

## Comments on the session on Vietnamese highlanders and DV

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Thank you for inviting me, and for giving me the chance to comment on two very fascinating papers. First let me introduce myself and what I do as a researcher. I am an anthropologist. I started my career researching ethnic minorities in Thailand, then went also to Myanmar. My interest has been on ritual and religion, family and gender. So you can see I'm not a Vietnam specialist although I have associated with Vietnam specialists through projects on family and gender in Mainland Southeast Asia.

I found both papers very stimulating from a comparative perspective, the DV paper in comparison to Japan, and the ethnic minorities paper in comparison to what I have researched in Thailand and Myanmar. Both papers make us think about the issue of the universal on the one hand, and the culturally-based on the other. How can we talk about these issues of DV on the one hand, and minority women on the other, in terms of the universal vs culturally specific. Both are issues that are context-sensitive, yet universally prevalent gender issues. In that sense, they are not only important issues in and of themselves, but also have farther implications.

Before I go into each paper, let me talk a little bit about how I understand gender and the family in Vietnam, because I think this would form the necessary backdrop for understanding the two papers. (this is all coming from second-hand knowledge, what I hear from my colleagues and read about on gender and family).

1. Vietnamese families are monogamous and predominantly nuclear, although there are patrilineally organized extended families as well. The eldest son takes priority in living with parents. Authority in the domestic realm is primarily based on principles of age. Inheritance is equal although the eldest son inherits the ancestral worship and management of the lineage. Kin relationship is quite tight especially surrounding the lineage. A lot of value is placed on the patrilineage and its ancestor worship, and leadership is based on this lineage.
2. Under the socialist regime, women and men were deemed equal in building the socialist state. Women were expected to contribute as much in production, and there was much support for their reproductive role.
3. Since Doi Moi, households are smaller since the late 1980s due to policy as well as parental choice. Women's lifestyle has changed accordingly, as they now marry at a later age, and they go through shortened birth circle, and gain higher education.
4. Many women have been productive and active members of society, earning as much as their husbands, and gaining equal rights in society. Wage is equal. Yet, women's rights within the household is low. They are expected to contribute both in productive and reproductive roles. Thus women must work hard both outside and inside the household. Authority and decision

making in the household is still prioritized by male. The patriarchal tradition of the lineage is maintained.

On the paper on hill minorities

Phuong-san raises many important points: Firstly, she questions the tendency to think that in less developed societies, there is less equality. It is interesting to note that western views of Asian women is replicated here. It reminds us of the third world women vs. western women debate in the 1980s.

Secondly, she points out that such views are based on taken-for-granted notions of gender equality which over-emphasizes economic factors. She recognizes that there is gender inequality here too, but argues that economic improvement alone does not solve the problem. She presents a more subtle way of addressing the issue of gender equality, that relies more on the insiders' point of view, both of men and women.

The paper's important statement is that development efforts cannot be made without knowledge of each social context in which the women live. All these points are very well-taken, and they really need to be emphasized in the Vietnamese context especially in actual practices of empowerment. Coming from Japan too, where we tend to consider ourselves a homogeneous society, there is a lot to learn from the diversity presented here. We have actually many diverse elements within our society, migrant workers and minorities, and we need to be aware that these differences are actually in many cases articulated by our views on gender. So the paper asks the crucial question of how do we understand gender equality in diverse cultural contexts.

In the Gender Gap Index: (Vietnam ranks 66nd, Indonesia 97th, Japan 101<sup>st</sup>!!) the criteria used are gender differences in economic assets, political roles, educational attainment and health. In this paper, the analytical framework uses 3 aspects to evaluate women's empowerment: 1) gender roles and division of labor, 2) access to resources and income, and 3) decision-making. Phuong-san emphasizes that from the insiders view, gender role and division of labor is the most important. Division of labor is very context dependent and can also be evaluated in many different ways. It is unquantifiable. Rather than take up objective indices, Phuong-san urges us to look at the insiders view, and I really agree that is the way to go.

Yet there is a dilemma of the insiders view: Because the insiders view is very context-specific, we need to delve deep into the specific culture. But by doing so you could be essentializing and it makes it difficult to compare. To avoid the dilemma: my own solution is two, and they are a bit contradictory.

One. to delve further into the context of each, going into the ethnographic detail. If social network is important, what are the existing social networks in the specific context? What are the customs of a specific group in inheritance, distributing resources, marriage and divorce, production and division of labor etc. cultural values? Even including traditional rituals which may not always be

detrimental to women's position.

Two. Making use of good ethnographic data, make some comparisons based on various factors.

So the two are both important. Understanding diversity entails both going vertically deep into a specific case, and then also horizontally going across many cases. Since the Vietnam highlands is such a diverse setting, it is a great place to try out different variables. How do these factors correlate? Comparative approach would allow us to understand the factors contributing to how women are more devalued in some groups than in others. For example, I could compare the Karen and Hmong population in the northern hills of Thailand. Karen with cognatic kinship with emphasis on mother-daughter relationships and tendency for matrilineal residence, primarily equal inheritance. In this case there is in daily chores a sense of equal burden if sometimes complementary. Hmong with patrilineal kinship groups and patrilocal residence, where inheritance as well as decision making is primarily the male domain. While no generalization can be made regarding kinship organization and gender roles, at least for these two groups, the organization of kinship and households had definite effects on the division of gender roles.

My questions for Phuong-san:

Question 1. Very important to know how the interviews were done. What words were used and how did the interviewees respond in each their own language.

Question 2. You mention that your finding was that workload sharing by husband and wife has become the main criterion for identification of a model husband and wife relationship in these communities. How can that be evaluated and compared

Question 3. The question then, is, how can we compare insiders views which are each very much contextualized in each setting. Is it possible to compare gender equality based on insiders views? And how to further make it comparable across cultures.

Question 4. Is it always right to try to prioritize their own idea of equality? As things change at a rapid speed, what they deem to be most desirable may not be feasible, or might end up in heavier burden for the women.

Paper on DV:

DV has been talked about across wide cultures and it seems almost a universal phenomenon. Yet it must be understood in the very specific contexts of current Vietnamese society and furthermore down to the individual cases. I have so many questions I would like to ask, but I will keep it to some comments and a few questions.

In fact the paper made me think a lot about what is happening in Japan. And comparing the two cases tells us not only about issues of DV, but also about the respective contexts, Japan and Vietnam. family, gender and the community.

In Japan, in 2001 law against spousal violence (amended many times afterwards) was stipulated but

it remained ambiguous on defining domestic violence as a crime to be punished by criminal law. Furthermore, enforcement has been difficult due to domestic enclosure. In Japan, civil society action on DV tends therefore to be towards protecting the victims, mostly women and children. The law itself puts more emphasis on protection of victims and stopping the victims suffering than working on the perpetrator. It is certainly important that protection of victims be legalized but still it is hard for outside help to reach inside the domestic wall.

The use of the term DV became prevalent in Japan only in the past few decades. But use of this term has had the effect of throwing light on power relations in the household which were until then deemed culturally and traditionally given, if not forgiven.

In Japan, we had fearsome husbands, and expressions to talk about them, which in one way made it something culturally acceptable. Fathers and husbands were to be feared and rightly so. The word "DV" has been accepted only in the past two decades and it gives the same action an entire new meaning by labeling it thus.

What I find most interesting about the project is that, whereas in Japan, assistance focuses on the victims, i.e. usually women and children, this program in Vietnam involves men, the local administration and authorities, as well as in the perpetrators, and the entire community. I'm wondering what is the crucial difference here? From the Japanese point of view, we find it incredible that the perpetrators themselves would participate in the program. In Japan, because the domestic unit is so solid, private and secluded, inhibiting to outsiders, it is difficult for public inspection to go inside that domestic wall. Women who dare go out of it may receive further punishment and the fear of that stops them from making a case. It is incredible that the real perpetrators and their victims would come out in the open. Or that the violence may be stopped.

I think it is important that you include both the visible and invisible violence because at the foundation of the actual physical visible violence is the structurally based role divisions in the Vietnamese family. So the visible violence and what you call the invisible are rooted in one phenomenon. That means working on the visible by talking about gender inequality can work on the invisible side as well.

Question 1. How is DV talked about in Vietnam? What kind of connotation does "DV" have in the Vietnamese language and setting? How is it expressed in Vietnamese culture? Is DV considered as something new? Or do Vietnamese people recognize it as something that has always existed. Is it that only recently people begin to talk about DV so that it looks like an increase, or have the recent changes in the family actually brought on an increase in cases of DV?

Question 2. It seems amazing that the program in Vietnam can involve the wider community, both men and women. Is it because the community (at least the rural community) in Vietnam has more of a moral enforcement power? If so, where does that moral enforcement derive from? the socialist era?

Is it because there is more openness of the domestic realm in the Vietnam case? I think it is a fundamental difference in the relationship between the family and the surrounding community/human relationship.

Question 3. I wonder how different generations and classes of men respond to this gender equality campaign. What are the goals of the program, both immediate and beyond? If there is going to be a law, what would that look like?