is the founder and head of Sthiradhamma Sthana, a religious centre and nunnery located on the outskirts of Bangkok. She runs programmes for *mae chiis* with the objective of deepening the nuns' understanding of Buddhist practice and introducing them to applications of Buddhist teaching to social and rural development. Mae chii Sansanee has also started many community service projects, including an alternative kindergarten and a rehabilitation home for sexually abused women and those with unwanted pregnancies. She teaches university students and other lay people meditation, trains Thai boxers in compassion and positive attitude, and provides Sunday Dhamma activities for families in the area. Her centre is also a meeting place where nuns from around the country can network and discuss ways of coping with various issues that affect nuns in particular. Khun Mae Prathin Kwan-orn and Mae chii Khunying Kanitha Wichiencharoen are two more examples of outstanding *mae chiis* who have been actively engaged in creating and

formalizing secondary and higher education for nuns through the Thai Nuns' Institute, the Dhammacarinii School, and the Mahapajapati Theri College. The social engagement of these two nuns will be dealt with below.

MAE CHII KHUNYING KANITHA AND THE FIRST THAI NUNS' COLLEGE

The three nuns mentioned above are all well educated, as this is a prerequisite for their carrying out socially engaged work. Mae chii Khunying Kanitha Wichiencharoen was one of the most well-known socially engaged Thai Buddhist nuns,⁵ and worked on numerous projects promoting women's rights. Before she became a Buddhist nun she was an influential lawyer and spent most of her life fighting to protect women from discrimination and exploitation. She was highly respected for her social work and commitment to achieving equal rights for Thai women.

Mae chii Khunying Kanitha received *mae chii* ordination in October 1993 when she was seventy-three. She said that she had had the idea of becoming a *mae chii* since she was young. When she was a child, she studied in a Catholic convent school in Bangkok and was very impressed by the Catholic nuns. She remembered seeing the Buddhist nuns cooking and doing domestic chores in the temple and compared them to the Catholic nuns in the convent who had access to higher education. She wanted the Buddhist nuns to have the same opportunity as Catholic nuns to study and to become teachers.

At the time of Mae chii Khunying Kanitha's ordination, it was difficult for her to leave the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women, APSW, of which she was the founder. They still needed her advice and were dependent on her leadership in the early years of her nunhood. Therefore Mae chii Khunying Kanitha decided to establish what she called a 'nuns' cottage', and she stayed there together with a few other nuns. The different enterprises that were gathered under the umbrella organisation, APSW, reflected Mae chii Khunying Kanitha's various interests and works. A wide range of activities were housed in the compound which contained: a gender research institute, a guest house, an emergency home, a nursery, a day care centre, a hospice for women with AIDS, a gymnasium, and the nuns' cottage.

Mae chii Khunying Kanitha wanted to see nuns and women playing a more active role in society through social work. She worked to improve the nuns' generally low status in society by campaigning for their legal status

and education. She saw clearly that the nuns needed a good educational background both in secular and in religious subjects, and concluded that higher education and engagement in social work would help improve the rights and status of women at large. For several years she worked on a nuns' law, which would have given the *mae chiis* legal recognition as ordained persons. However, the proposed nuns' law was rejected by the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs in March 2003, meaning that the legal position of nuns remains ambiguous.

Her final project was to establish a Buddhist nuns' college. In 1999, after five years of intensive work, the first Buddhist college for women in Thailand was opened. Initially the college was a pilot project under the supervision of the Faculty of Religion and Philosophy, at the monks' university Mahamakut Rajavidyalai. The nuns named the college Mahapajapati Theri, after the first Buddhist *bhikkhuni*. Mae chii Khunying Kanitha's pioneering work has been of great importance for many women in Thailand. The combination of her high social position, educational background, and social engagement were crucial for the realization of the nuns' college and for her work with improving the situation of Thai nuns. She argued that the nuns needed education, and attracted generous donations from the Supreme Patriarch, Luang Por Koon Parisutho, the abbot of Wat Dhammongkol in Bangkok, the Mae Chii Thai Foundation, APSW and from many lay people. Most of the nuns and women who study at the college come from poor farming families whose poverty has prevented them from gaining access to higher education. Currently, the college offers a Bachelor of Arts in Buddhism and Philosophy, but plans to increase its educational programme by offering a Bachelor of Arts in Education and a Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

All college students, whether they are nuns or not, must adhere strictly to the eight Buddhist precepts: to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual activity, lying, taking intoxicants, eating after noon, beautification or entertainment, and sleeping on thick mattresses. The daily schedule follows the routine at Buddhist temples and nunneries. This means that the day starts at an early hour with morning chanting and meditation. Then some of the nuns perform an alms round in the neighbourhood, while other students carry out various duties such as tending to the plants and working in the kitchen. Buddhist chanting and meditation ends the day. The college educates socially engaged Buddhist nuns and young lay women, and students in their fourth and final year of studies teach English, mathematics and Buddhism in the local school nearby. On Sundays, the

nuns welcome children and adults to join various activities at the college. They organize Buddhist youth camps and also run various short vocational training courses for the villagers. When finances allow, the college intends to expand its social activities to include a home for deserted elderly women, a vocational training centre, a telephone counselling service, a kindergarten and a primary school.

KHUN MAE PRATHIN KWAN-ORN AND RATBURI NUNNERY SCHOOL

Khun Mae Prathin Kwan-orn is a longstanding nun and is the head nun at Ratburi Nunnery. She has long been socially engaged and focused on providing educational opportunities to nuns and young women in Thailand. She started her own secondary education while living at the temple where she was ordained several decades ago. Later she went to study Pali in Bangkok. She completed her Bachelor of Arts and thereafter Master of Arts in India. It is still not common for nuns to be provided with the financial means to study, but Khun Mae Prathin was supported by her family and by lay followers. The initiative to start the Ratburi Nunnery came from the Thai Nuns' Institute. Ratburi Nunnery was established in 1978 and has expanded continually over its more than decades of existence. The two nuns Khun Mae Prathin and Khun Mae Sumon had only recently completed their university studies in India when they were invited to establish Ratburi Nunnery. Khun Mae Prathin was born in a province not far from where Ratburi Nunnery is situated. She was ordained at a temple at which both monks and nuns lived. However, the nuns department was similar to a nunnery and separate from the monks at the temple. The nuns ruled themselves and did not have to cook for the monks, which is otherwise a common task for nuns at temples in Thailand.

Khun Mae Prathin is one example of a socially engaged Thai Buddhist nun who is strongly committed to the issue of providing education for girls. Long before she started the secondary school at the nunnery, she had felt pity for girls who only had the opportunity to study at primary school. Khun Mae Prathin considered educational level to be a crucial factor in the lives of both lay and ordained Thai women, and saw that after the six years of primary schooling many impoverished girls could not afford to continue studying. Many underprivileged girls instead started working in poorly paid jobs while still very young. Khun Mae Prathin saw that many young Thai women sought employment in urban areas in order to help support

their families. They had to cope with poor working conditions because of their lack of qualifications for better employment. She identified lack of access to further education as a basic problem that had to be dealt with if young women were to be rescued from harsh treatment in factories or recruitment into the sex trade. As soon as she had the opportunity, she decided to dedicate herself to providing secondary education especially for girls who could not otherwise afford to study (see also Göransson in this volume).

Once Ratburi Nunnery was established, Khun Mae Sumon and Khun Mae Prathin made an attempt at starting a school for *mae chiis*. However, the large amount of work required and the lack of teachers forced them to close the school. Instead, they continued with the hard work of constructing buildings on the nunnery's difficult marshland site. While they were building the *saalaa*, the main building at the nunnery, Khun Mae Sumon became severely ill and died. Khun Mae Prathin continued the work with the help and support of the other *mae chiis* at the nunnery. In 1990, Khun Mae Prathin found a new chance to establish a school for girls and nuns in Thailand, and it became the first school ever established by *mae chiis* for girls in Thailand. By contrast, boys have always had the opportunity to obtain free education at temple schools. The opening of the school at the nunnery was made possible through economic help from a monk in Bangkok. This time the nunnery had better conditions. The nunnery had buildings, better financial support and more teachers. The nunnery school survives mainly on support from the lay community and from individual monks and nuns.

Today there are about fifty *mae chiis*, a varying number of *chii phrams*, and about sixty schoolgirls living at the nunnery.⁶ The schoolgirls study primary and secondary curricula and Buddhism at the school. The students come from different parts of the country, mostly from poor villages in the North-eastern and Central provinces, and commonly stay at the nunnery for several years. The school also provides an opportunity for *mae chiis* to acquire higher education and nuns from all over the country come to live and study at this nunnery.

The school system in Thailand is currently undergoing a process of change and the period of compulsory education is now nine years. This means that even girls from poor families will have access to free secondary education. In this time of educational reforms, Ratburi Nunnery has upgraded its educational standard. The school was originally established as

a non-formal school, but the nuns have recently formalized the school, and are planning to increase its intake to about one hundred students.

Ratburi Nunnery has an educational profile and there are always a number of visiting nuns who live at the nunnery for a limited period of time in order to study. The nuns study both secular and religious subjects and also have daily training in reading, memorizing and reciting chants. The nuns learn to recite sermons used in various rituals that are important for their public performances in the village. Every religious occasion at the temple requires chanting by the monastics, and the nuns are often invited to chant at nearby temples, for example at funerals, and at people's homes for house-blessing rituals. These activities are typical vocations that Thai village monks engage in. To perform these ceremonies requires special knowledge that not all *mae chiis* possess.

THE MARGINALIZATION OF FEMALE ASCETICS

Thai women who aspire to become ordained usually have to struggle with various difficulties, even though they only seek *mae chii* ordination rather than that of the *bhikkhuni*. *Bhikkhuni* and *mae chii* are two categories of Buddhist monastic women that exist in Thailand today and both are outside the strictly male Thai *sangha*. The *bhikkhuni* order (female monks' order) never flourished in Thailand and Theravada female monks are thus novel in today's Thai religious realm. Buddhist temples formerly held a central position in Thai villages and monks had the roles of educators, sponsors of co-operative work activities, personal and social counsellors, and ethical mentors (Swearer 1995: 117). As mentioned above, most *mae chiis* live at temples without holding any formal role, and the Thai nuns' marginal position at temples and in society is striking. Kamala Tiyavanich (1997) has examined many archives of Buddhist texts in Thai and reports that over the centuries there has been a conspicuous silence about the *mae chiis*, their lives, and their roles in the temples. The impression she has obtained is that they have lived an obscure life without formal religious assignments. However, she has found that in regional traditions there were prominent women renunciants, but their identities and teachings do not appear in official records because they were devoted to meditation rather than to scholastic training (Kamala 1997: 281).

The ongoing changes in the Thai religious realm have brought female monastics into the limelight and raised urgent questions about the lack

of gender equality in Thai Buddhism. The male-dominated Thai Buddhist *sanghai* and women's exclusion from a legal religious position became an issue for popular debate when the first Thai woman received *bhikkhuni* novice ordination in 2001. The ideal of equality for all human beings has not been put into practice in the Buddhist institutions. In Thailand, women continue to be refused full ordination as *bhikkhuni*. Male monks monopolize the formal religious sphere and women are not entitled to enter into the Buddhist congregation, *sanghai*. Despite the difficulties women often face in their ordained life, many nuns develop in their vocation, and there are manifold examples of women's great spiritual capacity. Throughout history there have been individual *mae chiis* who have earned public recognition for their activities, most particularly for their meditation skills. There are also well-known, longstanding meditation teachers, such as Acaan Naeb Mahaniranon, Ki Nanayon and Acaan Ranjuan, who have not sought *mae chii* ordination, probably because of the *mae chiis'* unclear position and difficult situation in Thai society (Kornfield 1996 [1977]; Van Esterik, J. 1996 [1982]; Kamala 1997; Batchelor 2000). Instead they have preferred to maintain their lay status. Nevertheless, they shave their heads and follow the same eight precepts as the *mae chiis*. One of the essential obstacles for the *mae chiis* is their context-dependent status. In some circumstances they are associated with the lay world and in others with the religious realm.

In general, Thai nuns and monks consider the Buddhist texts to be of fundamental importance for their understanding and practice of Buddhism. The Buddhist scriptures are also important for comprehending women's altered standing in Buddhism today. Women have gone from being fully ordained *bhikkhuni* and for centuries part of the *sanghai*, to being excluded from that congregation and denied ordination, to once again having achieved the possibility of receiving *bhikkhuni* ordination. Since 1998, it is possible for Thai women to receive *bhikkhuni* ordination abroad. Acaan Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was the first Thai woman who utilized the opportunity to receive ordination as a *bhikkhuni* in the Theravada tradition. She was ordained as *samaneri bhikkhuni* (novice female monk) by the Sri Lankan *sangha* in Sri Lanka on 6 February 2001, and adopted the religious name Dhammananda. She received full *bhikkhuni* ordination in Sri Lanka on 28 February 2003. In 2006 there were about seven Thai *bhikkhunis*; however, the Thai *sanghai* has not recognised their status as Theravada female monks. The international feminist Buddhist movement is advocating female monks' ordination and is challenging the Thai androcentric paradigm, here represented by the

Thai *sanghai* (see also the introduction in this volume; Lindberg Falk 2008). However, I have found that most *mae chiis* ignore the structural inequalities of the religious organization. Currently they are in no position to oppose the *sanghai*, and tolerate their neglected position in the knowledge that women have the same capacity as men to reach the Buddhist final goal, enlightenment.

VIOLATING GENDER ORDERS

Generally speaking, Thai people are ambivalent about women who abandon traditionally accepted social roles, and they do not encourage women to renounce the world. The ideal Thai woman is expected to fulfil the roles of wife and mother. The somewhat negative attitude towards *mae chiis*, together with their ambiguous position as renunciants, has made the role of *mae chiis* vague and questionable. The authorities also treat *mae chiis* in an ambiguous way. The government supports monks with free education, free medical care and free or reduced fares for buses and trains. Nuns do not receive such support from the government on account of their official status as laity. However, their ambiguous position becomes obvious when the same government denies *mae chiis* the right to vote in public elections because of their ascetic status and renunciation of worldly matters.

Commonly, Thai women who choose to receive ordination have a firm spiritual conviction. The nuns have diverse backgrounds and are not a homogeneous group: age, social background, educational level, aspirations and motives for receiving ordination vary significantly and inform differences between individual nuns. The social background of the *mae chiis* has significance for their lives as religious practitioners. Wealth and high social prestige may enhance an individual *mae chii's* position, but are not enough to ensure acceptance as a religious person, since this requires a combination of religious knowledge and practice. Thus, education and religious practice are crucial for *mae chiis* in their role as ordained persons.

In Thailand there is a widespread attitude that women are not spiritually qualified for the monastic life. Women are apparently seen as having less merit than men. Many Thai women are convinced that they carry a heavy load of 'negative karma' due to the simple fact of their sex, and are therefore eager to gain merit in order to offset it (Chatsumarn 1991: 31). Former deeds are commonly used to explicate gender; and the idea that rebirth as

a woman is the result of misdeeds in past lives is widespread in Thailand, despite the fact that this notion lacks authority in Buddhist philosophical texts. Thai women who seek their right to live a religious life and strive towards uplifting the position of women find support for women's spiritual capabilities in the Buddhist scriptures and are inspired by the narratives of the enlightened *bhikkhuni* and lay women related in the Buddhist teachings, as well as in history. *Mae chiis* express their certainty about women's and men's equal capacities to reach the final goal, *nibbāna*. When discussing this subject, the *mae chiis* commonly refer to the scriptures about women's spiritual capacities and are encouraged by the Therigatha text, which contains narratives of the early enlightened female monks.

FOUNDING A THAI NUNS' ORDER

In 1969 the Thai Nuns' Institute, Sathaaban Mae Chii Thai, was founded. This meant that Thai nuns gained a national network and a public representative who could unite them and work with issues that concerned them. The nuns were scattered all over the country and did not belong to a formal nuns' order. Their religious practices were not uniform and there were variations in ordination procedures and regulations pertaining to *mae chiis*. In 1975 the Thai Nuns' Institute published a *Handbook of the Thai Mae Chiis* with the purpose of confirming the nuns' ordained status and providing them with guidelines for their religious life. The *Handbook* is widely circulated and used by *mae chiis* all over the country, just as the *Patimokkha* is used by monks. The nuns follow the eight Buddhist precepts given there, and the *Handbook* also contains discipline rules and detailed training rules concerning proper behaviour for both categories: *mae chii* and *chii phram*. Punishment for breaking the disciplinary rules is also described in the document. According to the *Handbook* every nun has to practise the *sekiyadhamma*, which consists of the seventy-five training rules for monastics. The *sekhiya* rules may be taken as a manual of manners proper for monastics. According to Chatsumarn, there are grounds to believe that some of the *sekhiya* rules are among the oldest rules of the *Patimokkha* (Chatsumarn 1984: 133). The *sekhiya* rules for *bhikkhunis* are the same set of rules in both content and numbers as *Bhikkhus'* rules, and the *mae chiis'* use the same *sekhiya* rules.

In the process of becoming a religious specialist and belonging to the religious realm, religious practice and interaction with the lay community

are vital. The *mae chiis'* religious agency and performance in the religious field challenge the prevailing notion of women belonging to the lay realm only. Maintaining the distinction between the lay and ordained realms also includes the different activities the laity and the monastics are supposed to carry out. Special chores that are closely associated with the lay realm, such as childcare, are forbidden to *mae chiis*. Children below the age of seven are not allowed to stay at nunneries. Boys are commonly not allowed to stay at nunneries at all, no matter what age they are. There is a rule stating that *mae chiis* should not be close to any men, monks or novices, even if they are their relatives.

Buddhist nunneries that are governed by the nuns themselves and are independent from monks' temples are a recent phenomenon in Thailand. In 1978, when Ratburi Nunnery was founded by the Thai Nuns' Institute, it was still fairly rare to find nuns' communities outside the administrative structure of a temple. However, the two neighbouring provinces, Ratchaburi and Petchaburi, are special in the sense that they have had nunneries run by women ascetics for a long time (Chatsumarn 1991: 65; Kamala 1997: 283). These two provinces have a comparatively high number of nuns and there are some well-known female *dhamma* and meditation teachers from this region. To date, the Thai Nuns' Institute has established about twenty-five branches all over Thailand.

CONCLUSIONS

The historical Buddha founded an order for women wherein it was possible for women to receive ordination. This was not social reform to overcome existing inequalities, but rather the creation of a second world where such distinctions were no longer relevant. Every person, irrespective of caste, was welcome to join the order. However, in the early stage of Buddhism it was difficult for women to enter the order.

The denial in modern times of women's right to enter the formal religious domain has created an ambiguous position for Thai nuns, who fall in between the lay and religious realms, which has tended to marginalize them socially. Numerous writers on Thailand, for example Khin Thitsa (1980), Tantiwiranond and Pandey (1987), Chatsumarn (1991), Sulak (1992) and Morris (1994), have noted the reluctance to ordain women to the Thai *sangha* and debated the significance of this for the status of women in contemporary Thai society. They have been concerned with the question

of whether Buddhism is part of the patriarchal suppression of women or not. If Buddhism, like other world religions, exercises such suppression, the question is whether this is an intrinsic part of Buddhism or merely a later addition. The ambiguity of women's entry into religious orders seems always to have been present; however, Rita Gross holds that misogyny is not widespread in Buddhist texts (1993: 22).

Engaged Buddhism is, in a certain sense, a result of the great tension modern Buddhists have felt between theoretical and idealized concepts and the way these concepts have been used. Despite all the social and institutional restrictions for women, the aim for both men and women within Buddhism is to become enlightened and escape the cycle of death and rebirth. The best way to reach the ultimate goal is to live an ordained life. Men's ordination is highly respected and uplifts their social standing. For women, leaving the lay world and seeking ordination, even though they may only seek *mae chii* ordination, is commonly not appreciated and not in line with the Thai gender system. At many temples, studies are primarily reserved for the monks. However, not all Thai nuns are interested in education. As with monks, there are nuns who prefer to dedicate themselves solely to the practice of meditation. Nevertheless, access to education does affect the status of *mae chiis* and influence their identity as ascetic women.

In recent decades, many nuns have through their own agency and capacity started to enhance their position and create better circumstances for themselves, something which has also been beneficial for the lay community. Teaching is a social activity that is part of the Buddhist monastic role, and in Thailand Buddhist institutions have long played a major role in education. However, educational opportunities have not been available for Thai nuns in the same way that they have for Thai monks. The Thai Nuns' Institute plays a central role in providing education for *mae chiis*, and has been involved in the establishment of the school at Ratburi Nunnery and also in the recent establishment of Mahapajapati Theri College, the first Buddhist College for women in Thailand.

At Ratburi Nunnery, the nuns have become visible in the lay community. Their religious performance, their hard work at the nunnery and their strict monastic behaviour have been recognised by the lay people. Not only do they now attain higher educational levels, but they also earn religious legitimacy. This has not rendered them formal recognition, but they are granted informal legitimacy as religious specialists. It is in areas in which nunneries are situated that *mae chiis* achieve increased acceptance

by, and support from, the laity (see Lindberg Falk 2007). Impeccable conduct, religious performance and Buddhist knowledge have proved to be requirements for achieving religious legitimacy. Co-operation with monks and lay people is also of significance in the recognition of the nuns' capacities as religious persons. A morally pure *sangha* and ethically strict monks have been important in legitimizing the traditional Thai political structure and linking the cosmic order with the social order (see Bjarnegård in this volume; Jackson 1989; Keyes 1987).

In line with the fact that official forms of Buddhism in recent decades have become less important for legitimizing the state, lay people have begun to ascribe educated, morally pure and socially engaged nuns religious legitimacy by recognising their religious leadership and treating them as religious merit givers. Over the years, *mae chiis* have made some limited progress within the formal Buddhist institutions. Nevertheless, they continue to be discriminated against in certain respects. They are awarded qualifications distinct from those widely recognised for monks, and the Buddhist educational institutions provide a far more formal and systematic education for monks than for nuns. It follows that with the lack of academic training opportunities, fewer qualified teachers graduate. The absence of highly qualified nun teachers means that women have less access to religious education, a cycle which is self-perpetuating and which the *mae chiis* are trying to break through their daily socially engaged Buddhist work.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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NOTES

- 1 *Sangha* originally referred to the community of Buddhists that consisted of both male and female monks, novices and lay people. In Thailand *sangha* refers to the assembly

of male monks and novices; female monks and nuns (*mae chiis*) are not part of the *sangha*.

- 2 The research was carried out in connection with my Ph.D. research, which received funding from the Swedish Council for Planning and Coordination of Research (FRN), the Swedish Humanities Research Council (HSFR) and Svenska Sällskapet för Geografi (SSAG). See Lindberg Falk 2002.
- 3 The project was financially supported by SIDA/SAREC.
- 4 This project is financially supported by the Swedish Research Council ('VR').
- 5 Mae chii Khunying Kanitha died in May 2002.
- 6 *Chii phram* is a woman who has received 'lay' temporary ordination without shaving her head.

Chapter 7

Compromised Ideals: Family Life and the Recognition of Women in Vietnam

Helle Rydstrøm

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I consider the recognition of women in contemporary Vietnam by examining the body-bound ways in which women and men are rendered meaningful. My focus is on the family because it, as a unit of genealogical and social ties approved of by the nation-state, epitomizes the intersections between recognition, gender/sex and bodies (see Carsten 2005; Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako 1992). I refer to data collected during two periods of anthropological fieldwork carried out 1994–1995 and 2000–2001 in a rural Vietnamese commune called Think Tri.¹ In doing so, I first introduce the Vietnamese ideal of happy, progressive and harmonious families, second discuss the implications of this ideal with respect to the recognition of women, and third elucidate how male-to-female violence, as a bold demonstration of misrecognition, radically compromises the image of happy family life.

In following Nancy Fraser (2003), I understand the notion of recognition as related to a woman's status due to the socio-cultural ways in which her body is construed rather than seeing it as a matter of impediment to self-realization or psychical deformation, in terms of not managing to create a 'good life' for oneself. The extent to which a person is recognized, or misrecognized, is thus intimately intertwined with socio-cultural discourses and structures which inform the constitution of women and men (see also Butler 2004). The very same social conditions that facilitate

recognition thus also hold the power to foster misrecognition and even injustice and harm. Misrecognition, Fraser argues, 'is not to suffer distorted identity or impaired subjectivity as a result of being depreciated by others, it is rather to be constituted by institutionalized patterns of cultural value in ways that prevent one from participating as a peer in social life' (Fraser 2003: 24). Non-recognition or misrecognition then emerges as a kind of oppression, in terms of stunting the subject's possibilities of achieving a 'good life' (Fraser 2003; see also Nussbaum 2000, 2002).

FAMILIES

The family discourse in Vietnam merges Confucian and communist ideals and therefore condenses a dynamic conglomeration of ideas and ideological principles. The notion of 'family' (*gia dinh/nha*), either extended or nuclear, but most commonly patrilineal, has been a matter of dispute. The Communist Party (*Dang Cong san Viet Nam*) considered the pre-revolutionary (i.e. prior to 1945) family to be an oppressive Confucian and 'feudal' (*phong kien*) institution which challenged the building of modern families (Fahey 2002; Le Thi 1992; Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1989). Confucianism dominated Vietnamese society from 1075 to 1919 and continues to inform gendered/sexed interaction. According to Confucianism, the ideal society is ruled by the Emperor, or Heaven's Son, and marked by unity, harmony, order and stability. As Confucianism does not encourage equality but rather respect of those who personify social order, 'Three Bonds' (*Tam cuong*) define social relations: i.e. a subject's loyalty to the emperor, children's piety toward their parents, and a wife's obedience to her husband (Mai Huy Bich 1991; Marr 1981; Ta Van Tai 1981; Tran Dinh Huou 1991). The Confucian ideal of the Three Submissions (*Tam tong*) requires that a daughter obeys her father, a wife obeys her husband and a widow obeys her son (Trinh T. Minh-Ha 1992: 83). The Four Virtues (*Tu duc*) summarize a set of moral advice for girls and women:

First, *cong* [labour] taught a woman to be not only industrious but also appreciative of others' labour. Through her work such qualities as thrift, endurance, and attentiveness would be gradually instilled. [...]. Second, *dung* [appearance] educated her to maintain a neat and humble physical appearance in all situations. Under no circumstance would she expose her real financial condition through her attire—neither in rags nor in extravagant outfits. Third, *ngon* [speech] instructed her to refrain from

verbally showing such intense emotions as anger, frustration or jealousy. This act of self-control was a demonstration of her care and respect for people around her. Finally, *hanh* [conduct] focused on her inner beauty, making her an upright, filial, devoted, trustworthy, and kind-hearted person. *Hanh* was the ultimate outcome of the long process of self-control, self-sacrifice, and self-cultivation. Reaching this final stage of virtue training, one would receive considerable recognition and admiration from one's lineage and community as a woman of unstained virtues and perfect morality (*duc han ven toan*) (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004: 50–51; see also Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001).

After the communist revolution in 1945, the Women's Union (*Hoi phu nu Viet Nam*)² became engaged in the eradication of Confucian 'backward' (*lac hau*) and 'feudal' (*phong kien*) vestiges in communist Vietnam. Confucian precepts therefore could not be preserved in their original form. They were defined as counteracting communist ideals regarding the organization of society and the 'equality of men and women' (*nam nu binh dang*) (Barry 1996; Hoang Ba Thinh 2002; Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004). On 28 December 1959, the Law on Marriage and the Family was passed by the National Assembly. The law aimed at eradicating pre-revolutionary Confucian values by forbidding parental forced and early marriage, the use of property as a betrothal gift, mistreatment of women, concubinage and wife-beating (art. 3). Moreover, abuse of daughters-in-law, adopted children, and stepchildren was explicitly prohibited (art. 18). Women had the right to own property before and after marriage (art. 15). A special section was dedicated to women's rights to obtain divorce and the protection of children. In all, the law aimed to destroy all 'remnants of feudalism' and to build 'happy, democratic and egalitarian families' (Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978). With the introduction of the renovation program, *doi moi*, in 1986, Vietnam went through a rapid period of transition in which women's equality was improved vis-à-vis men.³ However, Le Thi Quy, who is a representative of the National Women's Union, is concerned about the extent to which the conditions of women have been further improved after the introduction of the *doi moi* policy:

Since the triumph of the August Revolution in 1945, a persistent struggle for equality of the sexes has been undertaken in all spheres, legislation, family, and society. This has led to a fundamental change in the position, rights and interests of women. However, any struggle has its difficulties, in particular, the struggle against backward perceptions and customs which have existed for centuries. It is then understandable that today, forty

years after the liberation from the colonial and feudal yoke, vestiges of the Confucian attitude of 'honouring men and despising women' still linger and have even regained vitality in some places. This attitude creates a kind of terrible violence against women (Le Thi Quy 1996: 264).

Le Thi Quy voices an interpretation of Vietnam's Confucian heritage which is not uncommon amongst scholars representing the National Women's Union. Her comments, therefore, need to be connected to pervasive family campaigns that have been carried out in Vietnam and which ambivalently subscribe to Confucian ideals (see also Bélanger and Barbieri 2009).

PROGRESSIVE, HAPPY AND HARMONIOUS FAMILIES

In official rhetoric in present-day Vietnam, the family is commonly referred to as a unit that frames the function of biological reproduction and nurturance. The cooperation of members of the family is assumed to entail a unique kind of affection and love governed by feelings and morality rather than by contracts and law (see Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako 1992). Owing to what is regarded as their essential bodily capacities, women are acknowledged as reproducers and nurturers within the unit of the family. Modern families are acknowledged as happy, progressive and harmonious, and assumed to be able to stimulate Vietnam's process of modernization and development in a global world (Barry 1996; Drummond 2004; Hoang Ba Think 2002; Marriage and Family Law 2000). An ideal family consists of a heterosexual and monogamous couple, each of whom has married on a voluntary basis. Happy, progressive, and harmonious families are generally understood as healthy well-to-do families with no more than two children (preferably a son and a daughter). In ideal families, all members are assumed to treat one another in morally proper ways, and recurring 'conflicts' (*cham*) or violent confrontations are not expected to occur (Hoang Ba Think 2002; Tran Dinh Huou 1991; Rydstrom 2003a).

The predominant family ideal in Vietnam has been reflected not only in the rural commune of Think Tri, where I conducted fieldwork, but also in national debates and campaigns. The campaigns mobilize citizens to attempt to organize their lives in conjunction with the ideals of love and affection, respect and faithfulness (Drummond 2004). Lisa Drummond (2004), for example, shows how family campaigns in the 1960s and onwards acknowledged the family as the foundation of society. The 'Cultured Family' (*Gia dinh van hoa*) campaign began in 1962, and in 1973 the slogan of

'Build[ing] a Civilized Way of Life and Cultured Family' emphasized family harmony as one of the central principles of an ideal family. In July 1988, the Central Steering Committee adapted the standards of a Cultured Family in order to adapt to a market-oriented and multi-sectored society. It was thus announced that one of the main standards of a Cultured Family was to 'build a harmonious, happy, [and] progressive family' (Drummond 2004: 165). In the early 1990s, however, only a limited number of households seemed to be aware of the family campaign, but due to intensified mobilization campaigns implemented with the aid of local People's Committees, the majority of the Vietnamese population today appears to be informed about the moral standards of a Cultured Family (Drummond 2004). According to the most recent Marriage and Family Law, families are understood as constituting the cells of society where 'men are brought up' and the foundation of a good society is created (Marriage and Family Law 2000, art. 1). Resembling the standards of the Cultured Family campaign of 1988, the scope of the Marriage and Family Law of 2000 is to promote what is referred to as the marriage and family regime. Each citizen should promote this regime by contributing to:

Building, perfecting and protecting the progressive marriage and family regime, formulate[ing] legal standards for the conducts of family members; protect[ing] the legitimate rights and interests of family members; inherit[ing] and promote[ing] the fine ethical traditions of the Vietnamese families in order to build prosperous, equal, progressive, happy and lasting families (Marriage and Family Law 2000, art. 1).

The principle of equality between husband and wife is central in the law, and preconditions to avoid gendered/sexed discrimination have been taken. For instance, it is pointed out that 'husband and wife are equal to each other, having equal obligations and rights in all aspects of their family' (Marriage and Family Law 2000, art. 19). In this spirit, husband and wife are expected to be 'faithful to, love, respect, care for and help, each other, so that they together can build a prosperous, equal, progressive, happy and lasting family' (Marriage and Family Law 2000, art. 18). Women, however, are subjected to particular protection in the sense that not only the nation-state, but also society in general as well as families all hold a duty to 'help mothers to [properly] fulfil their lofty motherhood functions' (Marriage and Family Law 2000, art. 2.6).

RECOGNIZING WOMEN'S SPECIAL ROLE

Recognition of women's reproductive body capacities, as reflected in the Law on Marriage and Family, is reiterated by influential feminist scholars in Vietnam. Le Thi (1999), for example, notes that a society exists and improves itself because of two important functions, namely the reproduction of human beings as such and the reproduction of material wealth. A family should be considered as an economic unit with certain responsibilities not only for its own but also for the entire society's maintenance and future existence. It is also in the family that 'the most profound sentiments are expressed' (Le Thi 1999: 15), according to Le Thi, because a family works as a platform for solidarity and sentimental, psychological and sexual harmony that assures family happiness (Le Thi 1999). In general, in the dominating discourse on women and families, women are approved of as having a 'natural vocation' (*Thien chuc*; i.e. Heavenly mandate) owing to their essential bodily capacities which enable them to bear and breastfeed children (Franklin 2000; see also Phinney 2003). In discussing recognition of women, Nira Yuval-Davis (1996) sheds light on the ways in which women's membership in their societies is of a double nature. Women are members of the collective, Yuval-Davis argues, but at the same time there are specific expectations and regulations that relate to women as women with female bodies. When women in the dominating national and even local discourses on family life are recognized by virtue of their female biological capacities, women are construed as biological reproducers of the nation. In that capacity, women emerge as salient for providing and bringing up a new generation.

Emphasizing women's role as reproducers, as Yuval-Davis (1996) points out, is not only a matter of a state implementing certain reproduction policies in which women are assigned a special role. With respect to female bodily capacities and the reproduction of the nation, women themselves frequently reinforce particular gender/sex values. Women of power at local and national levels may exert control over other women in order to make them live up to certain reproductive ideals. Such women of power could be older women or female intellectuals like Nguyen Thi Binh (1997), who observes that it is imperative to bear in mind the important responsibility of women as regards family life, the upbringing of children, and the conveying of cultural and moral values to children (see also Werner 2004b). In a

similar vein, Nguyen Duy Quy, a representative of the national Women's Union, says:

Women with their functions as wives and mothers, [...] shall contribute a large part in building a new type of people [...], preserving and bringing into full play the cultural identity of the nation while absorbing the cultural quintessence of mankind and passing this down to future generations (Nguyen Duy Quy 1997).

As a recent late-*doi moi* supplement to more official messages regarding happy families, a rapidly growing body of self-help literature increasingly offers, particularly to urban well-to-do women, suggestions on how to preserve a happy and harmonious family life. In a globalized world that pursues consumerism, Nguyen-vo Thu-huong argues, women are presented with a freedom of choice regarding how to construct their bodies in accordance with approved ideas of femininity, womanhood and motherhood (2004, and this volume). The new self-help literature encourages women to invest in themselves in order not only to appear appealing to their husband but also to learn how to be good mothers and housewives. What is marketed as freedom of choice paves the way for new techniques of self-government in women in the process of reaching stereotypical and bodily-defined ideals for women. The market and official ideals regarding women and their role in the family hence mutually support one another (see also Drummond 2003). Women thus are recognized owing to what is understood as their crucial role with respect to the reproduction and upbringing of morally sound citizens. However, there is obvious ambivalence and ambiguity in public discourses on women. Women affiliated with the Women's Union are demanding equality with men while at the same time they are celebrating women's potential for motherhood, which is assumed to generate strong ties between women and the domestic sphere. As summarized by Le Thi:

The mother plays a very important role in the education of children. The sentimental relations between the mother and the children are the basis for the latter's relations with the family and society. [...]. The father represents the intellectual, the will and the discipline of the family. He is an example for his children, especially the sons, to follow. Therefore, the father should participate in bringing up his children (Le Thi 1999: 90–91; see also Rydstrom 2001, 2003a).

In recent years, Confucian family ideals have been increasingly revitalized throughout Southeast Asia. Women's role as the bearers of the ideal family has been emphasized in family campaigns carried out in various countries of the region (e.g. Malaysia and Singapore). In these campaigns, women have been essentialized and defined above all as mothers and the moral providers of family harmony and happiness in a rapidly changing and increasingly global world (Stevens 2002; see also Fahey 2002).

PATRILINEAL FAMILIES

As Hue-Tam Ho Tai (2001) observes, recognition of women in a patrilineal kinship system and officially pursued gender ideologies in Vietnam is contradictory but also mutually supportive in portraying women as complementary to men:

In the Vietnamese kinship system, men form the core of the patrilineage but women are merely grafted onto it. Paternal relatives are thus called "inside kin" (*noi*), while maternal kin are considered "outside kin" (*ngoai*). In gender ideology, however, these roles are reversed. Women are associated with the inner sanctum, the core of the household; men represent its visible exterior, its public and ritual face. Whereas the women's sphere is the kitchen and their tasks focus on the material well-being of the family, the men's sphere is the front room, where guests are received and ancestors worshiped (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001: 169).

Even though a person does not relate only to her or his father's kin but also to an extended network of kin including the kin of one's mother, spouse, children, and siblings, family organization revolves around the patrilineage, as descent is traced patrilineally and post-marital patrilocal residence predominates (see Luong 1989, 2003).⁴ In *Thinh Tri*, the head of a household is usually a senior man approved of as the 'pillar of the house' (*tru cot*).⁵ In the practice of patrilineal ancestor worship, the relationship between the dead and the alive is reciprocal and eternal. The ancestors are acknowledged as representing the highest level in a patrilineage and the older a person is, the more respected that person will be, owing to an increased proximity to the deceased ancestors. Seniority, however, is imbalanced with respect to gender/sex in the sense that males are always acknowledged as superior to females within the vertical patrilineal kinship structure. Strictly speaking, a woman cannot acquire an equal status to a man regardless of her seniority. In practice, however, the patrilineal hierarchy is challenged by competing

ways of organizing family life which alter patrilineally-defined female-male balances (see Helliwell 1993; Phinney 2003; Rydstrom 2003a; Werner 2004b).

An oldest son is crucial for a patrilineage because he will usually be in charge of particular ritual obligations such as those in connection with his parents' 'funerals' (*dam ma*) and the 'annual death day celebration' (*bua gio/ngaygio*) of the deceased members of his patrilineage (Luong 1984, 1989, 2003; Malarney 1996; Tran Dinh Huou 1991).⁶ By reproducing the patrilineage of her husband, a woman is considered to demonstrate 'filial piety' (*hieu*) and thus honouring her husband's patrilineage (Pham Van Bich 1998; Rydstrom 2003a).⁷ As I have discussed elsewhere, an oldest son is acknowledged as connecting his patrilineage's deceased and future members by mediating physical, symbolic and temporal links across generations. Patrilineal blood passes through male bodies or, more precisely, from male genitals. In this sense, a son's genitals come to stand in a metonymic relation to his patrilineage as icons that mediate physical, symbolic, and temporal links across generations. A son is rendered intelligible as embodying patrilineal 'honour' (*danh du*) and ultimately 'morality' (*dao duc*), and he is therefore defined as 'inside lineage' (*ho noi*). Because past, present and future actions of the male members of a patrilineage are not clearly demarcated, the body capital of a boy or a man can be transferred from one male generation to the next (Rydstrom 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2004; see also Chanh Cong Phan 1993; Tran Dinh Huou 1991).⁸

Embodying the 'honour' and 'morality' of his entire patrilineage means that a son is not considered to be blank either biologically or symbolically. In a patrilineal socio-symbolic universe a daughter's body, on the other hand, materializes as blank because it does not incorporate patrilineal history and depth. A daughter is not recognized as embodying inborn patrilineal 'honour' and ultimately 'morality' (i.e. patrilineal body capital) and, therefore, she is rendered exterior in the patrilineal kinship organization; i.e. as 'outside lineage' (*ho ngoai*). Owing to the ways in which the bodies of sons and daughters are imbued with symbolic and material meaning, daughters must learn to compensate for their bodily deficiency, for instance, by providing male progeny and starting a happy family. In doing so, a woman demonstrates that she has *tin h cam* (sentiments/emotions/feelings), which in daily practice translates into the abilities of showing 'respect' (*kin h*), 'self-denial' (*nhuong*), 'endurance' (*ch iu*) and 'holding back' (*nh in*) oneself. Behaving with *tin h cam* means that a woman may be able

to generate 'honour' and ultimately 'morality' for herself and her husband's patrilineage (Rydstrøm 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2004; see also Anagnost 2004).

FAMILY HAPPINESS CONTESTED

In 1996, Kathleen Barry commented that Vietnamese 'family happiness'

... is a storehouse of unexplored meanings, a minefield of gender relations and patriarchal power. It is a source of profound anxiety as development and industrialization are dramatically changing family structure, functions, and relations (Barry 1996: 13).

Ideals of harmony and happiness are contested in many ways in daily life through day-to-day negotiations and conflicts. In the more extreme cases, the challenge of family ideals may even be manifested as violent confrontations between a husband and his wife (Hoang Ba Thinh 2002; Le Thi Phuong Mai 1998; Rydstrøm 2003b; World Bank 1999). The violence of a husband, as Henrietta Moore (1994) notes, can be seen as a course of action that exposes a crisis of the fantasy of (male) power in a patrilineal order. Violence works as a means to resolve the crisis, as it reconfirms a self-evident male hierarchy facilitated by a patrilineal tradition (Bui and Morash 1999; Connell 1995). Domestic violence is clearly an extreme way in which harmonious family life is compromised. Husband-to-wife violence remains a radical way of misrecognizing another person in terms of transgressing her mental and bodily boundaries (Hester 2003; Rydstrøm 2003b, 2006b).

Violence between husband and wife is prohibited by Vietnamese law. Article 21, paragraph 2 in the Law on Marriage and Family (2000), for example, reads that 'husband and wife are strictly forbidden to commit acts of ill-treating, persecuting or hurting the honour, dignity or prestige of each other' (Marriage and Family Law 2000). And in article 21, paragraph 1, in the Law on Marriage and Family, it is stressed that 'husband and wife [should] respect each other and preserve each other's honour, dignity, and prestige' (Marriage and Family Law 2000; see also Pham Kieu Oanh and Nguyen Thi Khoa 2003). In early November 2006, The National Assembly of Vietnam discussed the draft of the Law on Preventing Domestic Violence, which explicitly aims at preventing gendered/sexed abuse within the domestic sphere (Vietnam News, 6 November 2006). With the approval in 2007 of the new Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control⁹ and with the government beginning its implementation in 2008 an important step in

the prevention of wife battering was taken. Such initiatives are critical, as illustrated in a study from the early 1990s which estimates that between 60 and 70 per cent of all divorces in Vietnam were violence-related (Le Thi Quy 1996; see also World Bank 1999). In a 1998 study, 30 to 60 per cent of all divorce cases in Vietnam are said to be carried out because of men's violence against their wives (Croll 1998). In a World Bank study in 1999, local inhabitants nevertheless consider violence to be a limited problem. The level of violence was estimated to be 'low', as 'only' 5 to 20 per cent of all households were thought to regularly experience domestic violence (World Bank 1999: v; see also Hoang Nguyen Tu Khiem and Nguyen Kim Thuy 2005). In a study on violence in northern Vietnam from 2008, Nguyen Dang Vung and his colleagues argue that out of their sample of 883 women from the Bavi district in the Ha Tay Province, the life time prevalence of physical violence for women in intimate relations is 30.9 per cent while 8.5 per cent of the women participating in the study had experienced intimate partner violence within the preceding year (Nguyen Dang Vung et.al. 2008).

In Thinh Tri, Minh, one of the nurses from the local health care clinic, also minimizes husband-to-wife violence. Women who have been abused by their husband may seek support in the health care clinic but as long as the women 'only bleed a little', the cases of violence are not considered to be 'very serious'. Such a way of diminishing the problem of violence is not an unknown phenomenon in Vietnam, according to Ho Thi Phuong Tien (1993) and Le Thi Phuong Mai (1998), who both argue that violence against women in Vietnamese society generally is silenced. As Le Thi Phuong Mai and Le Ngoc Lan (2005) register in their recent study on violence in Vietnam, the hiding of domestic violence usually relates to myths about women's status and responsibilities for solving family problems (see also Pham Kieu Oanh and Nguyen Thi Khoa 2003). Le Thi Phuong Mai pinpoints that 'violence against women in particular is rooted in gender-based power relations. It measures gender inequality and is indicative of women's status in the family and larger society' (Le Thi Phuong Mai 1998: 6). Lan, a forty-two-year-old mother from Thinh Tri, comments that 'violence always occurs in families that don't stick together [*com khong lanh canh khong ngot*']'. She recounted her experiences of living together with a violent husband thus:

Before I got married I had never suffered due to violence. But after I got married I suffer because my husband beats me. It is very difficult. I know that women suffer a lot in their families because of this problem [i.e. husband-to-wife beating]. Very simple things can start a conflict. For instance, if a

daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law have a conflict, the husband may get angry and not support his wife against his mother. He will then take his anger out on his wife [...]. I think all conflicts are caused by two persons, never only by one. If I decided to run away from my husband he couldn't beat me, right? But if I stay with him, he will beat me. How to solve the problem of violence depends on the family situation [i.e. whether a couple has any children]. Beating is very unjust [*oan uc*] and you should not suffer from being hit [*bi don*].¹⁰

Like women anywhere else in the world who are beaten by their husband, Lan is caught between the options of leaving or staying. Even though some women may leave a violent husband, usually an abused wife will end up returning to her husband, especially if the couple has children. A woman's role as a mother and wife hence calls for family loyalty beyond what may be good for the woman herself. Local communities usually have a Reconciliation Unit (*Uy ban hoa giai*), but the Reconciliation Unit in Think Tri seems to intervene only rarely when couples end up in violent conflicts. A beaten woman may search for help at the local Reconciliation Unit, but not uncommonly she would be encouraged to go back home to reconcile with her (violent) husband. Such local ways of solving cases of domestic violence reflect the inconsistency with which domestic violence is treated (Le Thi Phuong Mai 1998; Le Thi Phuong Mai and Le Ngoc Lan 2002; Pham Kieu Oanh and Nguyen Thi Khoa 2003; Rydstrom 2003b; Trinh Thai Quang 2008).¹¹

THE SOCIAL ORDER

Violence could be understood as 'the sign of a struggle for the maintenance of certain fantasies of identity and power' (Moore 1994: 70). One fantasy may refer to men's domination over women in a male-centred societal organization that dichotomizes and essentializes females and males due to their ascribed inborn body capital (Connell 1995; Hester 2003; Moore 1994; Rydstrom 2003b, 2006b). The older woman Hoa from Think Tri, for example, refers to the consequences of a hierarchical patrilineal organization when she notes that 'good morality in a girl means that her husband and parents-in-law cannot complain [...]. If a wife doesn't behave well her husband may beat her and her parents-in-law blame her.' Le Thi Quy says something similar about the impacts of a patrilineal hierarchical structure that renders women inferior by referring to the proverb 'a wife will

fear her husband as she feared her father [*coi nhu thang chong la bo*] (Le Thi Quy 1996). In stressing the opposition between what in the Vietnamese family discourse is categorized as ideal modern families, on the one hand, and traditional (i.e. Confucian) families expected to suffer from 'social evils' to a larger extent than modern families, on the other, Hoang Ba Thinh comments on a violent husband.¹² Such a husband, she states, 'considers himself as the king while his wife is a subject. He still highly values the Confucian conception of "Three Submissions"' (Hoang Ba Thinh 2002: 143; see also Nguyen Hong Giang 2005).

Confucianism is defined by representatives of the Vietnamese Women's Union as a major source of inequality between women and men owing to what is seen as a 'feudal' approach to the genders/sexes, as already mentioned. Confucian morality at the same time, however, is also held out as an ideal with respect to the organization of family life not only in Vietnam but in many societies in the region of Southeast Asia. The dubious way in which official voices refer to Confucian morals reflects an ambiguity with respect to a comprehensive set of moral values that provides guidelines for how to understand the roles and obligations of family members, moral values that encourage a hierarchical structure and in more extreme cases may even legitimize the violent behaviour of a husband. Moral values in are thus a field of continuous negotiations, as illustrated by recent debates on equality, family morality and gendered obligations in the Vietnamese context (e.g. Nguyen-vo this volume).

Domestic violence and the ways in which it entangles with fantasies of gendered/sexed power recall the meaning of the bodily-defined status of daughters and sons in a patrilineal society. Women in the local community of Thinh Tri are assumed to demonstrate *tin h cam*, in terms of 'enduring' and 'holding back' whenever the atmosphere becomes tense and violence may occur (see Bui and Morash 1999; Le Thi Phuong Mai 1998; Rydstrom 2003b, 2004; World Bank 1999). Such ideas are confirmed by Le, one of the nurses from the Thinh Tri health care clinic, who says 'the victims of violence should reconsider their behaviour in order to prevent further violence. Women should hold back themselves and we [i.e. women] should not "explode" [*hang len/bung len*]. If we explode, a conflict will escalate and things will become complicated' (see Rydstrom 2003b; Le Thi Phuong Mai and Le Ngoc Lan 2002).

The occurrence of husband-to-wife violence in Vietnam is widely associated with a wife's inability to facilitate 'harmony' and 'happiness'

within the domestic sphere. Even though men's 'more uncontrolled' (World Bank 1999: 18) temper is thought to lead to violence, women are expected to make social life smooth, in and through the practice of *tin h cam*. Women should assess and adjust their behaviour in order to avoid provoking anger in a husband. The World Bank report on violence thus describes how people interviewed for the report tended to blame a beaten wife for having done 'something wrong or behave[ing] in a tactless way' (World Bank 1999: 19). A beaten wife is thought to have provoked her husband into losing control and behaving violently. A husband's violence against his wife is hence legitimized with reference to an abused wife's inability to maintain happiness and harmony in the domestic sphere. In this sense, ideals and realities regarding social interaction in the unit of the family are highly confused and blur the ways in which gendered/sexed power relations foster the unequal status and recognition of female and male within a family (World Bank 1999; see also Bui and Morash 1999; Le Thi Phuong Mai 1998; Le Thi Phuong Mai and Le Ngoc Lan 2002; Rydström 2003b).

CONCLUSIONS

Women have to negotiate their exterior position in the kinship system. By practising *tin h cam*, in terms of 'enduring' and 'holding oneself back', girls and women may facilitate the building of progressive, happy and harmonious families and, in doing so, avoid violent confrontations. Women who do not stimulate the preconditions for happy family life may be blamed for not fostering harmony in the sphere of the family. In not doing so, a woman may even be criticized for causing husband-to-wife violence. When an abusing husband misrecognizes his wife by neglecting her mental and bodily integrity, he may do so due to fantasies of power within a patrilineal hierarchical universe that celebrates sons both symbolically and practically, owing to what is appreciated as their in-born body-capital. Not only the bodies of males but also the bodies of females are essentialized in the Vietnamese context. Women and their bodies are shaped while women are also continuously crafting themselves in accordance with a pervasive family ideal that subscribes to a fusion of Confucian moral values and communist ideology. Women are ontologized officially in terms of being recognized and celebrated for their biological reproductive capacities, and, owing to the prospects of motherhood, women are perceived as closely related to the domestic sphere. A woman thus may not be recognized as the 'pillar of the house', but instead be granted certain feminine competencies

in regard to children and care. The ways in which Vietnamese women are construed within a patrilineal society due to their bodily capacities also reflect a Confucian heritage which is accentuated by the regional wave of Confucian inspired neo-conservative campaigns on family life as part of a search for 'indigenous' and 'authentic' Asian values (see Helliwell 1993; Stivens this volume).

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NOTES

- 1 The name of the commune is a pseudonym and so are the names of persons from the local community referred to in this chapter. Think Tri is located in the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam in the province of Ha Tay and consists of about 12,000 inhabitants, who belong to the majority group of the Vietnamese population (i.e. Kinh).
- 2 The National Women's Union was established alongside the Communist Party in 1945.
- 3 In December 1986, at the Sixth National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party the programme of *doi moi* (renovation) was embarked upon. The programme strives to maintain socialism in an economically prosperous way and has resulted in new forms of management and ownership including a resurgent private sector and market. On a national scale, the programme opened for Vietnam's rapid process of globalization (Duiker 1995).
- 4 According to Shaun Kingsley Malarney (2003), patrilineal principles have even been revitalized throughout the 1990s. Lifecycle ceremonies such as weddings and funerals became more elaborate and intensified, and in the same period an increase in patrilocal residency was evident (Hoang Ba Think 2002; Kleinen 1999; Luong 2003; Pham Van Bich 1998). However, there are differences between the northern and southern parts of Vietnam with respect to the influence of the patrilineal structure (Werner 2004a).
- 5 For a study on female-headed households see, for instance, Harriet Phinney (2003).
- 6 The practice of ancestor worship, however, has been subjected to criticism by the Vietnamese government. In the 1950s, the Communist Party undertook reforms which aimed at eliminating practices that involved the attempts of the living to communicate with the dead through offerings and prayers. Despite Party disapproval of ancestor worship, the practice has been sustained and in present-day Vietnam it is generally accepted (see Malarney 1996).
- 7 Since the late 1980s, Vietnam has been implementing a family planning policy. The programme, however, is unevenly implemented throughout the country. While some local communities may fine couples with more than two children, other couples with more than two children may encounter occupational sanctions. According to recent studies, son preferences are reflected in a slight inequality in birth ratios due to gender/sex selective abortions. Data from surveys and hospitals thus indicate abnormal sex ratios at birth among some groups of the Vietnamese population (Bélanger 2002; Bélanger et al. 2003; Croll 2000; Hoang Ba Think 2002; Le Thi Nham Tuyet and Hoang Ba Think 1999).
- 8 For a discussion of capital see Ann Anagnost (2004), Pierre Bourdieu (1992) and Loïc Waquant (1995).
- 9 *Luat phong chong bao luc gia dinh co hien luc*. Ngay 01/07/2008. See also *Vietnam News Brief 2008*.

- 10 See Ngo Thi Ngan Binh (2004) and Jayne Werner (2004b) for thorough discussions of the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.
- 11 See also Trinh Thai Quang's (2008) article on 'Marital Conflicts and Violence against Women'.
- 12 Domestic violence is associated with 'social evils' (*te nan xa hoi*) (Nguyen Thi Khoa 1997). 'Social evils' is a term which refers to various kinds of actions or behaviours which are assumed to jeopardize citizens' good morality and their fostering of a harmonious, progressive and happy family life (see also Nguyen-vo Thu-huong in this volume and Rydstrom 2006a).

Chapter 8

Gendered Expectations and Intergenerational Support among Chinese Singaporeans

Kristina Göransson

The Master said, The service which a filial son does to his parents is as follows: In his general conduct to them, he manifests the utmost reverence; in his nourishing of them, his endeavour is to give them the utmost pleasure; when they are ill, he feels the greatest anxiety; in mourning for them (dead), he exhibits every demonstration of grief; in sacrificing to them, he displays the utmost solemnity. When a son is complete in these five things (he may be pronounced) able to serve his parents (*Classic of Filial Piety [Hsiao King]*, translated by James Legge 1988: 480).

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of filial piety has been a fundamental feature of Chinese societies for centuries and was reasserted in Singapore as a cornerstone of the Asian Values ideology in the 1980s. The subsequent decline of the Asian Values ideology has not changed the government's emphasis on traditional Asian family values. This chapter looks at how the ideological constructs of 'familialism' mould female gender roles and intergenerational expectations among Chinese Singaporeans. In Singapore, familialism is a crucial component of both 'state imagination' and 'state building' (cf. Haney and Pollard 2003). The notion of the (Asian) family is linked to nationhood in constituting the unit of social reproduction and thus the basis for national survival, but familialism does not work only as an imaginary of statehood; familialism is also 'a technique of state power' as the state seeks to shape the behaviour of families (Haney and Pollard 2003: 10).

Clearly, the uninterrupted rule of Singapore by the People's Action Party (PAP) has enabled the government to exercise an effective form of social engineering. The family has been a subject of constant state intervention due to a policy where self-sustaining families serve as an alternative to public welfare (Göransson 2004, 2009). Discourses of Asian family values, cemented through state policies and population planning, define and reinforce gender norms within the family (Heng and Devan 1995; Ong and Peletz 1995; PuruShotam 1997, 1998; Stivens 1998). This volume explores how the roles, status and recognition of women and men intersect with economic, political and cultural structures, but also with individual agency. As we shall see, notions of gender defined in family ideology and politics are not imposed upon Singaporean women unchallenged. Women are exhorted to take their national responsibility by committing to marriage and motherhood, but this task is increasingly negotiated as they take up paid employment outside the home. Whereas filial piety traditionally emphasized the relationship between parent and son, the participation of women in the labour force has led to a reinterpretation of filial piety whereby daughters are also expected to fulfil filial obligations to their natal families. This chapter uses ethnographic material to illuminate how middle-class Chinese women in contemporary Singapore handle and negotiate expectations about gender and intergenerational support. I focus on different female roles within the family, such as mother/wife, daughter, daughter-in-law and grandmother.

THE FIELD AND METHOD

The small island-state of Singapore is located just south of the Malaysian peninsula, close to the equator. Singapore's multi-ethnic population is predominantly of Chinese, Malay and Indian origin, which is a result of the regional immigration that followed the British colonization in 1819. In 2006, the total population (i.e. residents and non-residents) amounted to almost 4.5 million. The resident population (i.e. citizens and permanent residents) exceeded 3.6 million and was composed of approximately 76 per cent Chinese, 14 per cent Malays, 8 per cent Indians, and 2 per cent Others.¹ After nearly 150 years of British colonial rule, followed by a short-lived merger with Malaysia (1963–1965), the Republic of Singapore gained independence in 1965. Massive efforts were put into modernizing the country, and together with Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, Singapore

became famous as one of the 'Asian Tigers'. Urbanization gradually swept away every trace of village life, transforming the island into a high-tech metropolis. Villages have given way to new towns, fully equipped with housing estates, MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) stations, neighbourhood schools, shopping malls, post offices, childcare centres, sports centres and cinemas. Although Singapore's economic growth faced some obstacles at the beginning of the twenty-first century due to global recession, the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and regional terrorism, the city-state is the most trade-intensive economy in the world and the richest country in Southeast Asia.²

Between 2002 and 2004, I conducted twelve months of fieldwork in Singapore on the subject of intergenerational relations and social change. While this study deals specifically with Chinese Singaporeans, the definition of Chinese or Chinese-ness must not be taken for granted. In Singapore, ethnic identity is reinforced by a multicultural system that categorizes each citizen according to broad ethnic categories determined by paternal descent. Thus, if the father is Chinese, his child will automatically be classified as Chinese, notwithstanding the ethnicity of the child's mother. It should be noted that this multicultural system inevitably conceals intra-ethnic diversity with regard to dialect, language usage, religious affiliation and class.³

During the fieldwork I was invited to stay for five months with the Tan family, whom I had met through my aunt in Sweden. Carole and Alan Tan, both in their early thirties, had been living in Sweden for two years due to Alan's job assignment. When they later returned to Singapore, they moved into a new flat in Tiong Bahru, an area in the central part of Singapore. Tiong Bahru is one of Singapore's older urban areas and was historically dominated by working class Chinese, but nowadays a quota system for public housing works to prevent the formation of residential ethnic concentration.⁴ Through Alan and Carole I was able to establish a network of informants who generously assisted me in my fieldwork. The ethnographic data was collected through interviews, conversations and observations. A substantial number of interviews were recorded on tape, but I also recorded a lot of information by taking notes.⁵ The people appearing in this chapter are informants whom I met on a regular basis, and I was thus able to follow up on interviews in an informal environment.⁶

In this chapter, I focus in particular on middle-class Chinese born in the 1960s and 1970s, the so-called 'sandwich-generation'.⁷ The term 'sandwich-

generation' refers to how this cohort is getting squeezed between their responsibilities to their elderly parents and their own children. The sandwich generation has experienced rapid social change and a dramatic generational divide. Today, they live comfortable lives in high-rise estates, indulge in consumption and are well educated. They are also versed in English, which since 1979 has been Singapore's first language and medium of instruction in schools.⁸ Furthermore, it is not uncommon for people of this generation to convert from traditional Chinese Religion to Christianity. Their present life-style stands in sharp contrast to the life-style of their childhood. Many of my informants grew up in a *kampung* (village) or in cramped urban areas. Their parents, who were generally poorly educated, worked hard to make ends meet. Daily conversations used to be carried out in various dialects, unlike today when the dialects are fading away in favour of English and Mandarin (particularly in middle-class families).⁹ The sandwich-generation are now raising their own children in strikingly different circumstances to those of their parents. Singapore's rigid and competitive education system drives them to invest heavily in their children's academic performance. The efforts made by parents range from paying for extra-curricular classes and private tuition to actually taking a holiday from work in order to prepare their children for examinations.¹⁰

REINTERPRETING FILIAL PIETY AND GENDER

Rapid social change and upward mobility across generations has an impact on the renegotiation of gender and filial obligations. Despite the generational divide, and the strain on the sandwich-generation to support elderly and young dependants, there are a number of ways in which intergenerational relations are strengthened. These centripetal forces are of political (e.g. legislation) as well as cultural character (e.g. cultural norms of intergenerational obligations and expectations). The notion of filial piety, strongly propounded by the Singaporean state, represents such a unifying force (Göransson 2004).¹¹ Strictly speaking, filial piety refers to a set of ritual observances between parent and child, but the way the term is used in the Singaporean context is much broader. It is difficult to speak of a homogeneous idea of filial piety, as it differs depending on religious affiliation, generation, social class and so forth. In the realm of Chinese Religion – a fusion of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and folk religion – filial piety continues beyond the parents' death in the form of

ancestor worship. In traditional Chinese society, sons were responsible for upholding the ancestral worship as well as securing the continuity of the patrilineage. Sons thus symbolise the link between the past (ancestors) and the future (descendants). Daughters, by contrast, were transferred to their husbands upon marriage, and from that day onwards their filial piety was to be wholly directed to their new family. A daughter's primary duty was to give birth to a son, and thereby to reproduce her husband's patrilineage (Hsu 1948: 107).

In contemporary Singapore, sons are still favoured for carrying the family name, but the idea of daughters marrying out no longer means that the daughter's filial piety shifts from her natal family to her husband's family. Thus, the filial obligations of sons and daughters are being reinterpreted. One of the most striking changes is that daughters have become an important source of support for their own parents, and, as we shall see, some women even abandon (voluntarily or not) their 'traditional' duties of marriage and motherhood by remaining single and/or childless. Another circumstance influencing the interpretation of filial piety is religion and religious conversion. In recent decades, a substantial number of Chinese Singaporeans have converted from traditional Chinese Religion to Christianity.¹² The Christian congregations attract people of different backgrounds, but an important recruitment base is young well-educated Chinese, who claim to feel little identification with Chinese traditions. Christians firmly reject the practice of ancestor worship that is prevalent in Chinese Religions, and conflicts often arise when children who convert to Christianity refuse to partake in the rituals of ancestor worship. Christina, who is in her late thirties, was the first in her family to convert to Christianity. Her mother was very upset and threatened Christina every time she went to church. 'It broke her heart,' Christina explained, 'because when you become a Christian you betray their religion.' Conversion to Christianity is not only a matter of private faith but also a break in the cultural continuity across generations. This includes the interpretation of filial piety. In the realm of Chinese Religion, a filial child has to perform rituals of ancestor worship, or else the deceased parents will become wandering ghosts. Thus, when Christian converts reject the practice of ancestor worship, it is seen by their parents as a betrayal of the traditional religion as well as their interpretation of filial piety. As Christina said, if you convert to Christianity, your parents feel that you do not respect them as parents and that you do not love them anymore.

Whereas Chinese Religionists perceive and rationalize filial piety according to a larger religious cosmology, Christians restrict – at least in theory – the idea of filial piety to life on earth: to be filial is to respect, provide for and care for your parents while they are alive. Conversion and multiple religious affiliations within the family may be a source of conflict, but let us not forget that many families manage to accept their religious differences, at least to the extent of not letting religious differences interfere with other domains of family life.¹³ This was the case in Carole's family. Carole had converted to Christianity in her teens. Her parents were initially very unhappy with her decision, but as time went by they learned to live with it. Carole, for her part, does not try to persuade her parents to become Christians, even though she told me that she hopes they eventually will.

In terms of norms of behaviour between children and parents in daily life, however, religious affiliation is of limited significance. The most frequent references to filial piety made in my interviews and conversations with informants concerned notions of respect, responsibility and duty. Whereas elderly informants often included obedience to parents as a key aspect of filial piety, the reciprocal aspect of taking care of elderly parents recurred regardless of age group. Auntie Lim, who had two adult sons, pointed this out: 'Children must have the responsibility of taking care of parents because they [were the ones who] educated them.' Behind this statement lies a strong awareness of indebtedness and of the importance of 'paying back' one's parents, literally and figuratively speaking. Monetary transfers are a central marker of filial piety in contemporary Singapore, but there are other aspects too, such as co-residence. Barbara and Peter live in a public housing flat in the western part of Singapore with their two sons and Barbara's mother. Barbara explained the duty of supporting elderly parents in terms of Chinese culture: 'As a Chinese there are things [you are supposed to do], like you [should] have parents living with you. It is *expected* of you, you know, it's your *duty* to take care of your mother and father if they are old.'

In the past, this duty usually fell on the sons but nowadays – as in Barbara's case – there are many elderly parents residing with their daughters too. This trend relates to the reinterpretation, and indeed revaluation, of daughters' filial obligations. Barbara is the youngest of six siblings. Her mother used to live with one of her sons but when frictions between her and her daughter-in-law became unbridgeable, she moved to Barbara and Peter's (Peter's parents live in Malaysia with the rest of his siblings).

According to Barbara, her mother is the 'focal point of the family'. When they have reunion dinners, all siblings therefore gather at Barbara's home. 'You must visit your parents frequently to be filial because for them it's a very important thing', Barbara said, 'and it's also considered a sin to send one's parents to an old-folks home. It's not acceptable although it's fading away.' The majority of the elderly in Singapore live with their child/children, but it is increasingly common to substitute personal care and co-residence by simply hiring a domestic helper or a nurse to take care of the elderly parents in their own home.¹⁴ Providing material support (including residence) to elderly parents stands out as one of the most crucial manifestations of filial piety, but there are other aspects, such as taking parents for holidays or outings, bringing them out for dinner, paying attention to their needs, buying presents and treating them with respect (respect – in the sense of being polite and sensitive to elderly people, addressing and greeting them properly – is not restricted to the parent-child relation but is perceived as the proper behaviour between younger people and the elderly in general).

FILIAL PIETY AND THE STATE

I now turn to the different ways in which the idea of familialism is employed by the state and how state policies work to reinforce filial piety. I then explore how the construct of familialism and the modernization of Singapore have affected the expectations on daughters' filial obligations. Whereas a welfare state locates formal intergenerational support between age groups (in the sense that social welfare is tax-funded and channelled via the state apparatus), the Singaporean state explicitly locates intergenerational responsibilities at the level of the family (Vasil 1995: 114ff). Accordingly, the care of the elderly should be solved within the family network. Instead of a public pension-system, an obligatory saving scheme – the Central Provident Fund – provides the formal old age security in Singapore (the Central Provident Fund scheme is mandatory for all employees except the self-employed).¹⁵ The Central Provident Fund was established in 1955, nevertheless there are many people who lack sufficient savings.¹⁶ Members get full access to their Central Provident Fund savings at the age of 55, but as they are allowed to withdraw money from the fund for purchasing public housing flats, children's education and medical costs, the retirement pool is usually small. Studies have shown that a large proportion of today's elderly persons either lack or have insufficient saving accounts for retirement. In

1995, only one-third of those aged 60 and above had Central Provident Fund accounts, and among these, only a fraction expected their savings to cover their whole retirement (*National Survey of Senior Citizens in Singapore 1995*; Chan 1997: 40). In such cases, the formal old-age support must be supplemented by informal support, i.e. the family.

Despite the politically reproduced notion of filial piety, the care of the elderly sometimes proves to be problematic. In 1995, the Maintenance of Parents Act legislated for the care of elderly parents by allowing them to sue those children who refuse to provide support for them.¹⁷ The timing of the Maintenance of Parents Act was not coincidental. In the mid-1990s, the problem of an ageing population had become obvious. By making the family the locus of responsibility, the act prevents the ageing population from becoming a future burden on the state. In the Confucian literature, filial piety implies devotion and subservience to parents, but this is less obvious in contemporary Singapore. The way filial piety is understood and practised among my informants is primarily, yet not exclusively, manifested through financial and material transactions. This is probably not even a recent or 'modernized' version of filial piety. Back in the 1950s, Maurice Freedman (1957: 58) observed that filial piety among Chinese Singaporeans is more a matter of material and/or economic obligations than excessive reverence of parents. Even Confucius himself, according to the *Analects*, complained about the state of filial piety: 'The filial piety of the present day merely means to feed one's parents; but even one's dogs and horses receive food; without reverence wherein lies the difference?' (Confucius, *The Analects*, book II, chapter VII).

However, legal documents regarding children's filial responsibilities to parents are not unique to Singapore. The role of state policy in reinforcing as well as undermining the practice of filial piety has been observed in several studies of other East Asian societies (Sung 1990, 1995; Davies and Harrell 1993; Ikels 2004).¹⁸ Moreover, the legislation of filial piety is not a recent phenomenon, which makes the assumption that children cared more for their elders in the past problematic. China, for instance, has a long history of family law, and the lack of filial piety was considered a heinous crime in the Imperial Codes. Examples of such non-filial acts included children who cursed or accused their parents and sons who failed to support parents or who set up separate households while their parents were still alive (Jamieson 1970; Young 1998).

INTERGENERATIONAL EXPECTATIONS IN THE SHRINKING FAMILY

Like most industrialized societies, Singapore has a rapidly ageing population due to a rising life expectancy and a declining birth rate. In 2003, the total fertility rate hit an all-time low of 1.25, far below the replacement rate of 2.1 needed to renew the population.¹⁹ From a demographic perspective, shrinking family size is often assumed to have a negative impact on the fulfilment of filial obligations (Philips 1992). In short, a decreasing number of children are expected to care for an increasing number of aged people. However, we must be cautious as to what extent this demographic trend actually increases the burden of children's 'filial obligations'. For one thing, the higher mortality rate of past times did not strike exclusively against the elderly; in many families only one or a few children would reach maturity and be able to fulfil their filial obligations to their parents (Cohen 1976). And secondly, even though families were bigger in the past, the responsibility of taking care of the parents in Chinese families traditionally fell on the sons. Famous historical guides for filial piety, such as the *Book of Rites*, the *Classic of Filial Piety*, and the works of Confucius and Mencius, all stress the relationship between parent and son, and in particular the relationship between father and son.²⁰ Daughters, by contrast, who moved out to join their husband's family upon marriage were exempted from the responsibility of caring for elderly parents. Compared to Mainland China, though, the estrangement between daughters and their natal family has always been less palpable in Singapore where geographical distances are smaller and allow for regular interaction.

Elisabeth Croll's (2000) study of daughter discrimination shows that the intergenerational contract remains a son-parent affair in many societies across Asia. In Singapore, however, the notion of filial piety has been redefined in the sense that it stresses both sons' and daughters' responsibility to provide financial and material support for their elderly parents. Based on the life stories of a number of graduate women and their mothers in Singapore, Graham et al. (2002) found that traditional notions of gender linger on, such as the preference for sons, but these are increasingly negotiated as younger women combine paid employment with motherhood.²¹ Many of my own informants actually expressed a preference for daughters because they are more 'caring' than sons. Janet Salaff (1995) observed the same development in Hong Kong during the intensive industrialization in the 1970s. As increasing numbers of women entered

the labour force, greater expectations were put on them to make financial and/or material contributions to their natal families.

Mei Ling, a church friend of Carole and Alan's, is a lively unmarried woman in her early forties who works at a bank office in Singapore. She is the eldest of four siblings and has two brothers and one sister. Both her mother and father were born in Singapore and belong to the Cantonese dialect group. Her conversion to Christianity in her teens was a source of tensions between her and her parents, who were Chinese Religionists. At the time of fieldwork, however, Mei Ling's parents were actually considering joining the church too. It is not uncommon for parents of Christian children eventually to convert, with the rationale that their children will not perform the proper funeral rituals and ancestral worship. Although Mei Ling's parents have two sons, their daughters are also expected to make financial contributions. During one of our interviews, Mei Ling described how her mother had taught both sons and daughters to be 'filial':

My mum made it a rule that when each one of us went out [to work] we had to give her allowances. And in the beginning she knew our pay, and she would tell you how much you needed to give. But gradually, when my brothers and sister got married, [because] my mother is a very reasonable woman, she told them to reduce the allowance. She told them to reduce their allowances. To give to her whatever is comfortable to them, but *must* give. You know, they *must* give whatever they can afford or what is comfortable to them. We are trained to give. I know my brothers give, my sister gives, I give. All of them give, although it's a matter of the amount you give.

This emerging norm whereby all children, regardless of gender, support their elderly parents may compensate for the decreasing number of children. Even so, children do not always fulfil the expectations laid on them, which in turn may trigger conflicts within the family. Mei Ling described a dispute that had taken place in her father's family:

In my father's family, they [were] more than ten siblings. When my granddad was old, he married a second wife because his first wife died. So some of the children felt that they were not being fairly treated when they were young. So when he's old, some of them refused to support [him] in the sense that he was in wheelchair and he was diabetic so he had to cut off the limbs. So they [some of his children] were not willing to put up money for medical expenses although they could well afford it. Because of this, there's a lot of rivalry between my father's brothers and sister. It caused a lot of

unhappiness, and they [the siblings] don't communicate with each other. So it depends a lot on the children, how cooperative [they are].

One of the siblings had passed away at a young age, and they were thus nine siblings by the time of their father's illness. Four of the siblings refused to make any contributions since they claimed to have been badly treated in the past, and another brother was struggling financially and could not provide any support. Thus, in the end only four siblings shared the task of supporting their sick father. Cases brought to the Maintenance of Parents Tribunal often spring from situations where one or more siblings fail (or refuse) to contribute to the maintenance of their parents. Already prior to its opening in 1996, the tribunal recognized the need to help care-giving children to oblige reluctant siblings to contribute to their parents' maintenance (*The Straits Times* 31 May 1996). The formal application to the tribunal has to be filed by the parent(s), but the actual initiative may very well come from the child/children who are unhappy with their siblings' lack of contribution. However, parents who are unable to apply for any reason may have a family member file an application on their behalf. Of course only a fraction of such intra-family disputes are brought to the tribunal, and in Mei Ling's view the tribunal would be the very last resort.

BODY POLITICS, THE 'NORMAL' FAMILY AND FEMALE GENDER

Singapore's demographic decline is not an automatic response to industrialization and economic growth but has been influenced by the state's stringent population planning. As pointed out in the Introduction to this book, the family plays an important role in state building, as a metaphor for national identity as well as a concrete unit of the reproduction necessary for national continuity. Drawing on Foucault's notion of power, Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz (1995: 6) show how postcolonial states across Southeast Asia are deeply engaged in the 'social regulation of bodies'. Within the nation-state project, the 'making and patrolling of the body politic is an ongoing struggle that often entails the inscription of state power on women's (and, to a lesser extent, men's) bodies' (Ong and Peletz 1995: 6). A number of studies have remarked on how the nationalist discourse of the Singaporean state attempts to control the lives of women, including their bodies and their sexuality (Heng and Devan 1995; PuruShotam 1997, 1998; Phua and Yeoh 2002).

In the 1960s and 1970s, Singapore's government successfully managed to restrain the high birth rate through promoting the two-child family. But the slow-down proved to be asymmetrical, insofar as the birth rate decreased notably among educated Chinese women, while it remained high among other groups. This development evoked concerns that Singapore's future gene pool would deteriorate. In the early 1980s the government therefore initiated a programme to speed up reproduction among educated women. Under the Graduate Mothers' Priority Scheme, graduate women were offered tax breaks and insurance privileges to have more children, while working-class women were urged to stop at two children through cash awards and sterilization campaigns. Not surprisingly, the campaign turned politically sensitive as the polarization between high-educated and low-educated women had ethnic implications; Chinese women were comparatively highly educated but simultaneously displayed the lowest fertility rate. Thus, the programme indirectly proposed the superiority of Chinese *genes*. The public dissatisfaction evoked by this eugenic, elitist approach led to the subsequent demise of the programme. By then, the fall in the number of births combined with an ageing population had become so problematic that a new policy was introduced to encourage an overall reproduction of the citizens (Heng and Devan 1995). A survey on family issues conducted by the Ministry of Community Development and Sports in 2001 singled out unmarried females in their thirties as those holding the most negative attitudes to marriage and parenthood (compared to unmarried men in the same age cohort) (*Attitudes on Family: Survey on Social Attitudes of Singaporeans 2001*).

The government justifies its interventions into the intimate sphere of reproduction and sexuality with the argument that Singapore is wholly dependent on improving its human capital, or else they will lose out in the global economy. From the government's point of view, however, procreation is only legitimate within the institution of marriage. The idea of the 'normal' family as consisting of husband, wife and two or three children is strongly enforced in state ideology and politics. Alternative family forms, such as single-parent families or homosexual relationships, are as a result marginalized and, indeed, de-legitimized. These alternative family forms 'are viewed as antithetical to the national ideology of the family as the foundation of nationhood' (Wong et al. 2004: 45–46). Divorcees and unwed parents, for instance, face practical obstacles with regard to public housing policies, which require a family nucleus in order to buy a flat (see below).

Just as the female body is a subject of control, the female body is also 'capable of resisting attempts of domination and control' (Phua and Yeoh 2002: 19). By choosing not to have children, Singaporean women implicitly resist the configuration of female bodies as 'reproductive bodies' as well as the idea of the normal family (Phua and Yeoh 2002: 24). However, women are not only expected to marry and procreate. At the same time as Singaporean women are saddled with the task of reproducing the population, they are also expected to 'pursue education and contribute to the growth of the national economy in the public sphere of paid employment' (Graham et al. 2002: 63). The difficulties in performing both these roles are demonstrated by a continuously slow response to the pro-natal measures launched by the government. Some of the more recent attempts at boosting the birth rate include a government-controlled committee to promote marriage and childbirth, government-sponsored matchmaking agencies, the introduction of an annual Romancing Singapore Campaign, and a baby bonus programme which gives a six-year cash disbursement for second and third children. The fact that the economic incentive programmes have not resulted in the desired outcome suggests that economic factors are not the sole explanation for falling birth rates.

Singapore's competitive education system and the emphasis on academic performance put quality before quantity when it comes to number of children. Carole, for instance, claimed that two children are enough if you want to provide the ultimate platform for the child to have a successful life (in terms of education and career). She stressed this by saying that 'Chinese want to have the best of the best for their children, but if you're fine with providing just the minimum, then of course you can have more children.' Obviously, then, if you aim for the 'best of the best', you cannot afford to have too many children. This attitude is intimately intertwined with the 'middle-class way of life' in Singapore (PuruShotam 1998: 127). The middle-class way of life is characterized by the striving to 'ensure the continued production of upward mobility', including the acquisition of better material goods and the expectation 'that children will do better than their parents' (PuruShotam 1998: 129). In that sense, the middle-class way of life also encompasses, and seeks to realize, the idea of the 'normal' family (PuruShotam 1998).

WORKING MOTHERS AND FILIAL DAUGHTERS

In being working mothers, women are thus engaged in reproducing the middle-class way of life for themselves and their family (PuruShotam 1998). As I remarked previously, the tendency among women to enter paid employment contains changing expectations of a daughter's filial obligations. All of my female informants were expected to contribute to their parents, in terms of money as well as other services. Through Barbara and Peter, I got to know Rodney and Christina, a married couple in their late thirties. They live in a public housing flat north of the city with their three young children. Like many other middle-class families, they have employed a domestic helper from the Philippines to do the housework and look after the children. Rodney works as a police officer while Christina gives private tuition to primary and secondary school pupils. They try to save costs by not having a car, but it is not cheap to raise three children and employ a domestic helper. Nor do they have much time left over for visiting their parents. It is still most common for old people to reside with one of their children, but Christina's widowed mother lives on her own. Christina and her siblings visit their mother on a regular basis, but it is not always easy to find the time. Christina said:

When you have children, it's very taxing. Initially every Saturday we go to Rodney's parents' house, every Sunday we go to my [mother's] house. Even when the first kid came we go here, we go there. Then you realize that you don't have time on your own. And you're so tired, especially when both of us are working. So because of that we visit our parents alternate weeks.

The difficulties in balancing one's filial obligations as a daughter and one's responsibilities as a mother, wife and wage earner, are also experienced with regard to financial support. Most working children do give their parents monthly allowances, popularly called 'pocket money'. Christina used to give her mother regular financial support but in recent years she has felt compelled to cut down on the allowances:

When I started working I gave her [money], but when our children start coming she [my mother] knows that financially you are quite tight because when you have families to run, you have a maid to support, she realize that it's quite tight on your side. And she has saved enough for her old age in that sense, so she told us 'you can keep' [the money]. So normally I give her during her birthday, special occasion, when she's going for holiday, or

Chinese New Year. So these are the few occasions [when] I normally give her.

For the time being, Christina's mother survives on her private savings and the allowances she gets from the rest of the children, but as she ages, all of her children, including Christina, will have to take greater responsibility.

NEGOTIATING FEMALE GENDER ACROSS GENERATIONS

In addition to the various expectations from their own parents, married women also face expectations from their husbands' family (although these expectations are not about financial support). The tensions arising from changing notions of gender across generations are particularly serious in the relation between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, rather than between mother and daughter. In traditional Chinese society a daughter-in-law was expected above all to obey her mother-in-law. The practice of patrilocality usually involved the daughter-in-law's physical estrangement from her natal family, and as an outsider she could expect little sympathy from her new family. Singaporean women today shun every prospect of ending up in such a situation.

Whereas many elderly women are housewives with limited education, young women often delay motherhood and prioritize their careers over domestic work. The changing notions of what it means to be a wife are a potential source of conflict, and the primary reason why most of my female informants perceived it as ideal to reside independently from parents-in-law (although this might not be the actual arrangement in the end). From the perspective of a daughter-in-law, mothers-in-law are possessive over their sons and they interfere with how the household is run and how the children are raised. Nicole, who planned to get married in the near future, was determined to live independently from her in-laws because she felt that she did not fulfil her mother-in-law's expectations of a 'good wife'. A 'good wife' takes care of the household, cooks and minds the children. Like most young women, Nicole works outside the home and does not care much for domestic work. Her own family has a domestic helper, and Nicole has never been expected to do housework. She therefore worries that her future mother-in-law will complain if she is incapable of doing the tasks a mother and wife is supposed to do, such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children. Such negative ideas of the mother-in-law persona often arise from

bad experiences, either personal or from hearsay. Nicole grew up observing the many arguments going on between her own mother and paternal grandmother, and she does not want to experience the same conflicts with her mother-in-law.

While young women prioritize career before housework, domestic skills provide an important strategy for elderly women to remain 'useful'. Bee Choo, a mother of two young children, remarked that elderly people are no longer rewarded based on seniority. The best way to survive in old age, Bee Choo suggested, is to be an 'asset' to the family. In this case, being an asset is to remain useful and to contribute to the running of the household: 'My mum is still an asset. She looks after my kids and all that kind of things. She's an asset. So if I can do something like that [when I'm old], if I can be a *value*, that is the only way [to survive].' Childcare and cooking are two areas where elderly parents can provide assistance. With the overwhelming choice of cheap hawker food in Singapore, young people see no incitement to cook themselves.

Even though elderly women often complain about the poor domestic skills of young women, they take great pride in being the 'matron of the kitchen'. As long as they are appreciated and able to offer their cooking skills, they have a role to play and can escape being a dependant. Elderly parents might feel inferior to their children in terms of education, but the domestic domain is a place where they can indeed remain superior. As Nicole herself indicated, young women often feel inadequate in cooking and domestic skills, and happily leave it to their mother or mother-in-law (or the domestic helper, for that matter). Food is a matter of significance for Singaporeans, and older aunties do not hesitate to complain about the food served to them if it is not prepared to perfection. The above examples indicate that the changing notions of female gender across generations involves tensions as well as renegotiation, in which elder and younger women have different strategies for fulfilling a role in the family.

THE FREEDOM AND BURDEN OF SINGLE-HOOD

Another aspect related to the increasing expectations on daughters to support their natal families is the role of unmarried daughters. We saw earlier how well-educated unmarried women are a major target in the government's strategy to increase marriage and birth rates. During the heated marriage debates in the early 1980s, two women's organizations

– undoubtedly influenced by the government – suggested that graduate women should marry and procreate as a form of National Service similar to the two and a half years of military service required of Singaporean men (Heng and Devan 1995). But at the same time as single women are criticized for not performing their national duty of marriage and childbearing, they actually play a crucial role in the care of elderly parents, and thus in the upholding of filial piety. The same pattern has been observed in other Asian societies. As in Singapore, the prevailing idea of womanhood in Vietnam is tightly intertwined with marriage and motherhood, which forces the increasing number of unmarried women to shape an alternative female identity. Danièle Bélanger (2004), for example, describes how unmarried women in Vietnam seek new ways of negotiating their female identity through becoming their parents' primary caregiver or acting as surrogate mothers for others' children.

One of the most effective tools in family politics – and in enforcing the 'normal' family form – is the government-linked Housing and Development Board, which provides about 86 per cent of the population with housing (*Yearbook of Statistics Singapore, 2001*). The Housing and Development Board was established in 1960 to tackle the urgent need of housing a rapidly growing population. Not only was the ambitious Housing and Development Board project a measure to solve the poor state of housing, it simultaneously counteracted the high rate of unemployment. The PAP-government also encouraged citizens to purchase rather than rent their flats. The Home Ownership Scheme launched in 1968 allowed purchasers of public housing flats to withdraw money from their Central Provident Fund savings for this purpose (Low and Aw 1997).

This arrangement, it must be pointed out, is only valid for public housing and not for the private market, which means that the latter is a much more costly option. There are numerous incentives and criteria for purchasing public housing flats that serve to encourage marriage and the desired family norm. The Third Child Priority Housing Scheme makes it easier for families with three children to upgrade their apartment to a larger one (an implicit motive here is to combat the low fertility rate). Since the 1970s there have been several schemes that encourage extended family relations. The Multi-Tier Family Housing Priority Scheme facilitates two- or three-generation families who want to stay in the same flat, while the Joint Selection Scheme gives priority to parents and married children to select separate flats within the same estate (*Singapore – a pro-family*

society 1995).²² An overall regulation for encouraging family formation is that unmarried persons below the age of 35 are not entitled to apply for public housing contracts. Those older than 35 years may purchase a flat on the basis of the assumption that they are unlikely ever to start a family of their own.

Residence with parents, however, is not exclusively a matter of public housing policies. An unmarried person who lives with his/her parents gains greater financial freedom by not being burdened with the costs of raising children and running a separate household. Moreover, unmarried informants found it very convenient not to have to bother about cooking food or doing laundry, as this was taken care of by their mother or a domestic helper. Another important incitement to co-reside is the strong social pressure against moving out from one's parents before marriage. Regardless of the age of the child, parents consider it an offence if an unmarried child persists in moving out. Mei Ling, the unmarried woman cited above, was in her early forties at the time of fieldwork. While her sisters and brothers were married and lived in nuclear units, Mei Ling remained with her parents until a couple of years ago when she decided to buy her own flat. However, her motive for doing so did not arise solely from a wish to remain independent.

For me, the reason why I wanted to go and get a flat outside [i.e. away from the parental home] was that eventually the flat which belongs to my parents – if they pass away – it will be divided among the four of us, okay. So maybe you can foresee that next time there might be arguments over money [between the siblings], so I prefer to have my own [flat]. But I had a very difficult time persuading my parents that I'm not dropping them and moving out on my own. So it took quite some time to convince them. Of course I explained the reason why I'm doing it. [The reason is that] I should get used to be alone because in future, if I'm not married, I'll be alone when they are not around. So it's better to adjust now than to adjust later when they are not around. So finally they agreed that I can go and buy my own flat.

In Mei Ling's case, her decision to move out rested on a combination of factors. She realized that future conflicts might arise over the inheritance, and in order to evade such a situation she bought her own flat. Although her decision was not an attempt to break away from the family, her parents had difficulties accepting it.

It's very traumatic for them [her parents] if the last daughter who is not married just moves out and come and sees them only during the weekends. Because after all, we have lived together for so many years. So I decided to stay half the week at my place, to get my own privacy and space, and half the week with them. In the beginning that was the perfect picture but then after a while it's not so fun, kind of lonely, so nowadays I move back to my parents' place more often.

Because of actual obstacles (such as public housing regulations) and social pressure (the taboo of leaving one's parents before marriage), unmarried children often become the ones who remain in the parental household. Since a single child has no family of his/her own, he/she is commonly expected to carry the main responsibility for the elderly parents. In terms of financial support this expectation is valid for both unmarried sons and daughters. The difference is that parents tend to have much higher expectations of their daughters to provide emotional care and practical assistance in the household, which connects to a perception of daughters as more caring than sons. The perception of women as more caring than men is globally widespread, but in Singapore daughters are also conceived of as more *reliable* than sons.

This, I suggest, is partly a result of their disadvantageous position vis-à-vis sons. Again, a parallel can be made to Vietnam, where the continuity of the patrilineage, and the birth of sons, is a pivotal filial obligation (Rydstrøm 2002). Unlike boys, who embody the continuity of the patrilineage, girls have to 'compensate socially' for the fact that they 'do not hold any inborn morality' (Rydstrøm 2002: 360). In a similar way the traditional Chinese preference for sons implies an additional pressure on daughters to manifest their filial piety through actual deeds. Although this study shows that daughters are increasingly appreciated, the idea of daughters as spilled milk lingers on. Angela, an unmarried female in her late thirties, described how she had been denied the opportunity to pursue tertiary studies: 'My father expected girls to work and not to finish their studies to a higher level. Although I was given a few choices to go to Singapore Polytechnic, I couldn't go as there was no finance for me. My father had decided to finance my brother instead. I was very disappointed over the favouritism shown by my father.'

FILIAL PIETY INVERTED

The notion of filial piety clearly gives emphasis to children's obligations to parents rather than the other way around. In reality, however, intergenerational obligations and expectations work in both directions. Elderly parents in Singapore are not only receivers of support. They are also providers of support in the form of baby-sitting, cooking, or even financial contributions (Mehta 1999; Teo et al. 2003; Göransson 2009). Another informant whom I met through Carole was John, a Chinese man in his early thirties working as an insurance agent. Carole and John were old friends from polytechnic but unlike Carole, John was not a Christian. John was the youngest of five siblings, and at the time of fieldwork, four of the siblings, including John, had married and moved to separate households. The eldest sister is unmarried and still lives with their widowed mother. The first time I met John and his wife Karen, they were expecting their first child. They had bought a flat of their own, but due to a delay in the renovation work they were temporarily staying with John's mother and elder (unmarried) sister. John personally wanted them to live permanently with his mother, but Karen had insisted they should live independently from both parents and parents-in-law. The preference among the younger generation to set up their separate residences may have a weakening effect on family/kinship ties, but the small size of Singapore and the convenience of communications makes it possible to retain and utilize an 'urban kinship network' without cohabiting (Wong and Kuo 1979).

The tendency of compensating for separate residence through new forms of interaction, like visiting and talking on the phone, is also observed in other societies across Asia (Sun and Liu 1994). John and Karen made use of this type of urban kinship network after the birth of their first child. Since Karen did not want to resign from her employment she went back to work after the standard maternity leave of two months. John and Karen could have managed with one income, but in order to keep their present standard of living they decided to stick to two incomes. Therefore, John explained to me, their daughter will be a 'weekend-baby'. John and Karen have made an agreement with Karen's mother to take care of the baby on weekdays. They often drop by to visit their daughter after work, but they only bring her home for the weekends. This is by no means a unique arrangement among Singaporean families, and as I shall discuss below, grandparents play an important role in the care of young children.

Whether out of necessity or not, most young couples prefer to have dual incomes. However, childcare facilities can be a costly affair and it is therefore common to get assistance from grandparents or to employ a foreign domestic helper (locals refer to a domestic helper as a 'maid'). To encourage Singaporean women to enter the labour force, the government launched the Foreign Maids scheme in 1978, by which people can employ foreign women to work as domestic helpers (PuruShotam 1997). Today Singapore has one of the highest proportions of foreign domestic helpers worldwide, with no fewer than one in seven households hiring a foreign domestic helper (*The Straits Times* 2003).²³ The domestic helpers are predominantly from poorer countries in the region, such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, and this is used as a justification for the low wage level. A domestic helper earns an average of S\$250–300 per month depending on their country of origin. Indonesian helpers are at the lower end of the scale (approximately S\$250), while Filipina helpers are more expensive due to regulations imposed by the Philippine government (approximately S\$350).²⁴ My informants accepted this wage difference on the basis that Filipina helpers have a higher level of education and speak English more fluently than their Indonesian counterparts. Although the employer is required to pay an additional Foreign Domestic Worker levy to the government, currently at S\$345 per month, and to provide the employee with board and lodging, the total sum is a bargain considering that her tasks usually exceed childcare.²⁵ Apart from the fact that a domestic helper may look after two or even three children for the same salary, most employers also expect her to clean, wash, cook, and even look after elderly members of the household (cf. PuruShotam 1997; Yeoh and Huang 2000).

The fact that some women, i.e. middle-class women, can pursue a professional career by delegating the housework to a domestic helper (or to an elderly mother or mother-in-law) does not really change the perception of housework as a female responsibility. As Nirmala PuruShotam (1997: 555) puts it, 'The costs of being working mothers and working women are effectively curtailed only by shifting the burden to another group of women [e.g. foreign domestic workers]. Nothing basic has or seemingly has to be changed. For women still do the housework and mind the children.' The presence of a young foreign woman in the home sometimes triggers intra-family tensions. A common problem voiced by parents is that the children get too attached to the domestic helper, who is the one providing the daily emotional and practical care. Angela believed that her sister's Indonesian

'maid' consciously tried to turn the children against their parents. In this particular case, the suspicion that the girl sought to conjure up dissension in the host family evoked accusations that she practised black magic. Angela claimed that the maid had collected hairs, letters, and other personal belongings of the family members in order to exercise black magic and manipulate the family. At one meeting, Angela showed me a small plastic jar containing the hairs, which she said she found amongst the maid's belongings.

Apart from the fear that children will get more attached to the domestic helper than to their parents, there are also worries that she will try to seduce the husband. In Angela's sister's case, the discontentment with the Indonesian domestic helper escalated to the point where they fired her and hired a new girl. Thus, although the domestic helper is a part of the household she works in, she also represents a dangerous element and is framed by the 'host society' as an 'alien other' (Yeoh and Huang 2000: 425). Many parents I spoke with also asserted that foreign domestic helpers are incapable of transmitting proper values to the children. In this regard, grandparents represent the polar opposite of the foreign domestic helper. Grandparents are conceived of as containers of traditions and are therefore the ultimate persons to transmit values to the younger generation. In actual practice, of course, young children are not passive recipients of values, but participate actively in their learning process.

For several reasons, most young parents prefer engaging grandparents (or grandparents-in-law) before childcare centres or employing a foreign domestic helper. The 'grandparents-option' is also strongly encouraged by the government as part of its pro-family ideology. Despite the important role played by grandparents in this regard, their services are not really perceived as labour because it takes place between family members. Whereas many grandparents happily take care of their grandchildren, it is not always a matter of pure choice.²⁶ In a context of social devaluation of seniority – partly because status today is achieved rather than ascribed – elderly parents who are financially dependent on their children are further obliged to offer their services as a form of compensation.

This was the case with Angela's mother, whom I know as 'Auntie Chan'.²⁷ Auntie Chan, who is now in her seventies, had never taken up any paid employment. Her husband used to be the sole breadwinner while Auntie Chan stayed at home to raise their three sons and three daughters. Their marriage, however, turned out to be an unhappy one. Angela recalled

uncountable quarrels between her parents, and her father's inclination to exercise 'disciplinary actions' toward both his wife and children. She remembered in particular one occasion, when he had used a slipper to beat her mother in the face. As the years went by the situation worsened, and the marriage ended in a divorce. Angela's father has Central Provident Fund savings and manages to stay in a flat on his own. Auntie Chan, on the other hand, has no Central Provident Fund savings and is thus dependent upon her children for accommodation and monetary support. She is currently living with her eldest son's family. Her remaining children contribute by giving her pocket money, paying for medical bills, bringing her out for dinner, and so forth. In exchange for living with her son, Auntie Chan's duty is to prepare the dinner on weekdays and to take care of the grandson when he returns home from school in the afternoon. 'She has to do it, it's her job. If she doesn't do it, they kick her out,' Angela said to me. The fact that none of Auntie Chan's other children has enough room to offer her accommodation makes her vulnerable when negotiating the terms of the arrangement. From that perspective, her services represent an insurance of continuous support rather than voluntary assistance.

CONCLUSIONS

The ideological construct of familialism, and the ways in which it shapes gender roles within the family, has to be comprehended against a political economy whereby self-sustaining families are promoted as an alternative to a welfare state. The Singaporean family is the subject of close social engineering and state intervention. I have discussed how familialism in terms of state imagination and state building influence female gender roles in the domestic sphere, but also how individual agency plays a role as women may choose to reject or negotiate prevailing stereotypes of women and family life. At the same time as women increasingly pursue paid employment and fulfil filial obligations in terms of economic support to elderly parents, they are also expected to commit to marriage and motherhood.

Despite the fact that unmarried women make important contributions to the care of elderly parents, the emphasis on women's duty as wives and mothers implicitly de-legitimizes those women who remain unmarried or make alternative life choices. Furthermore, when we take a closer look at intergenerational support it becomes clear that the flow of support runs in two directions. In families where both spouses take up paid employment,

elderly parents provide important assistance by looking after children and doing housework. As I have shown, the intergenerational exchanges are a matter of negotiation, and for elderly parents their domestic services sometimes serve as a strategy to remain useful to the family, thus compensating for the fact that they are financially dependent on their adult children.

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NOTES

- 1 Data are available at Singapore Department of Statistics, www.singstat.gov.sg, 13 September 2007. Singapore's heavy dependence on foreign investment and manpower is reflected in the fact that citizens account for only 74 per cent of the total population. Of the total population, non-residents comprise nearly 20 per cent and permanent residents comprise more than 7 per cent (Census of Population 2000).
- 2 The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome emerged in China in the end of 2002 and spread to other parts of the world. Among the worst hit areas were China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Singapore and Canada (World Health Organization, 14 February 2006: www.wpro.who.int/sars/).
- 3 The multicultural system is not a postcolonial construction, but dates back to the British rule of Singapore and their way of categorizing the Asian population. When Singapore gained independence, the PAP government adopted multiculturalism (or multiracialism) to build a national identity in an ethnically heterogeneous society (PuruShotam 1998a).
- 4 The government-linked Housing and Development Board has implemented a quota system to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves. The ethnic groups are allocated a certain quota of the total number of flats per estate in accordance with their total percentage of the population.
- 5 The transcriptions are reproductions of taped interviews. The transcriptions have been slightly edited for the sake of readability.
- 6 The informants' names are fictitious to guarantee their anonymity. Apart from informants whom I met on a regular basis, I gathered a substantial sample of isolated interviews regarding family life and intergenerational relations. During fieldwork, I interviewed over eighty people of different ages and status. The majority of my informants were middle-class Chinese between 25 and 50 years of age.
- 7 In the literature the term 'generation' is used in different ways. At the societal level, generation generally means 'age group' or 'age cohort', i.e. a group of individuals sharing the same period of birth. 'Generation' in a family context, on the other hand, refers to the relative position in a kinship structure, which does not necessarily coincide with actual age (Bengtson 1993: 10f). The terms 'older' and 'younger' or 'senior' and 'junior' are always relative and contextual. A person might be classified as elder in one situation (e.g. the eldest sibling) while being younger in relation to his/her parents' or grandparents' generation.
- 8 For an analysis of consumption and the generational divide, see Chua (2000).
- 9 Apart from the leap in education, class and standard of living, a generational divide has also arisen in terms of religion and language. The latter is a direct result of government

- intervention. The Asian Values ideology, which emerged in the late 1970s, paved the way for a revision of Singapore's national education system. In 1979, a bilingual curriculum was launched, prescribing English as the 'first language' and medium of instruction. English would provide a communication bridge between the different ethnic groups, as well as linking Singapore with the international economy and making the country attractive to foreign investment. To counter the threats of cultural Westernization, the new curriculum introduced a 'mother tongue' as a compulsory second language. 'Mother tongue' is determined on the basis of ethnic belonging. This means that Chinese students study Mandarin as their second language. Paradoxically, the ancestors of most Chinese Singaporeans originated from Southeast China, where the native tongue is not Mandarin, but what is defined as dialects, e.g. Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka and Hainanese. Although Mandarin is no more native to Chinese Singaporeans than English, the PAP government argued for the imperative of a common language. In addition to the curricular reforms, actions were taken to stamp out dialects from the society at large. Dialects were banned from all media and an annual (still ongoing) Speak Mandarin Campaign was initiated. As a result, there are many young children today who are unable to communicate verbally with their dialect-speaking grandparents. In fact, it is not uncommon that elderly grandparents pick up English or Mandarin to communicate with their grandchildren, rather than the other way around. Thus, the government's Asian Values ideology, which claimed to restore cultural continuity, in practice caused a generation gap with regard to language use (Göransson 2009).
- 10 Singaporeans are continuously reminded of their dependence on human capital and the need to improve the educational level of the population for national survival. This should be seen against the government's ideology of economic pragmatism, which has been repeated in various forms ever since independence. This ideology has its roots in the failed merger between Malaysia and Singapore, and Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965. Singapore's small size and lack of natural resources raised serious concerns as to whether it could survive as an independent state. The anxiety following the separation from Malaysia was the breeding ground for the ideological notions of 'survival' and 'pragmatism', whereby '[t]he economic is privileged over the cultural because economic growth is seen as the best guarantee of social and political stability necessary for the survival of the nation' (Chua 1997: 59).
 - 11 'Filial piety' is the translation of the Chinese character pronounced '*xiao*' (or '*hsiao*'). Filial piety is closely associated with the work of Confucius (551 BCE– 479 BCE) and his disciples.
 - 12 In the 2000 Census, approximately 16 per cent of the Chinese population is Christian. Approximately 64 per cent is Buddhist/Taoist, and nearly 19 per cent is without religious affiliation. The category 'Christianity' is subdivided into 'Catholic' and 'Other Christians'. Catholics account for slightly more than 29 per cent of the Christian Chinese community, while 'Other Christians' account for slightly more than 70 per cent (Census of Population 2000).
 - 13 Of course, religion also has the power of consolidating intergenerational relations. While religion can be a fragmenting force when younger generations convert and refuse to engage in the religious practices of their parents, religion may also strengthen the intergenerational ties within the same religious community.

- 14 In the mid-90s, over 85 per cent of the elderly population above 60 years of age co-resided with children (Chan 1997: 42).
- 15 Prior to 1999, the total contribution rate to the Central Provident Fund was 40 per cent. Employer and employee each contributed 20 per cent. In the aftermath of the financial crisis in 1997, the employer rate was cut to 10 per cent, but on the premise that it would be restored as soon as the economy recovered. However, the restoration was stopped by Singapore's economic recession in 2003. Singapore's dependence on multinational companies, and the increasing competition from low-cost countries, made it necessary to cut costs for employers in order to sustain an investment-friendly climate (speech by PM Goh, *The Straits Times Interactive*, 28 August 2003). The government decided to reduce the employer contribution rate on a more permanent basis. The employee rate for those up to the age of 55 years remains 20 per cent, while the employer rate has been cut to 13 per cent. For those aged 55–65, the employee rate is 12.5 per cent and the employer rate 6 per cent; for those aged 65 and above the employee rate is 5 per cent and the employer rate 3.5 per cent (Central Provident Fund, www.cpf.gov.sg, 26 August 2004).
- 16 In 1995, the total Central Provident Fund membership was estimated to be 89.8 per cent of the resident population (Low and Aw 1997: 29). The Central Provident Fund consists of three accounts: the Ordinary Account (aimed at housing and insurances), the Special Account (aimed at retirement), and the Medisave Account (aimed at medical expenses). Self-employed are partly exempt from the Central Provident Fund. Whereas self-employed may contribute to the Ordinary and Special accounts on a voluntary basis, it is compulsory for all self-employed with a yearly net trade income of more than S\$6000 to contribute 6 per cent to 8 per cent to the Medisave Account (Central Provident Fund, www.cpf.gov.sg, 5 February 2004).
- 17 The Maintenance of Parents tribunal was opened in 1996, with a total of 152 people filing applications before the end of the year. In 1997, the number dropped to 138 and in 1998 it dropped again to 134. After the three initial years, approximately four in five applicants received orders compelling their children to support them (*The Sunday Times* [Singapore], 4 April 1999).
- 18 Charlotte Ikels's (2004) edited volume *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia* illuminates the role of state policy in enforcing filial piety with examples from Japan, China, Korea and Taiwan. Davies and Harrell (1993), for instance, examine how families in China have been affected by policy shifts in the post-Mao period.
- 19 The total fertility rate is estimated per female aged 15–44 (Singapore Department of Statistics, www.singstat.gov.sg, 24 August 2004).
- 20 *Li Chi* (Book of Rites) was written in about 200 BCE and is a guide for religious, social and moral activities, including proper filial behaviour.
- 21 For an analysis of intergenerational ties and gender in Singapore, see also Teo et al. (2003).
- 22 Information about current regulations is available at the website of Family & Community Development, www.familytown.gov.sg, 30 January 2004.
- 23 In 2004 there were more than 140,000 Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore (Ministry of Manpower, www.mom.gov.sg, 4 October 2004).

- 24 The salary of foreign domestic helpers is far lower than a typical Singaporean salary. In 2000, the average monthly income was estimated at S\$3,114 (Census of Population 2000).
- 25 The Foreign Domestic Worker levy is meant to cool down the inflow of foreign domestic workers. In 2004 the government reduced the levy from S\$345 to S\$250 for families with children below the age of 12, or with elderly persons aged 65 years and above, in an attempt to further facilitate childcare and eldercare at home (Ministry of Manpower, www.mom.gov.sg, 8 September 2004).
- 26 The pressure on grandparents to assist in childcare and housework has been noted in other studies (see e.g. Teo et al. 2003).
- 27 In Singapore, senior people are addressed by title. Kin people are addressed by kinship terms. Non-related senior people are addressed as 'auntie' or 'uncle'.

PART III

MASCULINITIES

Chapter 9

Gendered Parties: Making the Male Norm Visible in Thai Politics

Elin Bjarnegård

INTRODUCTION

Regime changes, *coups d'état*, people's protests and elections... These are all occurrences to which much attention is paid by international news and scholars. They are, without doubt, important events in themselves and certainly merit the interest they receive but they need, however, to be understood and interpreted from more than one angle. This chapter will take a closer look at the unstable political sphere of Thailand, a country that has ample experience of large political changes, from a slightly new viewpoint, namely a gender perspective which might nuance our knowledge about the implications of radical political events.

Thai politics is drawn between military dominance and more democratic political competition between political parties. Political parties and multipartyism are commonly pointed out as central to a democracy, but it should nevertheless be noted that political parties are common in all kinds of regimes – democratic or otherwise. Political parties adapt to new political settings, but in doing so they do not only bring with them their experiences from working under other types of regimes and within another type of political logic, but also their very own organizational culture. In this way, an intriguing interaction between formal rules and informal social practices takes place within the political parties. This leads to particular institutional structures that will, among other things, inform the parties' choices of candidates. Political parties are often named the most important gatekeepers with regard to improved representation of excluded and disadvantaged groups (Dahlerup 2003; Norris 1996). As Martha Nussbaum

(2000) has argued, nowhere in the world are women as a group given the same human capabilities as men (see also the Introduction to this volume). However, the importance of women achieving substantive freedoms on a par with men, such as equal participation in political activities, is frequently highlighted and discussed. The recognition of women in this sense, as being able to attain functional capabilities and thus exert at least a certain political influence over their environment and life, is essential for achieving social equality and justice. However, the male-dominated political spheres and institutions themselves are more seldom subject to direct gendered scrutiny, despite playing a very active part in the misrecognition of excluded groups. Though frequently analyzed, they are often seen as 'the normal state of being' rather than as gendered institutions, whereas women entering the political sphere are seen as deviant from this norm, and at worst deficient.

The social patterns guiding who is considered a desirable politician differ greatly between different political and cultural settings. Although these settings in all parts of the world tend to exclude women to a greater extent than men, they also work to exclude many men. Thus, although gender will be the central dimension studied here, it must also be kept in mind that the institutional structures of parties are exclusive in nature, thus disadvantaging many groups of people based on other dimensions, such as class, ethnicity, religion, age, and – of course – ideological beliefs. As Leslie McCall has noted, using intersectionality anti-categorically quickly becomes extremely complex, thus an intercategorical approach is used here. No matter how incomplete and imperfect existing categorizations are, they nevertheless form part of the lived reality of many people. The categories can thus be used strategically, to answer substantial political questions (McCall 2005).

Theories from the field of critical studies on men, as well as more traditional theories on political parties and representation will serve as analytical tools for studying the masculine Thai political sphere. This chapter will explore what new perspectives of the ever-changing political sphere in Thailand the application of a gender perspective brings about. With the use of election statistics, the different internal and external mechanisms guiding the political parties in their exclusion of women will be identified and analyzed. The mix of formal institutions, such as party nomination procedures, informal institutions, such as male clientelist networks, and the particular gendered challenges they pose to political parties in times of elections are in focus here. This chapter wishes to

develop the gendered study of politics in an Asian setting by identifying relevant areas of study, areas within the political party process where male dominance is maintained and reproduced.

GENDERED STANDSTILL AMIDST POLITICAL CHANGE

The representation of women has remained consistently low in Thailand, at about 10 per cent. This proportion has not changed much regardless of what type of regime has been in power. Whether Thailand has been under democratic or military rule, male dominance has remained firm in the political sphere. This should be contrasted to the advances that Thai women have made in other areas of Thai society – such as having achieved a relatively high participation in the professional labour force and a high enrolment in higher education (Iwanaga, 2008).

In fact, although regime changes often come about amidst calls for far-reaching societal and political changes, and despite the fact that they are commonly loaded with an array of expectations, the type of regime in power has, in and by itself, proved to be a poor predictor of the level of women in parliament. Thailand is a perfect case in point, having, in a very short time, undergone various regime changes while political equality, in terms of greater parliamentary inclusion of women, has remained unchanged.

The political history of Thailand following the end of absolute monarchy in 1932 is one of the most diverse imaginable, and the last decade has proved to be no different. It is thus impossible to pinpoint one formal institutional setting that would set the stage for political actors in contemporary Thailand. Rather, the only thing constant in the Thai world of politics seems to be sudden change itself. As Duncan McCargo has noted ‘what appear to be robust processes of political liberalization can rapidly give way to crises of democratic confidence’ (McCargo 2002a: 112). Within the span of only a decade, Thailand has experienced regime change, democratic reform, political unrest, a military coup and a substantial reshuffle of the political boards.

The political reform process in Thailand in the wake of the economic crisis during the 1990s received a great deal of scholarly attention (Pasuk 2000; McCargo 2002b; Anek 1997; Hewison 1997). That a country that had known long-term economic growth finally democratized seemed, to many, proof that modernization and industrialization eventually lead to democracy. In the first election under the new constitution, a

new party, Thai Rak Thai (Thais love Thais), won a landslide victory and the businessman turned politician Thaksin Shinawatra became prime minister. In the midst of severe criticism and allegations from the media, academics and activists concerning corruption, personal rule, populist policies, the merging of business and politics, and a disregard for human rights, especially in the Muslim-dominated and violence-ridden areas of southern Thailand (McCargo 2002a; McCargo 2005; Ockey 2005; Pasuk 2004), Thai Rak Thai managed to gain even more popularity among Thai voters. The election in 2005 turned out to be a tremendous success for Thai Rak Thai and a downright catastrophe for many other parties, new and old. With Thai Rak Thai gaining 377 out of 500 seats, Thailand received its first ever single party government, and the power of Thaksin and his party seemed to be further confirmed while the opposition was considerably weakened (Ockey 2005). Several observers pointed out that this would consolidate Thaksin's hegemonic position as leader and that it might pose a threat to Thai democracy (Croissant 2005). A time of political unrest soon followed, sparked by the selling of a telecom company owned by the Shinawatra family to a foreign investor. Although the selling was legal, the law regarding foreign investments was amended shortly before and it was considered unethical to sell out a Thai company. In addition, people were upset that the capital gains the already wealthy Shinawatra family made were exempt from tax. Neither public protests and demonstrations on the streets of Bangkok, nor the dissolution of parliament and the subsequent snap election boycotted by all the major opposition parties solved the situation in a democratic manner. There was a political stalemate as the country slowly prepared for new elections. This was when the military stepped in once again, after fifteen years of decreasing military influence in politics (Ockey 2007).

In September 2006, Thailand experienced yet another military coup. This was the eighteenth military coup since 1932 but the first one since 1991. From the very beginning, the coup leaders, headed by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, and the subsequent government appointed by them and headed by prime minister and retired general Surayud Chulanont, expressed their conviction that the military should not be involved in politics and that they would turn power over to the people as soon as possible (Ockey 2007). The Thai Rak Thai party and over 100 of its leading members were subsequently banned from politics in 2007. A new constitution was drafted and passed in a referendum, and another round of democratic elections

was held (*Nation* 2007), while politicians were yet again busy strategically realigning and regrouping.¹

Through all these large-scale changes and high-stake strategic games, the main actors on the stage were all male. This is perhaps not as surprising regarding the military regimes as it is regarding the more democratic periods. In most cultures, there are few things that are so intimately connected to masculinity, and so consistently exclusive of femininity, as the military. This has also been recognized in some literature within this field (Higate 2005, 2003). Jeff Hearn (2003: xi), for instance, notes that it is 'an understatement to say that men, militarism, and the military are historically, profoundly, and blatantly interconnected'. In Thailand this has been literally the case, since women were not accepted as cadets to the Chulachomkiao Royal Military Academy until the 1990s (GDRI 1996). Thus, women have not had direct access to the political power centre that has been the direct cause of most of the coups d'état the country has experienced. This has probably impeded women not only when military juntas have been in charge of the country, but also when military-installed governments have been put in place in periods of transition, as well as during more democratic times. As argued by McCargo and Ukrist, important and close-knit networks are formed within the Thai military, often dating back to classes at the military academy. They argue that even during periods of relative democratic stability, it has been essential for any national politician to have linkages and good friends within the upper echelons of the armed forces, and to make very strategic appointments with the maintenance of the military's continued benevolence in mind (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 121ff). Important connections have also been made in the other direction, since army officers have often striven to ally themselves to powerful politicians in order to remain politically influential (Chai-Anan 1997).

How about the more democratic periods in Thailand? Why has democracy not managed to draw women into the political game? It is true that in some theoretical ways democracy and equality are intimately related. The underlying principle that is required for the people to rule a state is that all citizens should be regarded as equals (Beetham 1993). The central argument of feminist political science is, however, that the concept of democracy is built on a male norm and that ideal democratic equality cannot be realized in an already unequal society (Phillips 1991). Democratization certainly does not bring about automatic equality in the

political sphere, even if it brings about certain increased possibilities for such equality to be achieved.

First, it needs to be remembered that democracy can and should be regarded as a graded scale rather than a dichotomy. The magnitude of changes that political liberalization actually brings about can therefore differ. Hadenius and Teorell (2005) usefully insist on separating basic democratic criteria (such as universal suffrage, free and fair elections and the upholding of political liberties) from quality criteria that improve the quality of democratic procedures, but only in states which are already basic democracies. Matland and Montgomery (2003) consider representation of women to be such a quality criterion. However, keeping in mind the serious critique feminist political science has directed against democracy as being inherently male, they remain sceptical of the capabilities of most democracies to actually achieve equal representation. Worldwide, it is certainly true that many countries that fulfil the minimum requirements remain highly problematic democracies (Grugel 2002).

This leads us to the growing amount of literature on gender and democracy and democratization that empirically shows that democracy, in and by itself, is not particularly conducive to the increased representation of women. It is evident that women are left wanting as political actors in many contemporary democracies. In mainstream democratization literature, however, this absence of women has seldom been acknowledged or problematized as a democratic deficit. This neglect of a gender perspective on democratic representation has recently led researchers to focus on women as political actors in democratizing countries. Such studies have showed that women's active part in the opposition movement before and during democratic transition is also a very unreliable determinant of whether or not they will gain a place in formal representative politics in a newly established democratic regime (Waylen 2003).

Women formed part of the opposition movements in Latin America, Eastern Europe and many African countries, but it is only in some African countries, such as South Africa, that this democratic striving for equality was transformed into real political equality. In Latin America, women have continued to mobilize as an autonomous group following democratization, but only outside of the formal political sphere. In Eastern Europe, feminists have rather witnessed a backlash, in both the private and public spheres. Several authors suggest that this has something to do with how the present regimes have coped with democratization (Jaquette 1999; Jaquette 2001;

Ballington 2002; Matland 2003). As Jaquette suggests, it seems probable, therefore, that it will indeed be more fruitful to look for explanations in the political system, and not exclusively towards the agendas of the women's movements (Jaquette 2001).

GENDERING POLITICAL PARTIES

In fact, whether the strategies employed by women's movements are successful in opening up the formal political sphere for women or not is dependent on an array of other factors. Women's agency in politics needs to be contextualized, and the surroundings they are acting in and the specific problems that they are encountering need to be taken into account. Democracies of today build on representation, and there are several important gatekeepers that have to be passed before the possibility of representing the people is equal to everyone. Hastening to include women as political actors, this important first impediment is often forgotten and institutional settings and other important actors – political parties in particular – are ignored, or at least not analysed from a gender perspective.

This chapter takes seriously the claim that studying gender is not only about studying women, but about how femininities as well as masculinities are shaped in different societal contexts. The focus will thus not be on women as political actors, but instead on arguably the most important mainstream political actors; namely the political parties. The purpose is to investigate what patterns become visible when a gender perspective is applied, theoretically as well as empirically, to the study of Thai political parties in times of elections. The political party is essential for understanding the local political logic, since it is obliged to navigate and mediate between the formal institutions and regulations in place at that time, and between informal, culturally specific networks and alliances, in order to compete for power. This interaction between a formal set of rules and an informal base of influence has certain gendered consequences.

The study of the political party is, of course, quite common in political science, due to its central position in most political regimes. However, studies of political parties have for the most part been mainstream and gender-blind, despite the seemingly obvious fact that political parties are disproportionately dominated by men. The studies that have recently started to problematize gender relations in the political sphere at large have generally

done so by focusing on women as potential political actors, which of course is a perspective that has long been needed. The consequence, however, is that these studies have often been about the agency of rather marginalized groups of women activists. The mechanisms of the political party too rarely fall within the scope of gendered studies in political science.

Men are of course just as much gendered beings as women, and the fact that political power is often constructed as a male attribute is consequently as much a gendered phenomenon as is the political powerlessness of women. Yet, this fact has seldom been acknowledged, and men are hardly ever named 'men' in the same way that women are named 'women'. Political scientists have, for a long time, devoted themselves to studying men. This is thus nothing new. The important distinction to make is, as Hearn notes, how men are studied; whether they are visible as men and whether their practices are problematized (Hearn 2004). This remark is certainly true also for the study of political parties, where male power has been the norm since their inception. This has shaped the view we hold on political parties, to the extent that it is often forgotten that they are in fact male-dominated institutions, systematically excluding women. Hanmer remarks that critical studies of men cannot therefore be put on a par with studies of women – if they are they become mere studies of identity. She states that if feminist studies are about the powerlessness of women, critical studies of men are instead about the 'use and misuse of social power that accrues to the male gender, of recognizing benefits even when none are personally desired', and about how this power is used to subordinate women (Hanmer 1990: 29). It is thus the critical study of men, from a feminist perspective, that is needed as a new angle in the gender studies of political science.

Gendering parties thus implies an attempt at understanding how parties, as predominantly male organizations, control recruitment and form the political culture, and how this, directly or indirectly, affects women and political gender equality. As has already been mentioned, gendered studies of women as political actors are becoming much more common than they were. Women's lack of political power, and their road to achieving it, is now being rather extensively studied. This is in unison with empirical developments that show that women around the world have, more and more, started to make their way into traditional politics. CEDAW (the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) and the work of various international organizations have been important steps in this direction. Gender quotas are becoming more

common around the world, and as women's social and economical roles change with their entrance into the workforce, it is not strange that their demands for participation in formal decision-making bodies are increasing. However, as Carrigan, Connell and Lee argued in 1987, it is rather strange that so much time is devoted to analyzing the change of the social and political position of women, while at the same time there is very little understanding of the fact that 'change in one term of a relationship signals change in the other' (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1987: 63).

In the same way that feminist political science scholarship has traditionally focused on female structures and agency, scholarship focusing on men and masculinity has also, until recently, been more concerned with viewing men in new, less conventional roles, associated with the private and traditionally feminine sphere rather than with the public male-dominated sphere. As Collinson and Hearn (2005) point out, even though the long-ignored study of men in new spheres is important, the major moulding grounds shaping men, masculinities and men's power continue to be situated in the public sphere – at work, in organizational cultures and in politics. Thus, political parties, as well as other types of organizations, are therefore also effective sites for the reproduction of patriarchy.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND REPRESENTATION: WHAT MATTERS?

The increasing pressure for a gendered political sphere will, by necessity, change and challenge male political dominance. Drawing from theories of representation it seems that by focusing on the masculine bodies that political parties are we can at the same time study the centre of power and problematize this very centre from a gendered perspective. Here, we will look both at the formal institutional regulations that help shape decision-structures for candidacy within the political parties as well as at the informal practices and their gendered consequences.

Political parties are particularly interesting since several studies point to them as being the main gatekeepers for increased representation of women (Norris 1996; Dahlerup 2003). Drude Dahlerup is one researcher who clearly acknowledges the political parties as the most relevant actors with regards to the representation of women. 'In almost all political systems, no matter what the electoral regime, it is the political parties, not the voters, which are the real gatekeepers in regard to elected offices. Consequently, party nomination practices should be kept in focus' (Dahlerup 2003: 5). This

implies that the real discrimination against women concerns *candidacy* and that it takes place inside the political parties when they select candidates rather than inside the polling stations when voters elect representatives.

The design of the *election system* is also commonly pointed to as an important key to explain the level of women's representation. Proportional election systems, as opposed to majoritarian ones, have been shown to be generally more conducive to women's representation (Kenworthy 1999; Matland 1998; Paxton 1997). Proportional systems tend to focus on the party as a whole rather than on an individual candidate. In order to appeal to a wide electorate, parties are therefore more likely to introduce women and other social groups on a balanced ticket. In majoritarian first-past-the-post systems, on the other hand, the emphasis is on putting forward one strong candidate who can attract as many voters as possible – and this candidate usually turns out to be a man. By shaping the logic by which a political party selects its candidates, the election system thus brings forward otherwise hidden views on male and female candidates.

Welch and Studlar (1996) also point to *incumbency* as one of the greatest obstacles for women to run for office. As long as there is a successful incumbent running for the party, and as long as most incumbents are male, the opportunity structure for women to come forward as new candidates is limited. As parties are acting with the goal of winning the election in mind, candidates who have already managed to win an election are seen as secure investments.

Norris and Lovenduski's study of political recruitment in the British parliament suggests that the chances of inclusion of groups in terms of gender, race and class vary along two dimensions: the dispersion of power and the formalization of decision-making within the party. Chances of inclusion of women are greater the more formalized the internal procedures for candidate selection are, and the more centrally located they are within the party. Conversely, in informal–localized systems the party organization as such is weak and selection practices can vary considerably within the same party, leaving room for patronage considerations or other kinds of local manipulation (Norris and Lovenduski 1995).

These theories about formal party organization have been generated from a western context and will be complemented with more general gendered theories about organizational culture and male networks, in order to better capture the informal practices taking place in parties. Organizations, like parties, may appear neutral, but they are gendered in several respects.

Studies on management have often mapped out the alliances and networks being formed between managers in order to maintain their power. Collinson and Hearn (2005), however, point out that these texts miss the important fact that being a man often constitutes a prerequisite for being a part of these networks. Even though the outspoken intention of such alliances, or *closed male networks*, may not be to keep women out, but rather to protect one's own organization, the result is, however, highly gendered. This might be part of the answer to why, despite a high participation in the general workforce in most countries of the world, women remain strangely absent in boardrooms and, to some extent, in cabinets and parliaments.

Many studies point to organizational masculinity as being something instrumental in that it searches for success, for competition and for an upward movement career-wise, a description that goes hand in hand with the main task of political parties as well as politicians. In order to differentiate oneself in that manner, the use of negating others, individuals, organizations, or ideas, is commonly practised. In this sense, masculinity often constructs itself in opposition to what it is not. Collinson and Hearn (2005) mention a study in which male US navy officers construct themselves in opposition to women and gay men, who are perceived as weak. It is only through this negation that they can display their male, heterosexual identity. *Homo-social reproduction* is the other side of this coin. Senior male managers are likely to perceive men who display the masculinity they themselves display as more competent and reliable than individuals who display characteristics that they have formed themselves in opposition to. Thus, men select men, and boardrooms, cabinets and parliaments continue to be filled by and with men. The most obvious example of this, and still very common, is when companies, small businesses, farms or even political offices are passed on from father to son (Collinson and Hearn 2005).

The above discussion has served to outline a possible power nexus where the male norm is made manifest within political institutions in general and in party culture in particular. These factors will now be linked to the Thai case to generate suggestions on how and what should be studied in order to gain a better understanding of the continued male dominance in Thai politics. This will serve more as an exercise that evaluates the possible plausibility of these factors in the Thai context than as a fully-fledged analysis giving the whole picture.

The above political suggestions regarding the various manifestations of the male norm have been divided into factors influencing formal party

structure and factors influencing informal party practices. With the starting-point in these institutional factors, the party world of Thailand will be explored with the help of literature on Thai political parties as well as gender-disaggregated election data from the 2005 parliamentary election. The election data presented come from the Thailand Election Commission, but have since been disaggregated and analyzed. When presenting the gender proportions, the percentages represent the proportion of men rather than, as customary, the proportion of women². This is a simple way of illustrating continued male dominance in Thai politics, which is in fact the object of the study.

To reiterate, if these more general suggestions hold true in the Thai case, we would expect the male norm to be manifested in the following ways:

Factors Influencing Formal Party Structure

Candidacy: Discrimination against women occurs in the political parties, rather than in the electorate. Thus, we would expect as large a male dominance among candidates selected by Thai political parties as among elected representatives.

Election system: Proportional systems tend to favour a larger inclusion of different social groups than a majoritarian system. Thus, we would expect a majoritarian election system in Thailand, since higher male dominance among representatives is associated with a first-past-the-post system. We would also expect fewer women candidates in a majoritarian system than in the proportional counterpart.

Incumbency: Incumbent representatives stand a much greater chance of being re-selected by the party. Thus, in order to understand male dominance in Thai politics, we would expect a large number of incumbents running for election and we would expect the majority of incumbents to be male.

Dispersion of power/formalization: Since a decentralized and informal party leaves greater apertures for arbitrary and localized interests to influence candidate selection, we would expect Thai political parties to be decentralized and informal organizations.

Factors Influencing Informal Party Practices

Closed male networks: It is often a hidden prerequisite to be male in order to become part of networks and alliances formed between individuals to protect the power of the organization. Thus, we would expect electoral and political networks in Thailand to be male.

Homo-social reproduction: People with the power to recruit new members to the organization are likely to perceive men with similar characteristics to themselves as more competent and reliable than others. Thus, we would expect Thai politicians to recruit people like themselves, rather than people who represent other social groups.

IDENTIFYING THE MALE NORM WITHIN THAI POLITICAL PARTIES

Political actors remaining on the stage throughout regime changes often have plenty of leeway to decide the extent to which they will adapt to the new regime, and which particular strategies to employ. While Thai parties often have to court democratic and military leaders and ideals at the same time, the greater institutional context they are most likely to foresee is that of an ever-changing political arena, where it is better to invest one's power in something more consistent than a particular regime or institutional setting. Thai political parties, being the rational and pragmatic actors that they are, are likely to want to continue business in much the same way as usual, while making minor adaptations in order to conform to new formal rules.

The actual practices and preferences of the parties thus certainly have an impact on how generous the apertures for women are – in other words, how inclusive democracy becomes. In order to understand this stalemate in the over-representation of men in Thai politics, we have to understand the organizational context in which political actors are situated when operating within the political parties, and we have to understand the social and cultural expectations in the political sphere in Thailand. Although women are under-represented in all legislative bodies of the world today, there are different localized and cultural reasons for this under-representation. Specific political institutions – formal and informal – help shape localized interpretations of gender roles and thus generate a demand for different types of politicians. The low numerical representation of women in Thailand thus signifies an institutional context that has been favouring male political involvement over female political involvement.

Candidacy

The candidacy factor is of relevance for studying political parties in order to understand unequal representation. We expect political parties, not the electorate, to be discriminatory towards women candidates. If political

parties, rather than electorates, are responsible for the male dominance in parliaments, an expansion of the units of analysis is needed. Instead of analyzing the elected representatives, all the candidates presented by the party will be scrutinized. Who is elected is to some extent determined by the voters and the general election results. Whom the voters have to choose between, however, is determined by the political parties. A high number of women among the candidates is likely to give a high number of women representatives, although this is by no means certain. If there are, for instance, important discrepancies between how many women candidates each party fields, the party that wins the election is going to have more influence on the number of women representatives. Also, there are several strategies that political parties can use to field a large number of candidates in not very electable places. Examples of this would be when women candidates are placed at the end of the party list or in constituencies where the party does not stand a big chance of winning. Our main interest really does not lie in which party wins the election, but rather in how the party selects their candidates. We shall start by comparing election data on the constituency-based candidates and the subsequently elected candidates in the Thai parliamentary election of 2005.

Table 9.1 Representatives and candidates by gender in the constituency-based election system

	Seats won by party and by gender in constituency system					
	Candidates			Representatives		
	F	M	% men	F	M	% men
Chart Thai	22	237	91.5	2	16	88.9
Democrats	39	351	90.0	6	64	91.4
TRT	47	353	88.3	38	272	87.7
Mahachon	26	275	91.4	1	1	50.0
Other parties	46	287	86.2	0	0	0
Total	180	1,503	89.3	47	353	88.3
N		1,683			400	

Source: ECT

The above table confirms the suspicion that the largest threshold for women to become politicians in constituencies in Thailand lies with being

selected as candidates, and that our focus on political parties is thus an accurate one. Male dominance is as high in the pool of candidates as it is among the elected representatives, with 89.3 per cent male among candidates compared to 88.3 per cent men among elected representatives. The proportion of male and female candidates being elected is roughly the same in the constituencies, and even slightly higher among women since 26 per cent, or 47 out of 180, of the women candidates were elected, as compared to 23.5 per cent, or 353 out of 1503, of male candidates. Thus the fact that there are only 47 women constituency representatives is, in the first step, best explained by the fact that there are only 180 women candidates while there are more than eight times as many men standing for election. Though it is much harder to become a constituency candidate as a woman, it seems as though, once you are there, you are not discriminated against by being put in constituencies where it is difficult or impossible to gain a seat. Nor does it seem like voters shun constituencies that have a woman candidate. In this regard, Thailand follows the expected pattern and we can feel confident that the gendered analysis of masculinity within political parties is a useful one.

Election System

Because of the high male dominance in parliament, we might expect to find a majoritarian system in place in Thailand. Proportional systems tend to encourage political parties to include different social groups, whereas majoritarian systems encourage parties to go for the one candidate most likely to win. Thailand in 2005 provided an extremely interesting opportunity to compare the impact of different electoral systems on the representation of women in a non-western context. The election system at the time was of a mixed character, where 400 out of 500 seats were constituency-based whereas the remaining 100 seats were elected on a proportional list ballot, whereby all of Thailand served as one constituency. When looking at elected representatives by election system, however, we find an unexpected pattern in Thailand. The highest male dominance found is, surprisingly, the 94 per cent male representatives (6 per cent female) produced by the proportional system, wherein Thailand is considered one giant constituency. This is to be compared to the 88.3 per cent male dominance among constituency-based representatives. Thailand thus seems to refute one of the commonly accepted 'truths' regarding women's representation in the West, namely that proportional election systems generally produce more women

representatives than do single-member constituency-based systems. The comparison between the two electoral systems, made explicit, is shown in the table below.

Table 9.2 Women representatives by party and election system

	Seats won by party and by gender					
	Constituency			Party list		
	F	M	% men	F	M	% men
Chart Thai	2	16	88.9	-	7	100
Democrats	6	64	91.4	1	25	96.2
TRT	38	272	87.7	5	62	92.5
Mahachon	1	1	50.0	-	-	-
Total	47	353	88.3	6	94	94.0
N		400			100	

Source: ECT

Hence, we see that this anomaly holds true for all major Thai parties in this election. Among the representatives of all parties, male dominance is even stronger in the proportional system than in the constituency based system.

Table 9.3 Representatives and candidates by gender in the party list system

	Candidates			Representatives		
	F	M	% men	F	M	% men
Chart Thai	13	87	87.0	-	7	100
Democrats	13	87	87.0	1	25	96.2
TRT	7	93	93.0	5	62	92.5
Mahachon	11	89	89.0	-	-	-
Other	52	130	71.0	-	-	-
Total	96	486	83.5	6	94	94.0

Source: ECT

Looking more closely at the party list system candidates, we see a distinct strategy at work. On the one hand, parties field a certain number of women candidates, but, on the other hand, they put them in non-electable places. Thus, as we have seen, the number of women representatives from the proportional list is much lower than would be expected. When switching the

focus to include candidacy, however, we see that women in fact stand a better chance of becoming candidates on the party list than in the constituency-based system, but yet a smaller chance of actually becoming elected.

Even though there were 83.5 per cent men among the party list candidates, 94 per cent of the elected representatives from the party list were men. In proportions of female candidates, this means that out of the 16.5 per cent female candidates on the party list (compared to 11 per cent of the constituency candidates) only 6 per cent of those elected were women (compared to 11 per cent of the constituency candidates). This indicates that even though the number of women constituency candidates is very low, at least they are put in electable positions, and that this is not equally true for women candidates in the party list system. The fact that 16.5 per cent women candidates decreases to only 6 per cent elected candidates clearly shows that even if women are put on the list at all, they are normally put so far down that it is unlikely that they will be elected.

Why then do Thai political parties not use the opportunity to balance their party lists in order to appeal to more groups of voters? Interview material suggests that parties prevent the proportional method from having this kind of effect because they use the proportional list as an internal reward system. The party list has, in practice, become a seniority list for potential candidates for cabinet positions. The proportional list is thus considered a very prestigious list, and it is more attractive to become a party list candidate than a constituency candidate. In effect, only senior male politicians end up in electable places on the party list, often as a reward for support given to the party in some way. Very few of the senior politicians in Thailand are women, and in effect this has become a system where men reward men. The Democrat Party leader, Abhisit, confirms this view. "There are a number of reasons why people would prefer to be on the party list system. First because there's less of a burden in terms of constituency work and because constituency politics have become more competitive too, given that it is now single-member constituencies. Secondly, the process and the complications with the Election Commission have become very tiresome. You see how the party list members have a much easier time after the elections, not having to go through these processes of complaints, of allegations, of investigations and so on. And thirdly, it has now become an almost accepted rule that should the party become part of the government, ministers will be picked from the party list' (Interview with Democrat Party official, February 25, 2005).

Incumbency

Analyzing incumbency statistically in Thailand very soon becomes a complex endeavour. The theory of incumbency assumes that an incumbent representative will be more likely to be selected as a candidate in the same party. However, in Thailand we can not expect incumbency to work only within one party. Parties as organizations are weak in Thailand. In fact, most political parties in Thailand are really made up of political factions, or cliques of individuals, and politics has commonly been centred around these factions and around certain individuals rather than around parties and party policies (Ockey 2003, 2004). Duncan McCargo describes the now banned party Thai Rak Thai as a party that was 'at heart a collection of self-interested cliques unburdened by any program or ideology and united by little more than shared opportunism – in short, a traditional Thai political party' (McCargo 2002a: 116). Because of this pragmatism among political parties, and due to the fact that few candidates feel bound by party loyalty or ideology, party-switching is common in Thailand. The prerequisite for being considered an attractive candidate depends upon how strong a local network of canvassers you command at the constituency level. There are gains to be made for individual candidates with strong local networks switching parties, and even greater gains for faction leaders who might be able to command the switching of an entire faction from one party to another (McCargo 2002a; Nelson 2001). A male representative from northern Thailand explains why he decided to switch parties, although he was already an elected representative: 'Since I was a former Member of Parliament for another party, the party leader knew I was influential and invited me to become a candidate' (Interview with Constituency candidate, March 16, 2005).

Nevertheless, what is important to note here is that the existence of strong, local networks often go hand in hand with incumbency, at least where incumbency is not seen as limited to a particular party, and that most former representatives are male. There are different incentives for party switching in different elections, and in 2005 the incentives were not considered great. The election of 2001, however, was a different story. Then, Thai Rak Thai was a newcomer on the political stage, and the election has become famous for the large amount of representatives who were encouraged by Thaksin to change parties (McCargo 2002a).

In 2005, out of the 400 constituency representatives elected, over 70 per cent (290 people) were incumbents in the sense that they were

already members of parliament when they stood for election. Of these 290 incumbents, 65 people, or 22 per cent, had switched parties between 2001 and 2005, and 91 per cent of the winning incumbents were male. Thus, it seems that incumbency is both male-dominated and a common path to representation in Thailand, as in other places.

Dispersing of Power/Formalization

As expected, Thai parties cannot be easily situated along western ideological lines or measured with western political systems as the model, and, McCargo argues, should not be. Instead, he suggests, research should be geared towards how Thai political parties really function (McCargo 1997). This does not mean, however, that Thai political parties cannot be compared with other political parties in terms of, for instance, the strength of the party organization in order to see what apertures it leaves for localized interests to matter.

Several researchers of Thai politics have noted the large influence of factions and individuals, rather than of parties (McCargo 1997; Ockey 2003, 2004). Ockey (2004) notes that this reliance on factions in combination with the failure to develop clear policies has had the consequence that Thai parties are not only dependent on factions or individuals to build up their local electoral networks, but that it is also the faction or even the individual candidate concerned that claims credit for any local improvements. Such improvements often take the form of constituency services, personal favours, and direct vote-buying administered by the local canvassing networks. These networks, in turn, are exclusive and highly informal in nature, and almost exclusively male. Nelson explains: 'Citizens who are interested to participate in provincial politics cannot ask for a form to apply for membership; cliques do not have branch offices or regular meetings to discuss policies, nor would one find newsletters published to advertise a clique's political achievements and to broaden its membership base' (Nelson 2001: 317).

When looking at Thai party organization, therefore, it can be described as being both localized and informal. If this holds true for Thai political parties in general, in election data we would not expect great partisan differences in male dominance whereas regional differences might very well be visible. If all political parties in Thailand are, more or less, decentralized and informalized, no political party central leadership is likely to issue clear guidelines or rules encouraging greater diversity among candidates that all

constituencies would have to abide by. On the other hand, the local situation in certain constituencies might be more conducive to women candidates. These expectations do hold true. Male dominance is strong in all parties when looking at candidates as well as elected representatives, ranging from 88.3 per cent male candidates in Thai Rak Thai (88.9 per cent men elected) to 91.5 per cent male candidates in Chart Thai (92.7 per cent men elected). Since Mahachon only has two elected candidates and one of them is a woman, the low figure of 50 per cent men among their representatives might be a rather misleading figure, as the high male dominance among candidates, at 91.4 per cent, also shows. As far as the three other parties go, Thai Rak Thai, the landslide winner of the election, is also leading with regards to the proportion of women candidates as well as elected women. However, 88.3 per cent men candidates in Thai Rak Thai, compared to just over 90 per cent in the Democrats and Chart Thai, is hardly a big enough difference to conclude that Thai Rak Thai was less male-dominated than the other parties.

As far as regional differences go, the data has only been disaggregated for the five major regions of Thailand. However, despite this rather crude division, one region clearly stands out. In Bangkok the male dominance is as low as three quarters of the representatives (75.7 per cent male representatives, 24.3 per cent female). However, in Bangkok there is also an interesting discrepancy between candidates and elected representatives as the high percentage of women representatives is not matched among Bangkok candidates where only 13.5 per cent are women. Women candidates from all parties were actually more successful in Bangkok than in other regions, and thus the proportion of women among the representatives is higher for each party than the proportion of candidates.

The same is true, although not as evident, for the Central region and, again, for all parties apart from Mahachon. The three remaining regions display the opposite pattern. Not only have parties fielded fewer female candidates in the South, North and the Northeast, but the female candidates that are fielded are also not put in as electable positions as in the other regions. The proportion of women elected in these areas is the same or lower than the proportion of female candidates. What we see then is probably a rural–urban division that reflects the fact that the demands and expectations put on constituency candidates in Bangkok are different from those of candidates in rural areas of the country. Apart from city areas having a more highly educated population with generally more liberal values, it is

probably also true that electoral networks and vote-buying are less extensive in urban areas than they are in rural areas. How and why networks and vote-buying are conducive to male dominance will be elaborated below. Because the political parties are such decentralized organizations, these regional differences are reflected in a sex-disaggregated analysis.

It is also clear that candidate selection is, as far as it is conditioned by strong local networks, pragmatic rather than ideological in nature. Parties try to secure the candidate most likely to win, regardless of ideological stance or present political belonging. Electoral competition and success is thus at the centre of this political organization, just as in many other male-dominated organizations. We turn now to the factors influencing the informal party practices in Thailand.

Closed Male Networks

The importance of electoral networks in Thai politics has already been hinted at. We will now look at how these networks are built and maintained. We would expect them to be created in order to protect the power of an individual or group, and we would expect them to be male. Electoral networks have been central to Thai politics for a long time. Such networks usually extend all the way from the party candidate down to the lowest village level. There are several reasons why these networks are so instrumental. Although parties are localized, their organization as parties is weak and there are no effective party branches. Candidates can thus not rely on the party to build electoral support or to help in the campaign, instead they have to build and maintain their own personal networks. Also, Thai national politics has seldom been concerned with issues of interest to local communities and poor people (Ockey 2003). Instead, people have had to rely on local notables for help in their daily lives. This has brought about a patron–client system that is still in place today. Constituency politicians are obliged to establish themselves as patrons who can offer the welfare that the larger political system cannot (Brusco et al. 2004). General services to the constituency, individual favours, and direct vote-buying are all very common in Thailand. In order to administer vote-buying in particular, the large networks are essential (Arghiros 2000; Callahan 2005; Callahan and McCargo 1996; Nelson 2005).

These networks are thus built up in order for the candidate or factions to be able to distribute benefits widely: the most assured way of being selected as a candidate and being elected. Key members of these networks

are usually local politicians spread out at different levels and in different geographical areas throughout the constituency. It is important to have canvassers that work closely with villagers (Ockey 2004; Nelson 2001). There are financial benefits in store for local politicians who support a national candidate in an electoral network. There are a few earlier detailed accounts of hierarchical clientelist networks in Thailand, both of which show how political candidates gave economic benefits to local politicians in return for campaign work. This is sometimes referred to as creating 'electoral infrastructure' (Arghiros 2001; Nelson 2005).

Although much of this alliance-building is in unison with how and why alliances are built in masculine organizational networks, it does not explicitly explain why networks are predominantly male. As in organizational networks, the purpose of these networks is not specifically to exclude women, but to protect the organization. Being male is more of a hidden prerequisite for partaking. In addition, the less concealed prerequisite – being a local politician – is certainly gendered in itself. Male dominance is even more pronounced in local Thai politics than it is at the national level. The traditional institutions like village heads and sub-district heads are particularly male dominated with 96.7 and 97.6 per cent men among elected officials, respectively (UNDP 2006). These positions have historically been associated with police-like tasks and godfather-like men, and it was not until 1982 that women were even allowed to be village heads and sub-district heads (Doneys 2002; Funston 2001). It should also be noted that these networks do not only exclude women, but also a majority of men. Nor is any position within the network open to any individual. Thus, not only questions of gender, but questions intersecting class and social position are certainly at play here, particularly in a society that greatly emphasizes hierarchies.

Homo-Social Reproduction

People with the power to recruit new members to the organization are likely to perceive men with similar characteristics to themselves as more competent and reliable than others. Thus, we would expect Thai politicians to recruit people who are like themselves, rather than people who represent other social groups.

It is imperative that people in the same clique or electoral network can trust each other, especially considering that activities are often sensitive and secretive and sometimes outright illegal – such as the distribution of

vote-buying money (Callahan 2005). The cliques are often built around a powerful local family, but can also originate from academia or from the business-world (Nelson 2001). As mentioned, recruitment to the electoral networks generally focuses on local politicians, since they are perceived to have the connections needed as well as the incentives for helping the national candidate. Thus, the main guideline for these networks is not that they should be as diverse as possible. They are made up of people who are very much alike, who have very similar experiences, and who are perceived as suitable canvassers. Networks and cliques are, according to Nelson, also important arenas for political recruitment for higher political office. National candidates often originate from these very networks, having perhaps made a political career at the district or provincial level before taking the step to the national level, promoted by influential people in the clique or faction and with an already established electoral network at hand (Nelson 2001). The passing on of candidacy to a close family member, most commonly from father to son, is also very common in Thailand as elsewhere (Mitton 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

To reiterate the central argument of this chapter, representation of women has remained low in Thailand, regardless of the political regime in place. Military regimes as well as more democratic regimes have proved to be built on a male norm, favouring male political candidates. Thus, it is evident that mainstream political institutions work in gendered ways, and that they should be scrutinized from a gendered perspective. Political parties, as the main gatekeeper for women's political representation, should be the focus. This puts emphasis on the fact that political parties are not neutral organizations, but rather organizations dominated by men, where homo-social relationships and perhaps unconscious views of femininity and masculinity condition the recruitment procedures. Although political parties may court democratic and military regimes alike, they are organizations with an internal organizational culture that remains very much the same even though the surrounding institutions may change. In reality, they are driven by some formal organizational rules as well as by informal, cultural and localized practices. These formal rules and informal practices interact to shape political parties into the male strongholds that they are today.

Many useful pointers about the way forward for research on male norms in political parties in Asia and elsewhere can be drawn from the above analysis. First, and perhaps most importantly, political parties and the people that make up these organizations are motivated by winning elections. In order to understand the decisions made affecting representation within parties, elections should always be kept in mind. There are, however, several important factors that help shape the decision-structure within parties. These are a power nexus where masculinity as a norm is either fortified or abandoned, and formal party structures which set the general framework within which decisions are made. This framework can be more or less gender-friendly and partly determines to what extent informal organizational practices are allowed to influence decisions made within the party.

In terms of formal party structure, we know that the biggest threshold for women candidates in Thailand lies within the political parties. Future research on political parties as male organizations should thus be encouraged. Election systems *per se* do not determine whether or not women can become political candidates, rather, election systems are tools that parties can, to some extent, use for their own purposes. Abandoning conventional wisdoms about the automatic effects of different election systems is therefore advisable and it should rather be investigated how conceptions and prejudices about men and women held by party officials are filtered through different election systems. Organizations are also slow changers, which is why incumbency matters and why changes in terms of gender representation takes time. It needs to be remembered, however, that incumbency does not only work within one political party. Where party organizations are weak, as in Thailand, documented election success will always be an asset that instrumental organizations will want to use. The dispersion of power and the formalization of party regulations also set the limits as to what extent the male norm can arbitrarily influence the candidate selection. Decentralized or even localized systems with a high degree of informality are the most likely to give free play to exclusive and unofficial male networks to set the agenda and to select each other.

How informal party practices work in gendered ways needs to be contextualized. In Thailand, it is these exclusive and unofficial male networks that need to be investigated, as they are part of what influences informal party practices, and are the networks that often really matter for who is selected as a candidate. In the localized context of Thailand, it

seems as if candidature is almost conditioned by being a member of such an electoral network, and to become a member of such a network there is a hidden prerequisite of being a man. The more sensitive the activities within a network, the more likely homo-social recruitment will be. Women are thus caught in a vicious circle. Looking more closely at how these networks function in the candidate selection procedure within the political parties, and at how recruitment to the networks themselves works, is imperative in order to understand more about their gendered nature.

It is interesting to note that, when analyzed from the perspective of the male norm, we do not necessarily have to interpret women not participating in corrupt and clientelistic networks as less corruptible than men. When taking into account the male norm predominant in these networks, it is rather the fact that the exclusiveness of the networks, perhaps spurred on by the very type of activities performed within them, obstructs women from becoming part of corrupt networks. As Goetz suggests, it might be the case that political 'parties offer women and men different opportunities for illicit or illegal activities' (Goetz 2007: 96), not that women freely choose to abstain. Looking at the male norm thus not only teaches us things about men and masculinity, but might also make us re-evaluate our conceptions about women and femininity.

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NOTES

- 1 Political instability has increased in Thai society. Recently, demonstrations organized by different fractions reached huge proportions, leading, among other things, to the occupation of international airports (November 2008), the dissolution of an ASEAN summit (April 2009) and a proclaimed state of emergency (April 2009). Political instability and gendered standstill are thus persistent patterns of contemporary Thai politics.
- 2 Both proportions will be used and discussed.

Chapter 10

The Cultural Construction of Masculinity among Working-Class Malaysian Chinese in the Intersection of Race, Class and Gender

Ulf Mellström

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how heterosexual masculinity (hereafter only masculinity) is constructed in the balance between essentialized ideas of what makes up masculine ‘nature’ and virtues of achieved or performed manhood among working-class Malaysian Chinese men in Penang, Malaysia. This group of men (and a few women), descendants of *Nanyang* migrants from the southern provinces of China who once sailed the South China Sea in massive numbers, fleeing from starvation, famines, and political repression in search of viable conditions for making a decent living, is now living as an ethnic minority in Muslim-dominated Malaysia. In the following, this group of Malaysian Chinese working-class men will constitute the narrative focus for trying to understand how a particular form of Malaysian Chinese masculinity is constructed in the intersection of gender, race, religion and class.

My understanding of gender is based on a perspective of performativity, doing and undoing (cf. Butler 1990, 1993, 1996, 2004; West and Zimmerman 1987). As Judith Butler (2004: 10) would have it: “Terms such as “masculine” and “feminine” are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending upon geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints ... the social articulation of the term(s) depends upon its repetition, which constitutes one dimension of the performative structure of gender.’ Thus, masculinity as social

practice is something that has to be accomplished and proved over and over again. In the local context that I will depict in the following, certain acts of doing gender are reified as belonging to the biological nature of men and therefore accepted as forever fixed and not to be challenged. In other words, we have a social process whereby culture is transformed into naturalized conceptions and indigenous notions of stable and consistent gender categories, although social practice constantly challenges such local ideologies of gender norms.

My focus is on the stabilizing and performative acts of masculinity, but Peletz (1996: 9), for instance, argues that ‘femininity and masculinity can only be understood in relation to one another; that cultural knowledge is contextually grounded and deeply perspectival; and that our ethnographic descriptions and interpretations must therefore attend both to polyvocality (the existence of multiple voices) and to the political economy of contested symbols and meanings.’ In describing and analyzing a local form of masculinity among Malaysian Chinese working-class men, I will also use a relational perspective (Peletz 1996). This means that masculinity as such is enacted through a number of different locally grounded social categories in daily life, such as brother, father, son, uncle, friends and husband, and so are its female equivalents. This is also to say that certain male relational roles, such as father or husband, may well dominate the category of maleness or male. Masculinity is thus performed or enacted in the interrelation between these categories and in regard to equivalent female roles. This is not to say that masculinity stands on any equal footing to femininity, but to suggest that masculinity as a social category is composed of a number of contradictory representations and relations. As Peletz (1996: 5–6) points out, the category of male is just as much defined by relational roles as the category of female, even though males still come out ‘on the top’. A relational perspective also opens up the articulation of other important social categories.

Consequently, my gender analysis is grounded in an intersectional understanding in line with the theme of this collected volume, and aims to incorporate the intersecting dynamics of class, race, and gender (cf. Collins 1998; Crenshaw 1991; Young 1997; Yuval-Davis 1997; Lykke 2003; de los Reyes and Martinsson 2005) in an ethnographic case where the men portrayed both enact domination and are dominated. I believe that power and powerlessness are to be understood through an integrative analysis of gender, race, and class, i.e. from a broad approach, ‘one that interprets

power as having multiple forms and sources, varying sites, and differing modes of agency and operation' (Nonini 1999: 48). This is also to say that 'economic power enters into complex confrontations between groups divided along lines of ethnicity, gender, race, and nationality. Economic power activates, reproduces, and connects to fields of unequal non-economic power relations within which a variety of different identities are played out and constructed' (Nonini 1999: 48). Following Nonini (1999), I stress the continued importance of class analysis, but these men also strive for recognition of their gendered identities as men and their racial identity as Chinese, which in many cases are as important as their working-class ethos. In fact, this is what constitutes their particular form of masculinity within a Malaysian national context. In the case of the men portrayed in this study, they are practising a form of gender configuration that is at the junction of several structural elements that subdue as well as privilege. They are also practising a number of different relational roles in the community itself, as well as in relation to how they are viewed by other groups and societal actors in Malaysian society. In the constant 'othering' that is such a prevalent feature of Malaysian culture, working-class Chinese men are a category of low status and gain little respect and recognition. Within the Malaysian State, these men are essentially problematic citizens who are subjected to a number of oppressive mechanisms, such as being locked out of state employment opportunities. They are disfavoured and misrecognised on the grounds of race 'negative'. Chineseness in Malay society is often considered crude, simple, and unrefined. This racial stereotype is regularly invigorated by a cultural politics that fosters Malayness as the original set of indigenous cultural values (Nonini 1998, 1999).

The chapter has three substantive parts. The first situates the overall field of research, and the character of the anthropological fieldwork conducted between the years of 1997 and 2002. The second part of the paper discusses how mundane social practices such as drinking and gambling are transformed into undisputable facts about the nature of men and masculinity. In the third part, I discuss how manhood can be achieved through moral behaviour, honesty, hard work, and trust. My conclusion is that the cultural script of masculinity is articulated as a tension between these social forces and that it goes hand in hand with Confucian and Taoist folk beliefs.

SITUATING THE FIELD OF RESEARCH

In the opening lines of a fairly recent volume on Asian masculinities, one of the editors, Kam Louie (2003), addresses the evident lack of studies on forms of masculinity outside a Western context, and in particular Asian forms of masculine gender configurations. Louie situates seminal scholarship in men's studies (cf. Connell 1995, 1998; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994; Brod and Kaufman 1994) within a frame of globalization and comparative understanding, and convincingly argues that half of 'mankind', i.e. Asian masculinities, is invisible. This is despite earlier ambitions of understanding masculinities in an all-inclusive international context. Writers like Connell, Cornwall and Lindisfarne, and Brod and Kaufman all point to the necessity of such work but little has been realized since their mid-1990s publications. Indeed, Louie points to a crucial dilemma in contemporary studies of masculinities, and to some extent within gender studies in general. In the realm of 'international masculinity research' (Connell 1998), the large bulk of writings undoubtedly concerns white men inside a Western context. In the rather rare instances where Asian men have been studied, it is mostly studies of 'minority' masculinities within a Western cultural setting (see for example Chan 2000; Hibbins 2003). Louie's call for understanding 'local' Asian masculinities on their own terms (2003:13) therefore seems like an urgent and necessary plea for a further widening of masculinity studies.

However, Louie and Low's volume, 'Asian Masculinities', is concerned with what might more properly be labelled East Asian masculinities. All contributions relate to the practice of manhood in China and Japan or Chinese masculinity in Australia. Little of the rest of Asia, or different forms of masculinity in, for example, South East Asia are seen in the volume. A further widening of what constitutes 'Asian masculinities' would be a desirable next step. As their timely volume shows, there are considerable variations in what constitutes Chinese masculinity, although when it comes to 'Chineseness' certain pertinent features seem to be recurrent in a variety of local forms. These are a pre-occupation with wealth, hard work, and making money. This is also something that will become evident in this chapter. Still, it is crucial to see that any fine-grained cultural representations of masculinities, and in particular 'minority' masculinities, need to be contextualised in regard to nationalism, community structure, and global influxes, as well as in the local context being understood in a relational perspective.

In the overall context of international masculinity research I would argue that Asian masculinities and in particular Southeast Asian masculinities are just on the brink of being understood in the context of relational readings (see also Peletz 1996; Louie and Low 2003). Rigid gender dichotomies drawing on structural definitions of femininity and masculinity (cf. Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Chodorow 1978; Gilligan 1982) tend to underplay relational status and variety in gender configurations in a comparative perspective. In a Southeast Asian context this tendency has clearly been visible. For example, the Malaysian feminist scholar Wazir Jahan Karim (1995: 26) notes: 'Western themes of feminism cannot envisage a situation where male and female relations are managed in a way as flexible and fluid as they are in Southeast Asia.' Karim (1995) argues that in societies where dominant cultural codes are based on informality, conflict-based understandings may not be the best way to capture the semiotics of gender relations in Southeast Asia (see also Scott 1985; Errington 1990). Rather, these scholars argue that an anthropology of informality would make us understand intrinsic features of Southeast Asian cultural systems and social intangibles such as deferment, patience, spirituality, invisibility, and transference, not least when it comes to gender relations.

Indeed, this double-sided theme of intersectionality and a relational perspective informs my understanding of how masculinity is carved out in daily practices in the Chinese working-class communities of Penang, Malaysia.

FIELDWORK: LOCALITY, METHOD AND MATERIAL

This chapter is based on anthropological fieldwork conducted intermittently between the years of 1997 and 2002 on the island of Penang in the northwest of Malaysia (see also Mellström 2002, 2003, 2004). It is ethnographic work portraying the everyday realities of a number of men (47) and a few women (3) in technical professions. They are working as car and motor mechanics and a few as engineers. One important reason for choosing technical specialists was that the original focus of the study was technology and masculinity. However, my findings also came to cover a wider spectrum of issues such as race, nation, class, religion, and gender configurations in general. In other words and according to my results, these men and their sense of masculinity are clearly connected to the mastering of machinery and the tinkering pleasures derived from that, but their idea of manhood, of course,

also ranges beyond that. Their idea of manhood includes a number of virtues such as hard work, wealth, and morally proper behaviour according to a Confucian–Taoist cosmology that makes up the central tenet in their lives. Therefore, what this ethnographic picture portrays is a gendered world and imaginary (Nonini 1997) that springs from technical skills and machinery and is deeply rooted in the urban diaspora life of the Chinese Malaysians in Penang. It is a world with technical skills as a medium of survival and pride but it is also a world of transnational work migration, temples, Chinese schools, Chinese newspapers, local coffee-shops, hawker stalls, family, friends, and relatives. It is a world of beliefs and practices dating back to life on the Chinese mainland, but in contemporary Malaysia these men are directed towards handling a situation and asking for recognition, living as an ethnic minority, as non-*bumiputeras* (non-natives) in a country that often treats them as ‘second-grade citizens’ (*dierdeng gongmin*).

A combination of participation and life-history interviews was used to cover both synchronic and diachronic perspectives of the field. Altogether fifty mechanics were interviewed and three of them were observed more closely over the years.¹ These three men (Ah Teong, Tan, and Guan Hock) are now in their late forties and have been working as mechanics since they were teenagers. Through the customary ethnographic procedure of ‘hanging out’ I was able to interview and talk to men and women and gradually became known as the *ang moh* professor in the suburban quarters of the city where these three mechanics had their workshops.² I spent uncountable hours in the workshops, sometimes helping out with menial tasks but mostly passing time by talking and discussing the different topics of the day.

Conducting fieldwork intermittently³ has advantages and disadvantages. Starting with the latter, I recognise that my language skills probably would have been better if I had stayed for a longer extended period of time. Although I have reached an understanding of Hokkien to the extent that I can follow conversations in the coffee-shops and workshops, I am not fluent in the dominant Chinese dialect of Penang. Most of my research was carried out in English since two of my main informants were English-educated and the third one (Guan Hock) spoke almost fluent English. This is in no way uncommon in the former British crown colony of Penang; many Chinese Penangites often use both languages. Some interviews were conducted in Malay with the help of an interpreter; others were carried out, with help from research assistants, in Hokkien and were later transcribed. Approximately

half of the interviews took place in English. Taped conversations in the workshops were recorded by me but transcribed by research assistants.

The advantages of conducting fieldwork intermittently are the continuity of the anthropologist and informant relationships, and the longitudinal aspects of the research. As I have been able to follow my informants, their relatives and friends over a number of years, I have to a certain extent reached an understanding of the life cycle, beyond the life histories, of many people I have met. When friends and relatives have died, which many sadly have done since 1997, I have been in a better position to observe the elaborate burial customs performed in Penang. Furthermore, it has given me an understanding of the often pragmatic and relatively easygoing attitude that death is met with among the people I have come across. This seemingly contradictory behaviour of elaborate burial customs and a relaxed pragmatism made me very confused in the beginning but became understandable as time passed, not only in terms of cosmology but also as an embodied form of understanding on my part. For instance, two of Ah Teong's uncles who used to come to his workshop every day died. Together with Ah Teong I could then share memories of his uncles and this strengthened bonds in a way that would not have been possible if I had been staying for a one-year stint in the field. I believe my recurrent returns have created trustworthiness in my relationship with the informants. The last point is important in a society which has a special and long history of practising *xinyong*, relations of trust. Without doubt, trustworthy relations are important for a sense of 'Chineseness', although this may have been over-emphasised by earlier generations of scholars (cf. Amyot 1973; Young 1974).

As ethnographic fieldwork is a deeply personal experience it also means that inescapable social categories such as age, gender and race are decisive factors in the methodological procedures. In this ethnographic work gender is not only important as an analytical category and empirical reality but also as a determining factor of the character of the fieldwork. It inevitably creates partiality, a partial story, and a story from a man's point of view. That is unavoidable. I am a man; I was brought up as a man, I look like a man, etc. It has a meaning, a sound to it that I can refer to in a certain embodied way. I am heterosexual, and I am also a white Scandinavian, predominantly middle class, although from a working-class background. Besides my academic work, I am interested in ordinary things like my family, sports, and spending time with friends: something which facilitates my fieldwork. I

often fit in rather well in environments where many other mainstream men are. And according to my experience, the world is full of mainstream men. This does not mean that there are not huge social, cultural, and spiritual differences between me and the men figuring in this study, because there are. Nevertheless, I found my interests and background to be something I was able to transfer to my ethnographic context.

The information gathered for a study like this is consequently destined to be gendered from the very beginning. Through 'hanging out' with people, all men, I have been able to reach an understanding of men's life in a group of technical specialists in the Chinese communities of Penang. As such, gendered partiality is part of the study's preconditions. This illustrates two points: first, ethnographic fieldwork is gendered and should be accounted for as being so; secondly, gender is a deep-reaching and fundamental social category and in Malaysian society it is continuously operating in public as well as in domestic spaces.

THE 'NATURE' OF MEN: GAMBLING, WOMANIZING, DRINKING AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF FRIENDSHIP

Gender practices are continuously configured in shifting and relational forms but although practices change over time there are certain conceptions ascribed to the category of men and masculinities. They are ideas about the 'nature' of men that can be contested over and over again in practice, yet still they are part of the cultural script of masculinity. They are social practices transformed into indisputable facts. These indisputable facts of drinking, gambling and womanizing will be discussed in this section of the chapter.

In an early phase of my fieldwork, during a night out, I asked one of the mechanics, Ah Teong, later my reliable key informant, good friend and excellent interpreter, about the inner workings of Hokkien culture. It was a straightforward question, admittedly a bit naive, but nonetheless fruitful as it turned out. 'What is it like to be a man for you?' Ah Teong was startled and waited for a long time before saying anything. He was trying hard to come up with an intelligible and polite answer to this seemingly rather awkward question. After a minute or so, a smile lit up the rather worried expression on his face and he started to retell a conversation he had had with one of his female relatives some time ago. She had gone to Ah Teong and complained to him that her husband drank too much beer,

in the hope that Ah Teong could maybe make an impact by talking to him. She felt that the scarce family resources could be better spent than on the husband's drinking habits and she also wanted her husband to be home instead of drinking with his companions. However, Ah Teong was probably not the right person for her to talk to because as a bachelor he does not have much practical understanding of married life. Ah Teong advised her that she should accept her husband's drinking habit because what is drinking compared to gambling or womanizing? He then turned the question directly to me and rhetorically said:

AT: What is the worst a man could do out of these three alternatives, gambling, drinking and womanizing?

I never answered the question because I didn't know what to answer and because Ah Teong continued without waiting for my answer.

AT: OK, womanizing is no good because it hurts your family very much when your wife is always angry with you because you see other women. It is no good for the family. Gambling is no good because eventually you will lose all your money and get high debts and the loan sharks will come after you, and you and your family will have to move. What is drinking compared to that? When a man drinks he can still take care of his family. The money he spends on drinking with his friends is far less than the money he spends on other women and gambling. There are very few women that can get a man who does not do any of these three things.

Ah Teong's conclusion was that the woman had to accept her husband's drinking habit as long as he did not turn to womanizing or gambling because these masculine traits are potentially much more disastrous. As I gradually found out, these masculine traits were categorised as belonging to the 'nature' of men and were therefore not something that could be changed but were instead dealt with through various strategies by women. Although most of the men I came to know and interviewed rarely distinguished themselves by heavy drinking, gambling, or womanizing, they would recurrently claim that it is part of men's nature to do this. Ah Teong, Tan, and Guan Hock, as well as the majority of men I spoke to, said that women have to accept men as they are, and men are inborn obsessive drinkers, gamblers, and womanisers.

As part of a masculine script representing symbolic ideas of manhood rather than any lived reality, these 'activities' generate a plethora of stories

where men typically try to outdo each other for status and standing among peers. Friendship among the men often revolved around such stories told in different spaces of masculine sociability. Friendship as a form of relatedness is, together with familial relations, crucial for learning about masculinity and being a man in the Chinese communities. Friendship practices among the men in this study are performed both within domestic spaces as well as public spaces such as coffee shops, open-air hawker centres, and restaurants. Male friendship does not exclude the home as an arena for socializing. However, in the rare cases where men and women outside the family form friendship relations, they would not socialize within a domestic sphere such as the family house. From a family point of view, all non-family intergender 'private' relations are almost by definition supposed to be of a sexual nature. It then goes without saying that almost all friendship relations are formed intrasexually. Men form friendships with men and women with women. I have never spent time together with the men in company of a woman not belonging to the family in one way or another.⁴

GAMBLING

Gambling as a social activity is, however, often part of family matters. In some cases, like that of Guan Hock's brother, Lee Hock, who is a runner for a bookmaker, family earnings are directly connected to gambling. People would place bets via the family's landline phone at the workshop. Gambling and betting are in this sense part of everyday routines. It is not necessarily kept apart from normal family life but seen as something that can co-exist with family doings within the domestic sphere. Consequently, gambling as a social practice does not have the marked gendered character that drinking and womanizing (quite obviously) have. There are nearly as many stories about women who have gone insane gambling as there are stories about men, although gambling is not essentialized as a female characteristic. One may also find quite a few women at gambling outlets such as the race turf, number lottery shops, or visiting a medium trying to find guidance as to the winning numbers through spiritual intervention.

According to my interviewees, women gamble out of interest or economic need but it is not an essential characteristic of their 'nature'. When it comes to gambling this is probably the most important gender difference in the creation of feminine versus masculine scripts in the communities. It is in the blood of men but not of women, although women may potentially

gamble to the same degree as men do. For instance, in the Tan family of Ah Teong, there are several stories of the grandmother who was said to have gambled away small fortunes whenever she had the opportunity. Her reputation in the family springs from her excessive gambling and not taking care of her children. However, her 'bad' character is not explained in terms of a feminized 'nature' but rather plain laziness and indolence due to her social background, having come from a better-off family in China.

One gambling activity that is almost exclusively male, however, is the tours many men make to the state casino of Genting Highlands, a six-to-seven-hour bus trip from Penang. Once or twice a year, Tan travels there with his friends. To avoid the expensive lodging at Genting Highlands, a luxury resort that attracts gamblers and money-loaded people from all over Southeast Asia and the West, Tan and his friends travel by night bus and sleep on the bus back and forth. As poor gamblers with high hopes and dreams of big fortunes, they normally return with less money than they came with. This is an accepted fact among the men, i.e. the more money you have the better your chances of hitting the big money. As Tan explained to me: 'To be able to win you have to be able to lose.' Few of the men can afford to lose to be able to win. The trips to Genting Highlands are a rich source for bringing stories into the peer-group, as stories of gambling usually are. They contain excellent dramaturgical elements where a man's courage and foolishness can be highlighted. Winning and betting big sums of money is courageous, while losing the same amount of money is outright stupidity. Still, gambling can't be avoided since it is inscribed into the 'nature' of manhood.

Gambling in general is thus fertile soil for a good story about gains and losses, about life-careers from 'rags to riches' and vice versa, about destroyed families and fortunes, and so on. In other words, it is a powerful element in a strong local discourse that revolves around wealth, making money and doing business. Although gambling can be seen as a fairly gender 'equal' social activity and there are relatively few marked masculine gambling spaces, the trips to Genting Highlands are from the men's perspective a 'woman-free zone'. Women do not go on these trips.

WOMANIZING

The trips described above resemble the privilege men reserve for themselves by going to Thailand for sex, which I classify as part of the womanizing

experience. As Penang is only a couple of hours drive away from the Southern Thai border there is frequent traffic across the border for sex. Especially during the festive season of the year, the Chinese New Year (*Gong Xi Fa Chai*), there is heavy traffic across the border; towns like Had Yai and Satun close to the Malaysian border will be overcrowded by Chinese, Indian, Malay and Western men wanting to buy sex. It is very often through such trips that first sexual experiences are had. Approximately half of the men in this study had their first sexual experience with prostitutes in Thailand. Although many of the men had their first sexual contact with women by buying sex, premarital and non-marital sex are rarely discussed. From my experience, the men in the workshops are reluctant to talk about sexuality openly. For instance, in comparison to the 'sexual bravado' culture of southern Europe (cf. de Almeida 1996) the Chinese men of this study are, in a cross-cultural perspective, reserved about sexuality and seem to focus their womanizing experiences on other things.

What this leads to is a shared understanding of womanizing that is not primarily about sex. Womanizing may of course end with sexual intercourse but as it is being spelled out in the local discourse it is not about sex primarily. The idea of womanizing is basically a homosocial enactment; it is about showing off and being able to spend money. There are various ways of doing this. One common form among the men is to go to karaoke lounges or open-air hawker centres together with friends and spend money on the girls singing so that they accompany the men at the table. Karaoke lounges are a phenomenon that has become immensely popular in Penang in the last ten to fifteen years.⁵ There is a whole range of different places, from lounges with simple hi-fi equipment to exclusive lounges serving luxury food and champagne with special GROs (Guest Relations Officers), and girls accompanying rich businessmen and other prominent guests. The latter forms of lounges are not within the possible options for the men in my study. Instead they go to open-air hawker centres with a stage usually placed in the middle of the establishment and food and drink stalls crowded around the area. Guests sit down at any of the many round plastic tables and chairs typical of these places. These entertainment establishments are often found in the suburbs of Georgetown, to where many people are presently moving. Together with Tan and his friends, I would often go to a certain hawker centre in the suburb of Paya Terubong with a huge elevated stage and up to fifty different food stalls serving an array of typical Penang delights. Here is an excerpt from my field diary on 16 May 1998:

Tan (TT) came by my house and picked me up at 7.30. Today he had his car but usually he rides the motorbike. I knew that 'Fatty Hin' and 'the Englishman' were also supposed to be down in Paya Terubong. I can't remember the name of the place, but Tan reminded me; Chung Loh. As usual he's a bit quiet and answers my questions sporadically. I have learnt this now and I'm not bothered by it anymore. Whenever he feels like talking he does. It is different with 'Fatty Hin'. He talks almost all the time. So, I am not worried about any painful silence tonight. TT said some other people might show up. After the 10-minute drive, TT parks the car and we make our way through the maze of tables, having spotted Fatty Hin at the other end of the place. When we approach the table I see at least five more guys besides 'Fatty Hin' and 'the Englishman'. Fatty Hin has a big smile as always and greets us heartily. 'The Englishman' (who does not speak a word of English) introduces me to the rest of the men. As usual I forget the names soon after I've heard them. Me and Chinese names! Anyway, they are all lorry drivers and I have met two of them before in the workshop. I judge that we are all about the same age, between forty and fifty. TT explains to me that the man sitting right across the table (Chen Sim, as I later found out) struck it lucky on the numbers last Sunday at Toto. He won 3000 RM. Lots of food and beer is ordered, Chen Sim is paying! Nevertheless, when drinks and meals are served at our table, nearly all the men stand up and try to pay the waiter. However, they all know that Chen Sim will be clearing the bill. Consequently, the waiter refuses payment from anyone other than Chen Sim.

Whenever I empty my glass, it is filled up again within less than five seconds. The *ang moh* has to prove that he can drink as much and as fast as the Chinese. After some time the girls start to sing. It is five girls that sing one or two songs and then they change girls. The girls, all in their early twenties, sing contemporary romantic Mandarin songs. Chen Sim and the man next to him (Cheng Thok) sing along and especially seem to like a beautiful girl in a short black dress with long hair. They show their appreciation by buying strings of paper flowers from the waiters. The waiters then deliver the flowers to the girl and she wears the flowers over her shoulder and smiles gently in the direction of our table. The next time she gets up on stage Chen Sim buys five strings of flowers (10 RM⁶ each). She sings two more love songs and then she comes over to our table and a chair is borrowed from the next table for her so she can sit next to Chen Sim. He's a big man in his late forties, slightly bald with the beginning of a beer belly. The tiny girl next to him looks even smaller when sitting there. The focus of the group of men is concentrated on her. She answers all different kinds of questions with an eternal smile. What kind of music do you like? What's your favourite song? And so forth. After some time she leaves our table to get back on stage and sing another couple of songs. We applaud her stage performance loudly and Chen Sim buys another five strings of

flowers for the girl. She comes over to our table again and this time Chen Sim and Cheng Thok are both occupied trying to get the girl's attention and I can't hear what they are talking about. My glass is constantly filled up but apparently it's not only me that is getting a bit dizzy after all the beer we have knocked back, since the Englishman fell off his chair just after the girl came to our table. Everyone, including me, thinks this is hysterically funny although people at other tables do not dare to laugh too loudly. Chen Sim stands up and points a finger at the Englishman who just got to his feet and asks him if it was the beauty of the girl that made him unsteady. Another big laugh spreads and the Englishman is obviously embarrassed, trying to explain himself by claiming that it was not him but the chair that was unsteady. More laughs and for some time Chen Sim and Cheng Thok lose concentration on the girl who also partakes in the merriness caused by the Englishman's sudden fall from his chair. TT announces that it is time to go home because it is a workday tomorrow.

At this up-market hawker centre in the suburbs of Georgetown, I gained much information on masculine sociability outside the domestic sphere and outside the workplace. The themes and habits of womanizing and drinking crystallize in situations like the one described above. The escorting service of GRO girls was something that initially confounded me. Why spend so much money on the company of a girl who only sits at your table and charges by the minute? My immediate assumption was that sex had to be involved. Some of the men would vaguely admit that in special cases one could make a deal with the girl for sexual intercourse, but that this was very unusual and only happened at the exclusive places where the rich business elite would go. It does not happen at places like Chung Loh and I never saw it happen among the men I hung out with. Instead the payment for and company of GRO girls is primarily about gaining respect among other men. It is a display of homosociality and plays on the desire to be appreciated as a man by fulfilling masculine attributes.

This involves, on the one hand, showing that one has enough money to afford such pleasures and to spend on the spur of the moment, and, on the other hand, it is also about feeling appreciated as a man, through the endearments of a beautiful woman, illusionary as they may be. Particular women are here fetish objects for masculine self-satisfaction and self-confirmation. However, in the local gender discourse, most GRO girls are respectable because they are not selling their bodies for sex. In this respect it resembles the Japanese 'Geisha' phenomenon and the GRO girls have a similar task in entertaining men by playing on their femininity and

satisfying men's essentialized needs as men, something some of the men would complain they never get from their wives. These girls are then part of the womanizing phenomenon where cultural patterns are transformed into essentialized nature. The sheer existence of GRO girls is legitimized through that particular discourse and married women are most often fully aware of this and sometimes even support the idea. As such it is part of the balance, or rather imbalance, between the sexes where women are supposed to keep their husbands satisfied, and if they fail to do this men have the right to give expression to their 'biological drives' by womanizing. Consequently, GRO girls exist along the whole social spectrum and there are certain career paths that can be followed by these girls moving from simpler places to more exclusive ones and making more money along the way.

When I discussed the GRO girls with Ah Teong, he shared my amazement over the phenomenon that men can spend a lot of money on women escorting them and keeping them company, but we didn't share the same view on men's needs versus women's needs. According to him, several part-time taxi drivers that come regularly to his workshop use and rent their taxis just as much for the possibility of taking women along without any suspicion as they do for generating income. The taxi would thus be a cover up for being accompanied by an unknown lady on the island where there is otherwise a large chance of being detected by an acquaintance. Whether Ah Teong's assertion is correct or not, it points to an understanding that spaces of masculine sociability including womanizing are limited to specific arenas where these 'drives' can be given expression and are socially acceptable. Outside these arenas, social space is restricted by other local patterns of morality. To be escorted by a GRO girl at a karaoke lounge or a hawker centre is one such arena, but outside that arena it is socially unacceptable. As men and women outside the family sphere rarely socialize outside domestic spaces, there needs to be some other reason for being seen with a person of the opposite sex.

DRINKING

In proving and enhancing manhood and friendship, evenings out at the hawker centre are also connected to drinking and drinking patterns. To drink a lot and to be generous in buying drinks for other men is regarded as a masculine asset, something that proves your financial ability as well as

your ability to stand up as a man able to tolerate large quantities of alcohol. This is even more important when an *Ang moh* like myself is part of the group. Many of the evenings out on the town together with the men ended with informal drinking contests. My ability to drink alcohol was tested early in the fieldwork, and once I had proven my capacity to drink, they would accept if I declined more drinks during a night out. From my experience, drinking is part of the pattern of socializing but is not in the foreground of defined masculine traits. While it is a part of the essentialized 'nature' of men, drinking is perceived as easier to control than womanizing and gambling. There is, in other words, a reason for Ah Teong's claim that drinking is the least disastrous of the three essentialized traits of masculine behaviour.

To pay for drinks and to be generous is another important element in proving worthiness as a man. To be able to pay for drinks or food without hesitation is usually manifest in the collective behaviour when a waiter serves a table. As soon as he puts down the tray, everyone jumps to their feet and tries to push their money into the waiter's hands. It is almost a ritual-like behaviour, and not making a gesture to pay or at least make a movement with the hand towards one's wallet, has consequences for one's reputation as a person and as a man. This recurrent ritual is about generosity and consideration for others, but also about being able to meet the criteria of making enough money so that one can afford to provide friends with drink and food.

Anyone who can't do this is sooner or later excluded from the circle of friends that would meet up for an evening like the one described above. In other words, socio-economic status is being exhibited in everyday rituals like paying for food and drinks. It is carefully noticed if anyone has not paid for a period of time. So, even if everyone partakes in this everyday ritual and there is a certain degree of spontaneity at a particular moment, there is also a collective memory working and tracking down payment patterns through conversational practices and banter. If someone has not paid for a certain period of time, there will inevitably be comments and jokes about holes in the wallet or being drained by a demanding wife or having spent too much money on being escorted by other women. In other words, it belongs to the masculine etiquette to always be alert when it comes to paying. Otherwise there is a risk of being marked out in the circle of friends and possibly also within a wider circle of people in the communities.

THE MORAL ECONOMY OF FRIENDSHIP

The reciprocity of drink-buying is, as Miguel Vale de Almeida (1996) notes, never immediate and sequential but rather deferred in time. Following Almeida (1996), this moral economy of friendship also expresses an ideal, a fundamental equality of men: as a community, as a gender and as a social group. In the case I am describing, it belongs to an ideal among the men. Paying for drinks and food among peers mostly goes beyond any personal calculation and expresses the equality of friendship. It is, in other words, demonstrating friendship or performing and confirming norms, limitations and structures of masculine interaction, which in themselves set standards of masculinity as a code of behaviour. However, to a certain extent the equality of friendship is equal only as long as one has the economic capacity to demonstrate and perform these rituals of friendship.

The basis of friendship is grounded between exchange and sentiments allegedly based on non-instrumentalism. At the same time it is something that momentarily dissolves social rank, while possibly a few seconds later it reinforces socio-economic difference. Degrees of relatedness are of crucial importance here. In the event described previously, Chen Sim and Cheng Thok are not closely related to Tan and two of his best friends, Fatty Hin and the Englishman. The described situation expresses a complex balance between creating social bonds and showing socio-economic status. Chen Sim and Cheng Thok belong to the customers at the workshop but they do not belong to the regular circle of men hanging out there. The night out was thoroughly discussed among the regulars at the workshop in the days after. The perceived social distance between Chen Sim and Cheng Thok and Tan and his friends made room for speculation. The happenings that night were reiterated many times with a humorous climax in the Englishman's sudden fall off his chair. Questions like how much money was spent and why they had been invited as a group of friends, since this was not self-evident, were discussed. To what extent was my appearance part of the invitation and to what extent was the invitation an expression for a sincere gesture of generosity? For at the same time as friendship is an aspect of anti-structure and normative equality (cf. Papataxiarchis 1991), it is also based on exchange which can be more or less instrumental, although basically driven by self-interest, as David Gilmore (1980) would argue.

The speculations among the men were thus swinging within this span of judgements and comments. In the expected reciprocity and moral economy

of friendship, Tan and his friends speculated on what had to be 'paid back' in the future. Tan was relaxed about future obligations and appreciated the generous treatment we were getting, while the Englishman was more suspicious and thought that there was an underlying motive concerning underpaid lorry services that will be expected in the future. Whether or not he had any reason for expecting to carry out any such service for Chen Sim never became clear, but the different angles the two friends took on the matter pretty much reflected their different personal characters.

Degrees of relatedness were consequently the conversational soil that speculations were made upon. Such degrees of relatedness are distinguished in the vocabulary of acquaintances, friends, and friends of confidence. A close friend is normally known as *chi-im pen you*, meaning deep friendship. To add *see-yong sing pen you* means trusted friend or part of the family clan. A more distant friend is normally *poh-thong pen you*, meaning just friend or acquaintance. If one is rated in this category, there is a certain limitation in conversation and other activities. In such vernacular categorization, Chen Sim is placed among the friends while Fatty Hin and the Englishman are placed within the small circle of friends of confidence. From the Englishman's perspective though, Chen Sim would most probably be located among the acquaintances. As family ties are of outmost importance for the men of this study, as for many Chinese, friendships are rarely independent of family and kin. In de Almeida's study (1996: 97) of Portuguese men, where male friendship creates social space outside the domestic space: '... the masculine sociability of the café and 'going out' fulfils the function of creating ties that are independent from family and work.' This is not so with the mechanics, which also means that masculine friendship is almost inevitably directly connected to functions of the family, the clan, and the community. This also becomes evident in the expression *see-yong sing pen you*, which equates trusted friend with part of the family clan. Definitions of manhood, masculinity, or a local masculine script are closely associated with communal values and family ties. The independent, freedom-loving masculine character so thoroughly celebrated in Western popular culture and discourse (cf. Kimmel and Aronson 2004; Rotundo 1993; Bordo 1999) is apparently not the kind of man held in esteem in this context. The strong orientation towards family values is then naturally celebrated in events that mark communality and cultural coherence on a structural level.

* * *

To sum up the first part of this chapter: gambling, womanizing, and drinking are culturally constructed as belonging to the 'natural drives' of men, and as such they constitute one fundamental part of the discourse on masculinity in the Chinese communities. The other side of the coin, which will be discussed in the second part of this chapter, is achieved or cultivated manhood, or how to become a man by practising the believed virtues of 'good' masculinity. These two sides – on the one hand the 'natural' inevitable drives of men, and on the other virtues and practices to achieve manhood – constitute the frame of manhood in the Chinese communities. It is between these two sides that men have to perform their gender. The performance of gender (Butler 1990, 1993, 1996, 2004) can then in this context be seen as an act of balancing between desired masculine virtues and the culturally constructed inevitable drives. It is through such a transformation of culture to 'nature', of social patterns to essentialized 'nature', that men can maintain hegemonic patterns of masculinity (Connell 1995).

This hegemonic pattern has many components, of which drinking, gambling, and womanizing are but three. They are of course practised within the larger community and in relation to social institutions such as marriage, family, and work, i.e. other relational roles that define the men as husbands, brothers, sons etc. These relational roles have, in themselves, different patterns of time and space not least divided and locally categorized by gender. They overlap frequently but are also clearly separated at times. Men have their spaces for socializing and women have theirs. As in most other places, men occupy public spaces to a larger extent than women do and women are more homebound. However, in comparison to, for example de Almeida's ethnographic account of men in a Portuguese town, in which cafés are an exclusively masculine arena and the domestic space is 'feminised to the point where male presence is undesirable.' (1996: 89), this is not the case among the Chinese in Penang. Men spend a great deal of time at home and women and families frequent public spaces like coffee shops and restaurants on a regular basis. There are few clear-cut boundaries between domestic and public spaces. One important reason for this is the strong family orientation among the Chinese.

The tightly knit family is, I would argue, a pronounced existential point of departure. Relations within the family tend to regulate the gendered spatialization. Married men socialize with other married men while bachelors often seek each other's company and so forth. Age, class, wealth,

occupation, and marital status do regulate and define arenas for who socializes with whom. Rank and status are of immense importance when one observes mono-gendered relational patterns as well as gender-mixed arenas such as the outdoor hawker areas in different parts of town. Not only are they almost ethnically uniform but they are also easily categorized by status. The fashionable places for eating out on the island are frequented by wealthy businessmen while less fashionable places are located in other parts of Penang, as was exemplified in this first part of the chapter. Awareness of rank and status is self-evidently an important social tool for navigating the urban space of Georgetown, just as it is among its people. Wealth is highly respected and admired and will also be a *leitmotif* in what follows. It is also one of those things in life that can be achieved through hard work and something that men and women dream and fantasize about. Accordingly, it is through wealth that many industrious Chinese immigrants have come to claim a societal space of recognition, dignity, and respect in a country that has often been hostile to their presence.

ACHIEVED MANHOOD: WORKING HARD, MAKING MONEY AND CREATING WEALTH

So far, the essential and unavoidable 'nature' of men has been discussed. One crucial element of the social construction of masculinity in the Chinese working-class communities of Penang is the transformation of social practice into naturalized conceptions of the true 'nature' of men. I will continue to discuss what can be achieved by the individual man, despite and beyond 'nature', and the ways in which standards of manhood are measured by such achievement. I will in this first section mostly do so by recounting the life of one of the most famous Chinese Penangites, the late tycoon Lok Boon Siew. My reason for choosing this man is that his life has in many ways become a 'saga' illustrating collectively held dreams and aspirations of hard work, fame, and fortune in the working-class communities. His original occupation was also that of a mechanic and therefore his life is of special significance for the men of this study.

Wealth gained through hard work, honesty, and proper moral behaviour belongs to a sphere where the 'nature' of men can be regulated and tamed. 'Good' standards can be achieved and cultivated through a combination of inner discipline and a strenuous life. Good examples of morally righteous persons are recurrently portrayed in the daily Chinese newspapers. The

principles of a moral community here operate through the local media, and the evaluation of the moral reputation of a particular person or persons is very often an underlying theme in the local news (see also Hallgren 1986). Recurrent themes in such a moral community and righteousness are: honesty and trust, moral principles, hard work, ways of making money and a career, and moral behaviour. This concerns both the living and the dead, and of special interest are of course the local celebrities of the Chinese communities in Penang and other parts of Malaysia and Southeast Asia. The idea of hard work as profoundly formative for a person and the self is a deeply rooted belief among the mechanics. The lives of their forefathers as immigrant labourers are often used to illustrate the virtues of hard work. The idea of hard work is also closely connected to the idea of health, as I will discuss later. Hard work is a factual and concrete experience among people, but it is also a code of practical ethics, a set of ideas, which initially grew from the experience of being an immigrant group that had to endure degrading work and terrible working conditions in order to survive. As an immigrant group, the Chinese had to make their way in Malaysian society and had to search for recognition through hard work, making their living by means of small family businesses since few if any other alternatives were available. Initially a poor immigrant community, business has constituted the prime career opportunity and vehicle for betterment. There are some obvious reasons for this. The Chinese in Malaysia were for a long time prevented from buying and cultivating land, in order to prevent them from infringing on the ethnic Malay population's way of life. After independence in 1957, administrative careers were mainly reserved for Malays, this being a continuation of the colonial practice of recruiting civil service employees from the traditional Malay elite. For so-called racial harmony, the British colonial rulers preferred a given division of labour, which among other things meant that the Chinese stayed in business while the Malays were either civil servants or remained rural farmers.

The visibility of successful businessmen in the Chinese communities of Penang encouraged and inspired other people to pursue the possibility of social mobility. A number of the conspicuously rich businessmen such as Lok Boon Siew had risen within one generation or the span of a lifetime.⁷ This has undoubtedly nourished dreams of rapid social mobility within the whole community. However, the road to riches is by no means ever expected to be an easy one. It requires hard work and that is something people in the communities would emphasize over and over again. This also includes the

work of building a character or an attitude that can endure the hardships and tedium of menial work as a way to something else. In order to pursue a business career, many people would rather stay in a poorly paid manual job instead of taking on a job that pays a better salary but provides less possibilities of establishing an anticipated future network for business.

Few Chinese Penangites have ever attained such recognition and acclaim as the late Lok Boon Siew. Known and respected as a man of enormous wealth and a simple way of life, he enjoyed much fame and acquired an almost mythical status throughout Malaysia. Lok Boon Siew came to personify the attributes required for success in the Chinese communities. Thus, his life is interesting in a number of other ways, not least because they crystallize strong local discourses concerning wealth, moral principles, fame, masculinity, work ethos, and success. If one asks Chinese Penangites about a man that symbolises a classic 'rags to riches' story, they would almost certainly answer Lok Boon Siew. According to the obituaries (he died in 1995 at the age of 77), he was born in the Fujian (Hokkien) province of southern China and came to Penang at an early age. The obituary of the daily Chinese newspaper *Kwong Wah Yit Poh* on 19 February 1995 reads:

Lok Boon Siew was born in China. He came to Penang at the age of twelve. He repaired vehicles during the day and earned extra cash (30–40 cents a time) by washing buses in the evening. While many immigrants became coolies, earning RM7–8 monthly, he chose to become a mechanic, earning only RM3 a month. His aim was to master a skill that could benefit him in the future. In 1995, Boon Siew, 77, was the core agent for the motorbikes and cars for Honda. He was called the Honda King in Malaysia. He and his companies owned much land and property on Penang Island. He controlled more than 50 private companies and about 50% (at market value RM1,088,000,000) share of the Oriental Holding Bhd.

He had been the famous mechanic of Penang Island since he was eighteen. He provided services to Wearne Brothers, Borneo Motors and Universal Motors. In the same year, he used his savings, RM 2,000, to purchase 11 second hand buses. After repairing and spraying, he sold out at RM 12,000. Later, he used this money together with some borrowing to purchase 39 buses. With these buses, he formed the Penang Yellow Bus Company. Unfortunately, when Japan invaded Malaysia [sic] in 1942, the Japanese confiscated all the wealth of his sweat and toil.

After Japan surrendered in 1945, he started his business all over again. He traded bicycle chains, tyres and motorbike spare parts. Then, his business expanded to trading second hand cars, lorry transportation and bus services. However, what shaped his fate more than anything else was his

journey to Japan in 1958. He travelled with two friends, one from Penang, and the other from Taiwan. It was just a coincidence when the taxi they took passed a Honda motorbike. He quickly instructed the taxi driver to stop and begged the motorbike rider to let him examine the engine. From his 'gear-box' experience, Boon Siew concluded that it was a cheap but good quality motorbike. Then, he made a request to Honda to be the agent of Malaysia [sic]. With no competition, he succeeded.

In the beginning, he ordered only twelve motorbikes from Honda. Today, his company sells about ten thousand Honda motorbikes annually. Before he became the agent of Honda, Boon Siew had started to purchase land and property. His philosophy was simple: the population would increase but not the land. Hence, he purchased land that was regarded as wasteland at that time. The land he purchased more than four decades ago has made him one of the biggest property owners in Penang. Besides buying property in Penang, ten years ago he also bought land in the now popular resort Island of Langkawi. When the Malaysian government developed Langkawi as a tax haven and free trade zone in 1989, the value of property increased tremendously. Many envied his foresight but he said he was just lucky. He would not suggest purchasing property, speculating at the share market or running business by borrowing money. Because of his conservative but still pragmatic way of conducting business, his companies made profit even during the economic recession. Today, his business covers manufacturing spare parts, trading vehicles, transportation, plantations, crediting and hotels.

Although he was rich, his lifestyle was simple and economical. He loved porridge and simple food. He was not used to waste. So, he would always insist on finishing the dishes when he had dinners with friends. He was generous to his friends, but he had a serious mind when doing business. He would count every cent of a business negotiation. His high rank staff argued that this was a good business principle, but others criticised him for haggling over every cent.

Boon Siew believed that his success was a consequence of his hard work, courage, insight, and credibility. After he succeeded in business, he became a famous philanthropist in Penang. His mother was the one who reminded him to 'do good things'. Hence, when his mother died in 1987, he donated RM750,000 for establishing a hospital – Nam Hwa Yee Hospital. To date, his donations to schools, educational and cultural organizations, and philanthropic organizations have been estimated to run into hundreds of millions of Malaysian Ringgit.

Boon Siew was illiterate. He knew only his mother tongue – Hokkien – and Malay. He said that his illiteracy did not handicap him because he had a team of faithful employees. A team of loyal professionals operated his companies.

His accomplishments granted him to be chosen as one of the Ten Malaysian Entrepreneurs in 1985. The King of Malaysia has also awarded him the honorary title 'Tan Sri' in 1988 as a credit to his contribution to the nation. Unlike other immensely wealthy businessmen, he had no bodyguard. After finding success, he seemed to enjoy the freedom of a common person. He would have breakfast at an old coffee shop. Some people asked, 'Wasn't he afraid of kidnapping?' His answer was simple: he did no harm and evil, so he was not afraid of anything.

Boon Siew came as an immigrant with no education or social rank, one of many thousands of poor male labourers from southern maritime China pouring into British-controlled Malaya at the beginning of the twentieth century. In contrast to many other immigrants, he did not start off as a coolie at the port, but opted instead to be an apprentice in a workshop. As stated in the obituary, his intention was to master a skill to enable him to start his own business. Undoubtedly, this is something strongly desired by many people in the community. In his own way, Lok Boon Siew embodied a dream of the masculine entrepreneurial character among the Chinese of Penang, just as Henry Ford once came to be one of the auto pioneers of American industry and represented a classical American 'rags to riches' story (Scharff 1991).

However, Boon Siew was not a car maker but an entrepreneur more interested in business than engines and horsepower. But just as Henry Ford remained the humble-farm-boy-turned-mechanic so did Boon Siew. However, in Boon Siew's case the formula turned out to be poor-immigrant-boy-turned-mechanic. From the obituary and from what others have told of him, he seemed to have stayed loyal to his original mechanic friends in the workshops where he started his career. As noted, he used to take his breakfast in the same coffee-shop every morning and sat at the same table and used the same cup every day. In the coffee-shop his friends would read newspapers aloud to him. If he had time, he would also visit old friends and help them out if he was in the mood. That is at least what a couple of the mechanics recalled when speaking of him. Others would emphasize less positive sides of his character but everyone seemed to have a story or two to tell about him.

Stories about Boon Siew are plentiful. They revolve around a couple of recurrent themes important for definitions of a masculine entrepreneurial character in this context. As indicated before, these themes are: honesty and trust, moral principles, hard work, ways of making money and a

career, and moral behaviour. It is in many ways the virtues of the classical 'breadwinner man' that are at work here. In other words, it is a masculine ideal where remaining faithful to the family, friends, clansmen, and local community are values highly praised. It is a lifestyle and a cultural balancing act between self-interest and morally righteous behaviour in relation to the local community. As such it does of course relate to a universal human struggle between material and ideal interests, between problems of external need and problems of inner need, but it is expressed in certain ways and in particular places. In this context, needs and interests are ordered in a social system where patriarchal ranking is of crucial importance and it is through such ranking that masculine attributes and distinctions are carved out. Among other things, it means that men seek status among other men and that such rank and status are conferred by material rewards and conjoined by rituals of male solidarity.

What I also try to show with the example of Lok Boon Siew is how important it is to produce wealth and how such examples underpin social practices and daily routines in the lives of the mechanics. Historically, the preoccupation with capital accumulation can be understood through the legacy of the colonial division of labour still accounting for the Chinese predominance in business and commerce in Malaysia. The colonial division sharply separated Chinese, Indians, and Malays, and this policy was reinforced in the first period of self-government after independence in 1957. This reinforcement of ethnic politics eventually resulted in the racial riots and bloodshed of 13 May 1969, when nearly two hundred people were killed. After over forty years of economic progress and reform (NEP, NDP), aimed at eliminating the identification of race with economic function, the inter-ethnic economic imbalance still prevails, but is slowly being balanced (Rasiah 1997: 126ff.).

HARD WORK, MARKED BODIES AND MASCULINE EMBODIMENT

As was exemplified in the last section, hard work is crucial to the character of men and as a practical code of ethics. Wealth accumulated through hard work, combined with entrepreneurial smartness, is highly respected. As we have seen in the case of Lok Boon Siew and his business empire, the production of wealth is being achieved with and through the moral cornerstones of hard work, honesty, and communal loyalty. According to my ethnographic data, certain gender differences are being created in

regard to the morally critical idea of hard work. Even though both men and women are expected to work hard and contribute, it is nonetheless part of the masculine script that hard work is formative of the personality and that a masculine body marked by hard work represents masculinity as such, but a feminine body marked by hard work is not considered as sign of femininity.

This is especially so for the work of a mechanic where the body itself signifies manhood and is used as a proof of workmanship and masculinity (see also Mellström 2002, 2004 and Rydstrom, in this volume). Craftsmanship is characterized by the performative qualities of the workmanship and are situated in the work process. It is a matter of using and measuring the appropriate force of a blow or a twist, it is a matter of reading the pressure of the material, and so on. It is a knowledge of the body that is difficult to convey in written words. It is a matter of using both body and mind as an efficient tool in order to find a smooth working rhythm. The work practices of Ah Teong and other skilled mechanics I have observed draw upon an inventory of detailed and intimate knowledge of materials, the interpretation of sounds and subtle physical sensations. It is a kinaesthetic sense that operates. This kinaesthetic sense literally means to encounter and acquaint oneself with the machine, to work with the materials rather than against them, and to communicate with the materials and read their messages. It is an embodiment of machinery and tools, and that is an integral part of the work process. What is more, such an embodiment of machinery is a constitutive part of a masculine script among the mechanics in Penang. In this process, the body can be viewed as a form of inscriptional device (Latour 1986) representing skill, experience, and masculine tenacity and hard work.

This performative dexterity and these professional bodily actions of the mechanics of Penang, in combination with the body used as an inscriptional device, are thus enhancing a practice profoundly gendered and codified as masculine. In other words, the kinaesthetic sense of one's own body in performing 'competition' with other bodies is used as a sign of manhood. Indeed, machinery and definitions of masculinity often work in parallel, and the metaphoric inventory concerning gender configurations of masculinity draws heavily upon qualities connected to machinery and technology. A man of good standard is typically hard as steel, enduring as a machine, and fast as a racing car. The close relation or equation between masculinity and

technology is then co-constructed in language and metaphoric use, as well as in the embodied practices of physical labour.

During my work in Penang, older mechanics often came to retell their first experiences as apprentices. They spoke at length about the hardships of being an apprentice in the 1950s and 1960s. The main principles of the learning process were to observe, listen, and learn by trial and error. Punitive foremen, who rarely hesitated to physically punish their apprentices, most often surveyed their work. When discussing the hard work of previous generations, there were a number of senior mechanics who showed me scars from punishment meted out by such strict foremen. Ah Teong's uncle, Tan Leong Soon, often started our conversations by proudly showing two deep scars on the back of his head which he had received from heavy tools that his foreman at his first workshop used to throw at him whenever he became dissatisfied with Leong Soon's work. Judging by the scars, tools had on two different occasions hit Leong Soon forcefully on the head. Nevertheless, this was something that Leong Soon (like many others) used to prove his worth as a mechanic. This bodily inscription is a sign of workmanship and a workmanship heavily denoted as a sign of a certain form of masculinity intimately connected to machinery, bodily expressions, and bodily knowledge.

In research on masculinity, the body is generally seen as a most fundamental feature in forming masculine identities (cf. de Almeida 1996; Archetti 1999; Archetti and Dyck 2003; Bordo 1999; Gutmann 1997; Morgan 1992; Nonini 1997, 1999). This is also evident among the mechanics in Penang, especially the older ones. In what were once overwhelmingly illiterate communities, the embodied knowledge and the bodily inscriptions of work practice were, and to a large extent still are, extremely important. As mentioned earlier, such embodied knowledge is rarely verbalized or codified in written terms. Instead, the important skilled knowledge is passed on and learnt through practical work experience and training.

A common practice among the older foremen was to send off the apprentices on errands – to buy coffee or food, to place bets on horses, to pick up lottery numbers – whenever any vital engine parts were to be replaced or repaired. By such a practice, the apprentices were only gradually initiated into the mysteries of engines and thus the foremen were able to control the process of learning. There was, and there still remains, the fear that if the apprentice learns too much too soon he will run off and open his own workshop. To reveal too much of one's knowledge is synonymous

with losing authority and the power of judgement, not only in the work place but also more generally in the community. Such power is based on the embodiment of a patrilineal family structure where many of the family businesses were and still are based on embodied knowledge of machines. In such a patriarchal family and community structure, machines and technology in general come to be a metonymy for patriarchal responsibility. Such a responsibility includes the role of the 'breadwinner man' as well as a moral responsibility for contributing to the well being of the whole community.

The very idea of hard work as a most crucial component in the formation of a masculine character is also found in regard to bodily health and vigour. One of the mechanics, Sim, often repeated sayings like *wei chee* (no work, no food) or *chee ann shi wei* (you always have to secure your next day). His father and grandfather always told him to work hard, never to relax, and to think about how to survive. As such, it is part of the expected heritage passed on between generations of men in their role as breadwinners. This belief is held to such an extent that Sim claimed that working hard and thinking about the fact that you may not have any food on your table the next day is part of the Chinese genetic code. These ideas, which originate from a history filled with hard labour and have been transformed into biological 'facts' about bodily schemes and constitution, are also expressed in the belief that work makes you healthy, or the opposite, that non-work makes you sick. Ah Teong expressed such a belief when he spoke about his uncle Tan Lien Soon: 'He stopped working and stayed at home to relax. What happened? He is not very well. He got sick. One has to work to stay healthy. To work is our life.'

In another interview, an old male construction worker, Tan Leong Aik, said that women can not do construction work, 'no way'. He was also very firm about the fact that 'women cannot do that kind of work; it's too hard for them'. His statement did seem somewhat reasonable, since one does not observe any female construction workers at the construction sites today. But, as I discovered, his statement was misleading. This became evident when I met an elderly woman bent with age. Auntie Tang, as she preferred to call herself, used to work on construction sites together with numerous other women as a coolie and construction worker. Auntie Tang came to Penang in the 1950s via her husband to whom she had been married by way of an arrangement by her parents. Her husband had come to Penang ten years earlier and then returned to his family's original village in the

Fujian (Hokkien) province in order to marry. When arriving in Penang, construction work was the only work available for her. Her husband could not support her so she had to find work when she arrived. Auntie Tang recalled the heavy loads she had to carry in the 1950s and 1960s and the long working hours they had to do. When the construction had to be completed they often worked until late at night. She stopped working on the construction sites in 1990, after thirty years. She says now that she's not strong enough anymore and that nowadays they prefer to hire male Bangladeshi workers and they won't let women work on the same site as they do. However, now in her mid-seventies (estimated age) Auntie Tang still works as a sweeper and helper in a timber mill. According to her it is easier but boring in comparison to construction. However, to work is fundamental for her and as she says: 'To be healthy you must work all your life. If you rest more then you will be less healthy, work more and you'll be more healthy.' The theme of health in relation to hard work is something that characterizes both men and women in the Chinese communities of Penang, but is something that is essentially seen as a crucial masculine character trait.

In the transformation of history and discourse into bodily 'truths' about men and women, it is the male bodies that are given visibility in the local discourse. Nonetheless, it is obvious for anyone who walks around in the old parts of Georgetown that there are numerous male and female bodies, such as Auntie Tang, marked and literally inscribed by hard labour. These men and women and their bodies are in themselves evidence of a community that has struggled hard to survive. The history of the men and their marked bodies has been transformed into social and biological 'facts'. Hard work, technology, and male bodies are then some of the crucial and constitutive ingredients of the breadwinner man ideal. The male body and the embodied inscriptions of hard work and machines are consequently a locus of patriarchal ways of sustaining male hegemony.

CONCLUSIONS

Let me summarize the discussions of this chapter by relating them to local ideas of what constitutes masculinity and to relevant folk beliefs in the studied communities. A few of the men referred to in this chapter, their parents or grandparents having originated mostly from maritime China, made it big and are held in great respect and are venerated and attributed

an heroic status by other people in the communities. The fate of the late famous business tycoon, Lok Boon Siew, illustrated this. The collectively held discourses exemplified by his life-career concerned hard work, moral behaviour, honesty, recognition, and trust. These are also the good virtues of masculinity that equate to the conception of what a good man is. These culturally held conceptions of a good man are notions that are to be achieved; it is through personal realization that one achieves these masculine virtues. Furthermore, the idea of achieved personhood in the Chinese communities is based on these virtues. As a general code of conduct, these virtues would also apply to women, but since the communities are essentially overtly patriarchal, it more or less means that the Taoist inspired folk beliefs of personhood equate with masculinity and conceptions of a good man.

There are then two connected vernacular views of what constitutes masculinity and with which men have to struggle throughout their lives. First, and as exemplified, the essentialized nature of men is that they gamble, womanize or drink. None of these are specifically desirable traits, but have to be accepted since they constitute the masculine nature or rather the masculine culture transformed into nature, or social patterns transformed into ideas of men's biological 'drives', which are nurtured by both men and women. Secondly, the conception of man is a code of conduct, which has to be achieved; a personal realisation that has to be cultivated in relation to others since, in the Taoist folk beliefs, the notion of self is irreducibly social. Masculinity then is essentially a social product, produced through patterns and roles of social discourse based on the essentialized ideas of what constitutes a man's nature. A man's nature makes him vulnerable to potentially disastrous life-paths such as drinking, gambling, or womanizing, and one's life-path must continuously be balanced in relation to the cultivation of a 'self' that during a lifetime tries to realize the masculine virtues of a 'good man'.

Since such a cultivation of 'self' is irreducibly social, and has, in the ontology of Chinese folk beliefs, a polar relationship with 'others', including non-humans such as machines and tools, it means that each particular is a consequence of every other and is determined by every other particular (see also Kasulis, Ames and Dissanayake 1993). Not least, conceptions of gendered selves are constitutive in relation to 'others' according to such folk beliefs among the Chinese in Penang. The 'self' is far from an autonomous subject but relational and can instead be seen as a project constantly constituted and re-constituted in relation to 'others' and the network

of 'others'. It is through such an extensive idea of subjectivity that the communal breadwinner man script is articulated as a tension and struggle between masculine nature and masculine virtues in the daily practice of the mechanics and many other Chinese men in the communities.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This chapter is an elaboration of the arguments in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 (pp. 99–168) as presented in my book *Masculinity, Power and Technology: A Malaysian Ethnography* (Ashgate, 2003).

NOTES

- 1 The fifty interviews comprise nearly eighty hours of transcribed tapes. The age of the informants ranges from 25 to 67.
- 2 Literally meaning red-haired bastard/devil professor; *Ang moh* is the commonly used name for white people in Hokkien.
- 3 I have spent different extended periods of time on the island. In the years 1997-1998 I spent six months in Penang, in 1999 three months, in 2000 six weeks, in 2001 two months, and in 2002 one month. I am now returning to the island approximately one month per year and keeping up my contacts with the mechanics as a friend. My main informants, Ah Teong, Guan Hock and Tan, have also read and commented on the book (Mellström 2003) that this chapter is based upon.
- 4 The most important criterion for forming friendship is gender, together with race. As such they also reflect the two major organizing principles of Malaysian society. Among the Chinese men in this study, there are few that socialize on a regular basis with men from other races, i.e. Malays or Indians. Although quite a few of them say that they have Malay and Indian friends, there were very few occasions where I came across any prolonged socializing between men of different races outside professional contacts in the workshops.
- 5 For the 'karaoke-ization' of Chinese culture during the last decades of the twentieth century, see Ong (1997).
- 6 Ringgit Malaysian.
- 7 Another famous and enormously wealthy Chinese Penangite was Yeap Chor Ee, who traded in sugar, rice, and tapioca. He founded the BHL Bank and had three sons (Yeap Lean Seng, Yeap Hook Hoe, and Yeap Hook Hin) of which Yeap Hook Hoe later became the chairman of BHL Bank and known for his generous donations.

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