THE LIE OF THE LAND

Gender, Farm Work, and Land in a Rural Vietnamese Village

Cecilia Bergstedt

UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES

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Abstract

This anthropological study investigates ways in which perceptions of gender intersect with the everyday dealings of land and farming practices in a village in the northern part of Vietnam. The point of departure for this study is a desire to take a closer look at how processes of gendering actually take place and become meaningful on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, this study focuses mainly on situated, land-related practices in which the actions of embodied actors establish – desired as well as undesired – gender features and characteristics. One of the reasons why farmland was chosen as the main location was the ubiquity and 'naturalness' of farming – in this case wet-rice cultivation – in this rural village, and the matter-of-factly manners in which the gendered labour division was presented by the villagers. The actions of male and female farmers appeared to be immanent in their bodies and the ways in which they interacted with land. By studying how the integration of practices and places contributed to a 'naturalisation' of the gendering process, this study aims to investigate how gender interrelates with people's possibilities to act and gain access to particular places.

Two approaches to gender analysis have been used in this study. One takes its inspiration from phenomenology and the perspective of the 'lived-body-in-place' and the other is a more structural approach. This allows for a merging of two equally informative but quite different approaches. The phenomenologically inspired approach recognises embodied ways to handle and act in a particular place and in an environment with certain historical as well as practical conditions. In combining a 'body-in-place' perspective with a consideration of structural conditions, this study seeks to comprehend the naturalisation of certain gender traits and relations and, at the same time, provide space for practices of agency and self-fashioning. An active use of existing understandings of gender can be found in a structural gender perspective, which highlights the more general and shared conditions that govern possibilities and constraints for action in certain contexts. With this double approach to gender, the gendering processes wherein structures and habits are incorporated into actually *lived* life by the location based practices of women and men can be further investigated.

This thesis is based on twelve months anthropological fieldwork carried out in a village in Phu Tho province in the northern part of Vietnam.

Keywords: Anthropology, Vietnam, gender, agriculture, farming, wet-rice cultivation, farm work, division of labour, land, land access, place.

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INTRODUCTION

It was the changing seasons of the farming year – and especially the cultivation of wet rice – that determined which tasks had to be performed and the number of persons who were engaged in the fields that encircled the village of Lang Xanh. At the peaks, groups of ten to fifteen women could be seen bending, side by side, either transplanting the bright green rice seedlings into the muddy water filled fields, or cutting the ripe rice and tying the stalks into sheaves. Most of them would be wearing dark trousers, conical hats and, if it was sunny, a scarf or a mask that covered most of their faces. At a first glance, it was the bright colours of their shirts that distinguished them from each other – at least for a stranger or a foreigner. Often the women were chatting, joking, and exchanging comments and opinions among themselves. Between harvesting and the next transplanting, the fields were usually harrowed, or sometimes hoed, and then ploughed by a solitary man and his buffalo. There was a special 'language' that was used for instructing the buffalos to start, stop, or turn right or left, and these commands could be heard echoing around the area from morning to late afternoon when these men were at their busiest. During off-peak seasons, some male but more often female farmers could be seen visiting their fields to check on the water level, make sure that the banks that surrounded each field to regulate the amount of water were intact, or just see how things were going.

Especially at the busiest times in farming, the tasks were generally divided according to an ideal order where gender played a significant role. On a household or individual level, deviations and exceptions were sometimes made for a multitude of reasons, but there was an established general division of farm labour.

"The husband ploughs, the wife transplants, the buffalo harrows" (*Chong cay, vo cay, con trau di bua*)[1].

This saying had survived the communist revolution, the land reforms, and the market-oriented household farming of today's Lang Xanh village. In some respect, this trinity still constituted the essence of farming life. A simple, self-evident, and effective division of labour, that was indisputable as long as the means for other ways of life and support were not available. "The land tells us what to do and all we have to do is follow", as one male farmer described his perception of the small-scale and manual farming the people of Lang Xanh engaged in. This 'natural' land-generated perception of life and labour commonly included a well-established gendered division of tasks and this was expressed in an often-used phrase: men do 'big work'[2] (*viec lon*) and women do 'small work' (*viec nho*). This implied, for example, that ploughing was considered as 'big', while transplanting fell into the category of 'small' work.

The gendered division of farm labour tasks had spatial implications in that women and men frequently performed their gender-specific tasks separated from each other in place and quite often also in time. In this sense, the practices of farming were directly related to – and actually contributed in creating – places that held gender-particular intentions and implication. Meanings and availability of places were closely bound up with ideas about gender.

"If you were a man, all the women would want to marry you", one woman told me after I had spent a month or so in Lang Xanh, the smallish rural village in the northern part of Vietnam where I had come to do fieldwork. We were a group of women who had gathered in the shade of a large tree that grew between the fields and the garden of the village leader's house. There we ate sweet and sour starfruit while some of the women enjoyed a rest from weeding the rice fields. Just when I heard her remark, I was not sure if it was meant as a kind of compliment or a way of telling me that I was not very good at being a woman. But after some elucidatory comments, I think that there were elements of both meanings to be found in her observation. At a first cursory glance, the main thing that I had going for me as a woman was my

1. Throughout this text, I have reproduced the Vietnamese words without the diacritics that indicates the tones and the variant vowels and consonants that the language has.
2. The English distinctions between work and labour do not really have their equivalents in Vietnamese. *Cong viec* is the noun for work, or job, and *lam viec* is the verbal form, i.e. to work or to labour. I use work and labour more or less interchangeably, and not as indicators of shiftings in meaning or value (c.f. e.g. Arendt 1958).

white skin that obviously did not bear the distinct marks and colour of many days of working in the rice fields. This placed me in the category of women that incited men's imaginations about the exceptional and relatively unexplored femininity associated with non-farming women. I was told that my supposedly good education and affluent financial situation were, in a sense, on the plus side but these traits were even more suitable for a man, since women with better means could, especially here in the countryside, make men feel uncomfortable and subordinate.

What had primarily triggered her remark though, was how I moved around in the village. She and other villagers had noticed what was going to be my habit for the whole year in the field, namely to walk the paths of the village and the surrounding fields and chat or discuss with people I met on the way. If someone invited me to come to their home I would go and visit them and maybe have a cup of tea or a snack while we conversed about this or that. My 'socialising' included virtually everyone in the social range and this width was spatially paralleled – maybe even outdone – by the fact that I had covered not only the capital and the local surroundings, but other continents as well. This was a man's way of moving and occupying places, to be able – at least ostensibly – to wander around purposelessly without any apparent reason and destination, to idly fall into conversation with anyone and accept an invitation without careful estimations about appropriateness and respectability. To be seen 'hanging around' outdoors without really working or being on the way to or from some engagement was predominantly a male privilege.

Some time after, at a dinner one evening with my host family and one of their male friends, we elaborated on the frequently popular topic of advantages and disadvantages with being born a man or a woman. Among the more jokingly comments and suggestions, our guest's argument for why he would never want to be a woman stood out: "Women cannot go around". He said this with some emphasis and even though this statement was overtly general and could easily be proven inapplicable to some of the women in Lang Xanh, his idea of women's constrained mobility was indicative. This was further enforced by women who told me about questions and accusations from suspicious husbands that awaited wives who were not home, or returned back later than expected, without an acceptable explanation for their whereabouts. Wandering was not a matter of course for the female inhabitants of this place. Outside of the home, one of the most appropriate places to be for women of working age was in the fields. For many of the women, this was one of the places where they spent most of their time, sometimes alone and during the peaks of the farming year, in the company of many others. In comparison with the increasing necessity of – and in some cases opportunity to – work 'outside' of farming and the village community, the daily and home-near labour that mostly women performed in the fields was comparatively safely set 'inside' the moral community.

Gender, farmers, and land in Vietnam – a broader perspective

In Vietnam, the categories of 'women', 'peasants'[3] and 'farmland' have been paid a great deal of political, ideological, and scholarly attention, not least since the resistance against the French colonial regime began to take more distinct shapes in the 1920s. Under colonial rule, large quantities of land were concentrated in the hands of a few, and many peasants were evicted from farmland they had cleared and cultivated, sometimes since long ago. At the same time, peasants were heavily beset with taxes, which put them in an even more exposed position. Increasing discontentment with the French led to a rise in political and social awareness and issues concerned with women's situation formed an important part of a growing opposition. Initially, the 'women's question' was also a way of expressing metaphorically the subordinate and exploited position of Vietnam in relation to France, but gradually it developed into a question of its own. With the expansion of Marxist ideals in the resistance, women's position in social, political, and economic life came even more to the fore (Marr 1981:2-3, 235-237). The support from women, as well as from the country's large number of peasants, was crucial in order to organise a mass-opposition against the colonial rule. The massive struggle for an independent nation, led by the communists, resulted in the 1945 revolution. To instigate and organise the revolution, the attitudes, morals, knowledge, and behaviour of categories defined as 'peasants' and 'women' constituted essential focal points of the rulers. This also applied to the building up of a socialist society after the fight was won.

The control of land, and especially farmland, as a means for shifting and executing power – ideological as well as political and economic – has been another major issue. The centrality of farmland continued when Vietnam underwent an economic reformation (*doi moi*) in 1986 that opened up for a market oriented economy, followed by a land allocation in 1993 when collective farming was formally ended. The necessity of change and adaptability – but also control – of rural women, agriculture, and land use, remained some of the key issues for state policies in order to achieve desirable progress (e.g. Le Thi 2001:109, 115-118, Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2002:33, 42). Hence, questions concerning land, farming, and women, have been running all through these political movements. Still today, more than 70% of Vietnam's population have the countryside as their home and around 60% of the country's inhabitants have agriculture as their main occupation[4]. Therefore, farmland and farmers – not least women farming the household fields – form large parts of Vietnamese society.

3. In Vietnamese, the word *nong dan* translates into both farmer and peasant. It does not indicate scale or ownership of land.

4 http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/EXTEAPREGTOPRURDEV/0,,contentMDK:20534368~menuPK:3127821~pagePK:34004173~piPK:34003707~theSitePK:573964,00.html

The female farmers of Lang Xanh were acting in an ideological context where socio-cultural, political, and economic circumstances structured their positions and identities. Moreover, as will be dealt with further on, Lang Xanh women could be seen as consciously using and incorporating strategies of feminine virtues and morality through their farm work. In this way, they tapped into the discourses of rural female care and self-sacrificing (c.f. Taylor 2007:29-30). For men, as we will see, working the fields – especially the rice fields – was more of a balancing act. They had to juggle their farm work carefully, sometimes even avoid it, in order to prevent a slippage into the female domain and thus risk loosing in masculinity.

Gender and the division of labour

From the Asian continent, the ethnographic testimonies of gendered labour divisions – where men and women's tasks and activities are perceived as complementary but separated – are plentiful. Everyday conceptions of male and female characteristics appear inseparable from gendered work and other activities and even if the actual content of the activities alter, the gendered divisions often remain (Croll 2000:140). The gendering of labour can happen by dividing occupational spheres according to ideas of male and female, but also within an area of labour – where men are associated with, and the main executors of, certain tasks, while women mainly perform other chores, e.g. within the field of farming (Bradley 1989:9, 76-77). This may implicate a separation also in place of male and female workers where, for example, men and women do not work together, or have different opportunities to travel and to leave the home and the family (Bradley 1989:9, McDowell 1999:129). Whether the work is performed 'inside' or 'outside' the sphere of the home is also usually connected to gender ideologies, since the meanings and characteristics of the places where men or women perform their work often mirror gendered values and capacities (e.g. McDowell 1999:123, 144-145). Another aspect of gender division of labour is the definition of what kind of activities are recognised as labour. Judged by the variations – culturally, and across time and place – of the classifications of what labour is and if women or men are most suitable to perform it, the changes and alternatives seem to be infinite (Bradley 1989:8, 76-77, McDowell 1999:126-127, Moore 1988:43).

NATURE OR CULTURE?

The questions posed to the observation of gender division of labour have been varied and compelled by different objectives. A gendered division of labour have been used to reflect ideas concerning such wide topics as the capacities, characteristics, and positions of men and women from biological, cultural, social, political, and economic perspectives. None of the enquiries regarding the origin of this phenomenon seem to have provided satisfactory and conclusive answers, even though the attempts have

been many (Bradley 1989). Despite extensive observations of divisions of labour according to gender, there has not been a total agreement on its general existence within anthropology. Sherry Ortner (1974), for instance, claimed, based on her idea of women as universally associated with nature and men with culture, that all societies adhere to a sexual division of labour where women's work are generally undervalued compared to men, who are dominating in areas of religion, politics, and economics. In contrast, the texts in the anthology "Nature, Culture and Gender" (MacCormack and Strathern 1980), for example, argue against all kinds of universal categorisations, systems, and divisions regarding relations between women and men, and maintain that much of the analyses of non-western societies are tinted by the anthropologists' own cultural understandings of gender relations.

Even if anthropological arguments like Ortner's, claiming that women and their work have a universally subordinated role, did not imply any biological reasons for this situation, some general and all-encompassing definitions of women's positions in society have been put forward, that are as deterministic and inevitable as the ways in which physiological and biological circumstances sometimes are presented. The cultural, or symbolic, meaning of women's reproductive abilities, for example, have been discerned as the root cause of women's inferiority by both comparatively radical and more mainstream feminist researchers (see e.g. Bradley 1989:25, 30, Connell 1987:34). The meanings and consequences of child bearing for women's labour, however, have proven to be as diverse and impossible to generalise as any other activity, and the effect on the gendered division of labour is not universal; although Moore (1988:108-109) points out that parenting, or marriage, is often recognised as an alternative career for women but rarely for men. Historically, women's domestic labour has nonetheless been comparatively invisible and tended to fall into the category of 'natural' activities because it has been, and still regularly is, associated with bodily needs that can be perceived as being continuous and unchanging, and not always regarded as work. But neither the distinctions between the domestic and the public, nor the work that has been connected to these spheres have been constant – they are unceasingly redefined, as are the notions about their associations with women and men (McDowell 1999:123, Moore 1988:53). Henrietta Moore (1988:42) points out that within anthropology, questions concerned with the gendered division of labour have often revolved round its connection with the various and changing organisations of households, marriage, kinship and family. Relations within these spheres are influencing "women's access to work and other resources, and also play a key role in producing and maintaining gender ideologies". It has been argued that kinship and family organisations are major sites for depriving women of their possibilities to control their labour and property (Moore 1988:72).

INFLUENCES OF MARXISM

Many theories and understandings of gendered division of labour, whether concerned with economic, political, feminist, or cultural aspects thereof, have derived their ideas from Marxist influenced conceptions. Core ingredients in the analysis and debates have been the relations between property, labour, and family constellations, and the effects that the changing nature of these have had on the development of economic systems.

One relatively early observation of gendered division of labour, that has been reverberating in anthropological discourses, is the often cited passage from "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State" by Friedrich Engels:

> Division of labour was a pure and simple outgrowth of nature; it existed only between the sexes. The men went to war, hunted, fished, provided the raw material for food and the tools necessary for these pursuits. The women cared for the house, and prepared food and clothing; they cooked, weaved and sewed. Each was master in his or her own field of activity; the men in the forest, the women in the house. (Engels, [1884] 1972:149)

This is part of Engels' description of the division of labour that was assumed to have existed before the development of patriarchal control of family and property. A source of inspiration was the anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan's theories on social structures and material culture (Carsten 2004:58). The quotation from Engels provides a good starting point for looking at some of the aspects of gender division of labour that have been circulating in anthropology, especially within feminist perspectives. Moreover, Marxist theories have been highly influential in Vietnamese politics and ideology and therefore some common points can be discerned.

Engels' main argument was that the development of settled agriculture – sprung from the introduction of domesticated animals and plots of land that were turned into permanent fields – lead to men's wish to pass on these assets and the accumulated surplus of their labour to children of their own blood. This, in turned, resulted in a male desire to control women, which was best attained through marriages that supposedly ensured men's fatherhood. Through this reasoning, Engels wanted to connect the emerging of private property with capitalism and changes in family organisation. Before these transformations in the material conditions had taken place, he argued, the work of men and women might have been separated, as in the above quotation, but it was equally valued and it was directed to benefit the whole community rather than the individual household or person.

As Moore (1988:47) points out, these ideas have been both influential and widely criticised within anthropology. Feminist scholars have, for instance, questioned the assumptions about the 'natural' division of labour and the apparently self-evident development of men's inclination for controlling property, means of production, and the transmitting of these to the next (male) generation. Moreover, Engels' theory takes for granted the form and meaning of the 'family' that developed after private property and, consequently, patriarchy had appeared (Moore 1988:47). One consequence of this assumption is that the reproductive role of the family – which is confined to the domestic realm where women 'produce' the next generation – and the productive, male dominated sphere of material means are considered separately from each other. Such an analytical separation between the productive and the reproductive roles of women would, according to Moore, be very limiting for anthropological research (Moore 1988:48-49). She puts forward the important role that anthropology can play in nuancing universalistic and oversimplistic ideas and bring attention to the various interconnections between gender ideologies, household organisation, and the gendered division of labour in and outside of the home (Moore 1988:113).

VIETNAMESE PARALLELS

As an undertone in Marxist reasoning lays the assumption of a past characterised by gender equality, however with biological differences that 'naturally' set women and men apart, in place as well as in activity, according to their gender-specific traits. This view is reflected in some Marxist influenced Vietnamese gender and/or feminist scholars (e.g. Le Thi 1999, 2001, Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978, 2002) who portray traditional pre-colonial Vietnamese society as marked by partnership and equality between husband and wife, who were both normally engaged in household subsistence production. Their work – though basically divided by gender – was not sharply distinguished, neither between men and women, nor between the domestic and the 'outside' society, and it was equally valued. The rural farming household, for example, was founded on the complementary roles of husband and wife, who contributed their specific skills and capacities. The men may have controlled the public, legal and political spheres, but this was compensated by women's domestic rule and control of the household budget. According to this line of thought, this order gradually deteriorated due to the influence of hierarchical Chinese Confucianism and the rise of landlords and private property. Later on, inequalities increased by French colonisers and a capitalistic economic system. Through the introduction of a centralised economy and collectivised production systems – where the power of the patriarchal family that had oppressed women and controlled property was diminished – society would again be equal and production would be for the good of everyone. The implications of the 1945 revolution and the development of the socialist state on the labour of women and peasants, and their access to land, will be

dealt with in more detail in one of the following chapters. For the moment, suffice to say that the state's interests in economic growth and political power have tended to overshadow intents toward gender equality and altered divisions of labour.

FARMING AND WOMEN'S LABOUR

Feminist scholars within anthropology who have been interested in women's status and gendered division of labour have quite often been influenced by the work of the economist Esther Boserup (1970) and her book "Women's Role in Economic Development". Through her comprehensive study of many societies, she emphasised women's often invisible or underestimated labour performances in traditional agriculture and the importance of these efforts for the sustenance of the households. One reason for women's obscured labour, Boserup points out, is that it often takes place in or around the home. She showed that women could be found to work with all sorts of tasks, including heavy and male dominated labour, and that the variety among societies was great. One of the important points that she made was that the differences that she observed in women's partaking in agriculture could be connected to varieties in systems of land tenure, technology, economic systems, colonialism (which often presupposed that men were in charge of farming) and gender biased legislative systems. This comprehensive approach to women's labour paved the ground for subsequent studies.

However, from a broad and comparative perspective, women's work has proved to differ greatly in place and time. The same outlook has also made it possible to distinguish some wider, although in no way universal, trends in gendered labour division. For instance, Boserup (1970:92) noticed that men generally depreciated and tried to avoid undertaking work that was mainly done by women. Moore (1988), on her part, stresses the constant under-evaluation and invisibility of women's work, and that the expectations and responsibilities of motherhood dominate the views of their labour. Finally, Bradley (1989), calls attention to how women's work, including farm work, for a long time has been perceived to be monotonous, dreary and requiring patients rather than skill, strength, or analytical ability. Compared to men's work, it also lacks the opportunity to be mobile and away from home.

THE PRACTICE OF GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR

We can now conclude that gendered division of labour is abundant, even if it is changeable and diverse. The difficulty in pinpointing origins or concordant reasons for the existence of gendered division of labour leads us to presume that social and cultural expectations and understandings concerning gender have immense effects on the division of labour. The differences in what is considered as male or female work at a specific time and place, also invite us to conclude that it is not the 'actual' requirements

of the work that determines whether it is best suited for women or men. Instead, it seems rather to be the performers who influence the status, value and meaning of the work and; hence, as a mutual and perpetual circle of meaning, the performers are attributed with gendered characteristics. The actors constantly shape their gendered selves through their engagements in work. This is a life-long process and does not stop with the socialisation of children into gendered beings (c.f. Bradley 1989:69).

The significance of place has so far only been hinted at. For instance, we have seen that a gendered division of labour can involve spatial separation of women and men, and that women's mobility might be relatively restrained in connection with their work. Moreover, women have often tended to be associated with the home and domestic labour and men with the 'outside' world. Therefore, it is possible to see how the practice of labour in particular places can actually materialise, and generate, distinctions between male and female labour. Gender differences come into being through the combination of bodily actions and the location of these activities. And it is through this same process that gender ideologies and division of labour can appear so natural and given. When women and men work in specific locales, they make certain orders of things come to life. In other words, particular tasks and persons are connected to specific places and they reinforce each other because perceptions of gender traits are concretised in the materiality of placed practices (Moore 1994:72). In taking the Kabyle house as his example, Bourdieu makes this process understandable by arguing that gender attributes are symbolically reflected in the organisation and use of the house. But the meanings only come into being when they are acted out in actual practice by the men and women who inhabit the houses. Hence, the differences between men and women – expressed in gender ideologies and discourses – are made real through the bodily enactment of different spatial perspectives and positions for women and men (Bourdieu 1977:90-91, Moore 1994:76-77).

> In other words, the awakening of consciousness of sexual identity and the incorporation of the dispositions associated with a determinate social definition of the social functions incumbent on men and women come hand in hand with the adoption of a socially defined vision of the sexual division of labour. (Bourdieu 1977:93)

Gendered dwellers

In order to investigate the ways in which Lang Xanh peasants' engagement with the land shapes them into meaningful and acknowledged female and male farmers, a phenomenologically influenced idea of people as dwellers in the world will provide

a vantage point. A 'dwelling perspective', which I predominantly borrow from the anthropologist Tim Ingold, builds on the assumption that persons and their environment form a mutually informing and constructive relationship, primarily through people's practical involvements with their environment (Ingold 2000:153, 154, 191). The shaping of the environment as well as of the dwellers emerge from people's movements and skilled practices in particular places. Dwelling, in other words, happens when persons perform their everyday activities in their environment. All practices get their meaning in relation to other persons, other tasks, and other places (Ingold 2000:195). With this in mind, by studying interactions with land, we can learn how being is constituted in particular and meaningful ways.

An intrinsic part of a dwelling perspective is that persons are perceived as embodied beings in the world. Influenced by the ideas of the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, Ingold maintains that the human existential condition is that of a "total bodily immersion, from the start, in an environment" (Ingold 2000:169). By inhabiting our environment, it becomes incorporated into us at the same time as we form part of the places where we are. This reciprocal engagement is a "movement wherein forms themselves are generated" (Ingold 2000:193). To dwell in the world is ultimately a social activity because we are not only aware of and consider the places where we act, but we are also aware of the presence of others in our social environment (Ingold 2000:196). Ingold analyses the painting *The harvesters* (1565) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in order to illustrate that the landscape, just like human life and activity, is temporal and experienced in an immediately relational way. He considers this view as preferable to seeing the world as covered with layers of meaning that can be interpreted, or as a persistent entity upon which humans enact their lives. When he comes to the people who inhabit the painting, predominated by people who are engaged in harvesting the rich crop of wheat, or taking a break to eat and rest, Ingold notices how they, together with the landscape, are drawn together in activities which are responsive both to the environment and the fellow harvesters. People are assigned to different tasks but never act in isolation. According to Ingold's interpretation, they "work in unison, achieving a dance-like harmony in their rhythmic movements" (Ingold 2000:207). What he does not notice is that it is only men who cut the wheat and tie them into sheaves, and that the prepared sheaves are carried away from the field only by women. The harmonious dance of harvesting is apparently incorporated into the dwellers either as male cutters of the wheat or female carriers of sheaves. In Bruegel's painting, the complementarity of acting bodies and landscape has generated gendered dwellers who engage with their environment and their fellow workers according to their gender-specific skills and tasks. Hence, the world that the dwellers in engagement with the landscape bodies forth, indicates an environment wherein male and female farm labourers move and act in accordance with gender-specific knowledge and capacity. Further, when such gendered conditions emerge

in the form of people's everyday engagements with their surroundings, when they are "transmitted in practice", they often escape "the level of discourse" (Bourdieu 1977:87), in such a way as the gendered division of labour did for Ingold. For instance, the gendering habits of farm labour emerge through practical bodily engagement in places; in this process, these places become ordered according to a logic which creates differences that appear as self-evident in their 'natural' setting.

When considering gender from a dwelling perspective with its inseparable approach to the human–land relation, a more structural aspect of gender will bring an important dimension to the understanding of how people live out their lives in normatively and historically conditioned settings. Christopher Tilley, writing on the phenomenology of the landscape, points out that certain groups or individuals presumably have different experiences of places or locales depending on relations of e.g. power, knowledge, and use. He considers that such conditioned positioning is sometime overlooked by phenomenological theory. The use and meaning of particular places can vary greatly depending on the situation of the actor, and may result in conditioned and restricted access (Tilley 1994:26-27). Gender is a necessary part of how people dwell in the world and is one of the factors that influence our conditions and experiences in certain places. Learning the limits and possibilities of actions in a place is a gendering process in which men and women get a 'feel' for which actions that are appropriate in which places. In considering Lang Xanh women, notions of respectability and arduous work characterised the women's assessment of their ability to occupy and act in places (c.f. Skeggs 1999).

Land and place

To live and exist, a human being inhabits places and forms a mutually constituting relation with the environment. It is not possible to live a placeless life; we come into being in places, which in themselves take form as particular places because we live there. This means that, as in the case of the farmers in Lang Xanh, people and land constitute an ensemble where land is as generative and activating as life itself (Ingold 2000:139, 149). People and land do not combine as independent and separate elements where life is lived autonomously upon land as a surface. From a phenomenologically influenced dwelling perspective, life and the environment merge in an inseparable relationship. In other words, particular places and people exist because life "is immanent in the relation between them." (Ingold 2000:149).

Land – and the places we live and act in – is more than a surface or a stage for human activity. This is today an accepted premise for many geographers, especially with a feminist perspective (e.g. Ardener 1981, Bondi 2005, Duncan 1996, Listerborn 2007, Massey 1994, McDowell 1999). It is also acknowledged among anthropologists with

an interest in the interconnectedness of place, or space, and the people who inhabit them (e.g. Abramson 2000, Cresswell 1996, Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995, Ingold 2000, 2011, Low 2003, Tilley 1994). Another related discussion is the question of how to define and relate 'space' and 'place'. To address this extensive debate is way beyond the scope of this work. This debate has included such matters as the arguments for space as being fluid, processual and relational (Massey 1992) and place, on the other hand, as a fixed location, a concretisation of more abstract space. In short, the idea that space is made up of a myriad of places (e.g. Ingold 2011:146, Tilly 1994:14-15). From this perspective, the relatively esoteric and immaterial concept of space is understood to be made up of situated relations between places, things, and persons (Tilly 1994:17), often for other analytical and theoretical purposes than to embrace actual experience of people concerning where they perform their activities. For the purpose of this study, however, I will follow the path cleared by Ingold. He argues that the world is in constant motion and comes into being through the relations between persons, things, and non-human beings, as they move around and take up their existences in their environments, but somehow it is difficult to perceive this as happening in 'space'. I agree with Ingold's sense of space as a void and an absence, that it is abstract and empty and detached from the realities and experiences of life (Ingold 2011:141-142, 145). My interest in this study is how female and male farmers constitute themselves in meaningful ways, through their daily dealings with land, in terms of place rather than space. As Ingold maintains, "we can only live, and know, *in* place" (Ingold 2011:146 italics original). The nothingness of space does not really allow for inhabitation and is quite distant from how we tend to experience living in the world. "Farmers plant their crops in the *earth*, not in space and harvest them from *fields*, not from space" (Ingold 2011:145 italics original). Ingold argues in favour of place because we experience our environment as sequences of specific places that disclose and conceal themselves as we move around.

One of the effects of the land strategies of the Vietnamese communist regime was the creation of a fracture in the relation between peasants and land. The purpose of this was to replace 'traditionally' informed land relations with a socialist one, where land – and especially arable land – could not be held and accumulated as private property. Land was not to be used as a vehicle for power by anyone, except for the state. Besides disrupting the power that ownership and control over land resulted in, the intent of the socialist land organisation was to turn land into purely a means of sustenance and rational production. In pre-revolutionary rural society, the farmers had engaged with the land, in what Ingold terms a relational way. This means that land is a kind of node where relations spanning over past, present, and coming generations of inhabitants are drawn together. And, most importantly, land is not perceived as a lifeless surface upon which human actions take place. Instead, as mentioned previously, life comes into being in the relation between land and inhabitants. Vitality exists in land as

well as in people and mutual care brings mutual nourishment. The knowledge of nurturing the land and creating a sphere of reciprocity between the inhabitants and the environment is shown by previous dwellers, whose presence and activities in particular places are made available to the living (Ingold 2000:144, 149). In this way, a relational approach to people and land involves the idea that each generation do not stage their lives upon sedentary land and then disappear into past time, but constantly come into being, in one shape or another, and enter into relations with people and the environment. Previous generations and events might not be present at the moment, but they have not ceased to exist (Ingold 2000:142-143). Life does not come to a definite end that is forever left behind, but is rather transformed into another, parallelly existing, world which affects and is affected by the present dwellers. This mutual relation between present and past generations used to characterise Vietnamese people's engagement with land, which also included a pantheon of deities, spirits, ghosts, and wandering souls connected with each piece of land. The coexistence of spiritual beings and previous generations with the now living in and around the homes is the one of the main topics in chapter three. Particular focus is on how this was informed by perceptions of male and female capacities, and had implications for the manners in which men and women related and gained access to both residential land and farmland.

Cresswell (1996:11) insists that: "the social and the spatial are so thoroughly imbued with each other's presence that their analytical separation quickly becomes a misleading exercise." Meanings and judgements of people's practices are immersed in and dependent on where they take place. What is appropriate in one place can be highly improper somewhere else. Both practices and places become meaningful through this interconnection – they are mutually informed by each other. Even if this is not a static relation but is often slowly changeable, as long as this mutuality between our understanding of a place and our actions there is not profoundly disturbed, this give us a sense of self-evidence and naturalness (Cresswell 1996:11-22). The outlook of many of the Lang Xanh farmers on their everyday dealings with land reflected such a matter-of-fact attitude.

Peasants and bodies

The concept of the lived-body-in-place (c.f. Ingold 2000:352-353, Young 2002:415) allows for an all encompassing theorising of people's life-worlds without the uncomfortable and difficult dichotomisation between, for example, people and their environment. Epistemological problems like if people inscribe meaning onto an essentially meaningless world, or if people are constituted by their environment, become irrelevant. Our bodies are an inevitable condition of life, just like place is an inevitable condition of life. Together, they constitute the human condition.

The bodily practices of the farmers in Lang Xanh constituted their particular situations and were the vantage points from where they experienced the world (e.g. Ingold 2000, Tilly 1994). Through their engagement in land and farm-related practices, the villagers also positioned themselves in social structures of historically and culturally informed activities and positions that contained each farmer's gendered and embodied experience of accessing and labouring the land in Lang Xanh (c.f. Young 2002). With the lived body as a viewpoint – and if we follow the pathway laid out by e.g. Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of perception* (1962), there is really no other option for us humans than to perceive the world as situated embodied beings in the world – there is no detachment or discontinuation between the body and the environment. When people move around and do things in their daily lives, the textures and characteristics of their environment are incorporated into the bodies and sculpt, or shape, their mobility, movements, and motor skills (c.f. Ingold 2011:47). Acquired knowledge and understandings of the land provide the inhabitants their capabilities for actions. The feeling of being familiar with a place entails insights into what is meaningful, expected, and acceptable to do there; in this way "the place acts dialectically so as to create the people who are of that place" (Tilly 1994:26).

Such an unmediated relation between bodily practices and the environment is acquired through direct involvement with the surroundings. Much of human actions are performed in accordance with the forms and qualities of the land without consciously reflecting about it; we take what we do and how we interact with our environment for granted because our practices and behaviour serves our purposes and intensions (Crossley 2001:89-90, 100, Jackson 1989:130). Embodied knowledge is a form of capacity that allows us to move, act, and use our surrounding places in accordance with our social and practical interests. This basic harmonisation between the body and the world becomes incorporated knowledge and as we learn new things and refine our skills, both our bodies and how we perceive and act in particular places are altered (Bourdieu 1977:89-90, Crossley 2001:106-107, Ingold 2011:6). When the farmers in Lang Xanh engaged in agricultural practices on the fields and developed their skills in particular duties, they tuned their bodily beings in accordance with the places. Gradually their bodies incorporated the adjustments and modifications to be skilled farmers and inhabitants of their environment. As the male farmer described in the beginning of this chapter, it felt like the land told them what to do and they just followed. As we shall see, this body-and-land-based 'naturalness' (c.f. Bourdieu 1990:69-72) was reflected in – and was, not least, a compelling component in the persuasiveness of – the gendered division of farm labour as well as in the relation between patrilineality and residential land.

A bodily atonement with the environment does not mean that all dwellers unconsciously align themselves equally in a place. Skills, habits, and behaviour are

developed through social interactions, which make them shared and resemblant of each other. In turn, this brings meaning to our actions because of the durability and coherence that conventional behaviour conveys (c.f. Bourdieu 1977:87, 90). But the biography of each and every person, and the residue of personal experiences and circumstances that underlie people's actions, allow for individual notions and forms in each situation (Crossley 2001:108-110, 115). Our perceptions and understandings are always "perspectival and partial" and our behaviour is not determined by the setting, "but rather 'replies' purposively to its environment in accordance with the meaning that environment has for the agent" (Crossley 2001:108, 114). Combining each person's individual situation – bodily, socially, and culturally – with the habitual practices that particular places are attached with, leaves the person the freedom to understand, perceive, and act in relation to such restricting circumstance (Jackson 1989:130, Young 2002:415). In sum, we can understand the capacities and practices of the farming body to constitute how the world is understood and how it is ordered for the peasants in Lang Xanh. Bodily skills and practices bring about a personal, as well as a fundamentally shared, understanding of social values (c.f. Jackson 1989:131).

Another issue that the idea of the lived-body-in-place can problematize – and even avoid if so desired – is how sex and gender relate to each other (Young 2002:415). As pointed out already, each person's ability to act in, gain access to, and use particular places depends largely on individual, biographical, and normative circumstances. The body is crucial in generating these divergences, which is in many cases categorised as female or male, but does not have to be limited to only these two. From a theoretical perspective, the lived body is less abstract, scientific, and biologically determined than 'sex' allows for, and not so culturally constructed and performative as 'gender' might indicate. The concept of the lived body makes it possible to merge the physical aspects of the body with how it is experienced and perceived from a socio-cultural perspective, without making distinctions between nature and culture. The body in the world is, per definition, always saturated with culture because it is constantly existing in cultural, social, and spatial contexts (Young 2002:415-416). In order to better detect and understand some of the circumstances that differentiate and restrict people's behaviour at particular times and in particular places, the more subjective perspective of the lived body can be complemented with the comparatively general and structural concept of gender (Young 2002:419), as this study will strive to do.

Cultivating gendered farmers

Implicit throughout the discussion about gender-specific attributes will be the villagers' commonly held perception that a person is basically categorised as either man or woman, based on the genitals of the body, which are identified as either male or female at birth. A Vietnamese man or woman is "referred to as *being* her or his

body" and a person's body is understood to integrate and encompass multifaceted features varying from, for example, individual fate to emotions and physiology (Rydström 2003:5). Such an essentialist idea of the body creates oppositions between sex and gender, or between body and mind, quite ineffective as analytical tools for understanding Vietnamese perceptions of the meanings of being a man or a woman. First and foremost, the essence of the body lies in its generative capacity in relation to a patrilineal kinship system, i.e. weather the body is male – with the ability to pass on its own patrilineal bloodline – or female, and thereby carries the feminine ability to reproduce not its own, or the father's, but the male procreator's family-line (Rydström 2003:4-5, 92-95). The basic idea of the men and women of Lang Xanh was the notion of essentially distinct categories of 'male' and 'female' bodies. They engaged themselves in practices that influenced their appearance as particular kinds of men or women with specific positions vis-à-vis each other, depending on the situation and the people involved. From one perspective, farm work was a means for the male and female peasants to pursue – quite consciously – desired types of femininity and masculinity. It was also a way in which men and women distinguished themselves in relation to others. One significant way in which gendering structures operated was in the division of labour. These structures were all encompassing and compelling to the extent that everyone was categorised and affected whether they liked it or not (Young 2002:420, 422).

With this in mind, I want to turn to the anthropologist Saba Mahmood and her analysis of Egyptian women's engagement in the Piety Movement as part of the Islamic revival. There she develops the idea that these women's active and deliberate practices of piety should not so much be perceived as reflections of already existing internal states of mind, or to be caused by particular emotions or sentiments. Instead, Mahmood suggests that women engaged in pious acts in order to *create* feelings and attitudes of piety. It was not assumed by the women that they 'naturally' possessed the desired features or even the will to act piously. Through engagement in disciplined actions that women came to incorporate the feelings and manners that enabled them to become a pious person. In other words, the actual practices of virtuousness and piety that women performed in their daily lives (i.e. prayer, avoiding situations that can invoke non-virtuous behaviour, acting shy and modest, veiling etc.), bestowed each person with the very qualities that were enacted. According to Mahmood it makes little sense to separate, for analytical purposes, the feelings of individual women from socially stipulated conducts, because the intention of women was to install in themselves the virtues that pious women were expected to possess. Mahmood bases her reasoning on the Aristotelian idea of habitus as an attained skill or capacity (practical or moral). Through comprehensive practice, this eventually becomes part of a person's character, like a calibration of outer behaviour with inner states. In this way, "external performative acts (like prayer) are understood to create corresponding

inward dispositions" (Mahmood 2005:135). The core idea is thus: a person becomes virtuous by doing virtuous things.

Mahmood suggests that: "we might think of agency not only as a capacity for progressive change but also, importantly, as the capacity to endure, suffer, and persist" (Mahmood 2001:217). This perspective can be useful when analysing women's capacities for action. This provides nuances to explanations of women's feeble and submissive roles, where resistance and conflict often are perceived to be the foremost reason for proactive and intentional actions (c.f. Frisk 2004:21-26). If we see agency "as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood 2001:203), then what might at first look like passive compliance with a gender discourse that works only to women's disadvantage, can on closer investigation also turn out to provide a sphere for women's self-realisation (c.f. Mahmood 2005:174). Therefore, I will suggest that the farm labour of Lang Xanh women can be understood as a means to act and to shape themselves as respectable and responsible women within an existing framework of gender norms.

In her article *House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme* (2005), the political scientist Iris Marion Young wants to rehabilitate the value of women's household work. Men, she argues, commonly perform the heroic, the founding, and the constructive work (like building houses for example), but "as soon as these deeds of founding are accomplished […] a new task comes into play: preservation." (Young 2005:142). And the everyday duties of preservation often fall on women's lot.

Young takes her starting point in Simone de Beauvoir's ideas about household work being what keeps women tied to the sphere of immanence, preventing them from engaging in the kind of transcendent work that allows men to expand their minds and wills outside the home and the family. Unlike Beauvoir, Young argues that women's traditional household work, with its capacity for preservation, is a human activity which is fundamentally creative and not only an endless series of work that deprives women of their subjectivity. Preservation may be undervalued, but it is highly significant in making and remaking the home as a place for support for personal identity. And without claiming or necessarily contributing to "accumulation, certainty or fixity", as the founding and building aspects that are often applied to more typical male work can do, women's daily preservation is central in the sustenance of human life (Young 2005:124-125). Building and constructing can be seen as breaches of continuity, but household work needs to be done continuously and this contributes to the maintenance of a living and meaningful history. Preserving practices do not have an equally fixating effect on time and place, but they join today with yesterday and tomorrow, they merge new things and relations with the old ones, entangling all this into ever-changing, shared and individual life worlds (Young 2005:143, 145).

Young concentrates on work performed solely inside a home and on how women's housework – at the same time as it can be oppressive – creates meaning and gives contexts to the lives that people live inside their homes. I consider that her basic idea of women's household oriented work as "world-making" and "meaning-giving" can be applied to the work that Lang Xanh women did in the fields as well (Young 2005:145). This is especially relevant, as we shall see, since the fields were largely incorporated into the female sphere of 'inside' household work.

However, as Young reminds us, there is no reason to romanticise the preservative activities of everyday housework because they can uphold unequal relations at the same time as they can sustain personal identities. And when the work of preserving is not regarded as equally valuable, or when it is governed by a gendered division of labour, it can happen that women perform this work in non-reciprocal relations. When this occurs, women in their preserving work serve men as subjects without gaining support for their own subjectivity (Young 2005:143, 145). Nonetheless, this kind of daily work might be the context wherein women try to shape and fashion themselves into recognised and respectable women.

Focus and main questions

This thesis investigates the practices through which the inhabitants of Lang Xanh engaged in processes of gendering while they were simultaneously cultivating their land. The aim of this study is to see how ideas and perceptions of femininity and masculinity were manifested – i.e. how the particular gender attributes and characteristics of the actors were made to appear and carry meaning – in some of the situations when farmers were interacting with land. This was undertaken by examining, from a gender perspective, practices of access to arable and residential land, practices of farm labour division, as well as of exchange and compensation for farm labour. I am interested to see how gender becomes naturalised through the integration of practices and places, so that the actions and their meaning seem to emanate from the gendered bodies in a 'natural' manner. I will argue that such naturalised practices imply that the bodies of the farmers have been directed, or oriented, toward places and activities in gender-specific ways.

One of the reasons why farmland came to be the main location for this gender study was the ubiquity and 'naturalness' of land and farming – in this case predominantly wet-rice cultivation – and the matter-of-factly manners in which the gendered labour division was presented by the villagers. This spurred me to investigate how female and male capacities, which were seemingly taken for granted, came to be meaningful in the particular context of land. Following along this line of investigation, attention was turned to day-to-day practices and events, and not so much to the spectacular

or the eye-catching occurrences associated with e.g. ceremonial or extraordinary episodes in life. By putting the daily routines of land practices at the centre of attention, the processes of gendering that occur will hopefully emerge in the light of the themes of each ethnographic chapter. With everyday-life in focus, dealings with land and farming can be understood as meaningful and influential on how self and others are understood as gendered beings. In addition, the way people relate to and perform land-oriented practices can be informed by their gendered situations. The thesis addresses the following set of research questions.

How do gender processes actually occur and take place in everyday practices related (mainly, but not only) to farmland? How do conceptions of gender shape people's abilities to act as farmers and gain access to land? Which implications can notions of gender have in certain land-oriented situations? The most comprehensive question is how gender processes and land practices interweave with each other.

Although I want to see my work as a gender study, mainly because ideas and practices concerning femininity and masculinity largely come into being in relation to each other, there is a predominance of women and perceptions of femininity in this thesis. This is due to several reasons. My first encounter with gender and land issues was through field studies of northern Vietnamese female-headed households and their situation in and experiences of allocation of farmland. This was followed by other field studies focusing on decision-making and processes of democratisation on a village level, mainly from a gender perspective. It became increasingly clear to me how much time and effort Vietnamese women put into their farm work, how different the conditions often were for men and women in rural areas and, as a consequence, how important gender was for daily practices regarding arable land. Another factor that influences the balance between the presence of men and women in this study is the fact that many of the chores involved in farming were performed by women. The feminisation of farming was rather widespread, especially in the daily maintenance of the fields. Some of the reasons and consequences of this will be elaborated in the following chapters, but the apparent effect was that fewer men were out in the fields and available to discuss the everyday efforts of farming. Last but not least, the fact that I am a woman who tried to be as present in the fields as possible made my encounters with women both more frequent and more intimate. Nonetheless, men were definitely part of farming and some of them became engaged and valuable participants in this study. Eventually I learned that men's absence was as meaningful and important as their presence when it came to farm labour and masculinity. This will be elaborated further later on.

While dealing with the issues of gender and land, this thesis will touch upon some classical topics such as tenure rights and legislation, agrarian reforms, natural resource

management and the advancement of women or peasants' power and positions, although it will not delve deeper into these topics. Instead, land will first and foremost be treated as the necessary and ubiquitous place where much of rural life takes place, an environment for daily actions where practices integral to rural life are situated. In this way, land provides a vantage point and can help to illuminate how perceptions of gender are formed and become meaningful and crucial in particular situations.

To sum up, I want to see how place and spatiality appear in the constitution of femininity – and to some extent masculinity – both as ideals and as habitual practices that generated and situated women's lives in the community. Moreover, I want to explore how social and spatial aspects, when bodied forth in everyday practices and perceptions, in the encounter with structuring gender concepts, influence the understanding of persons, practices and places as gendered. A female or male body has its own particular way to relate to and move in the environment. Spatial separation of women and men's labour and duties, for instance, reinforce perceptions of distinct male and female capacities (Spain 1992:85-6). Therefore, I will argue that the rice fields of Lang Xanh – where men and women performed much of their labour – became an integral part of the process of gendering and is thus in itself a gendered place. From such a perspective, the fields were not neutral ground, but places where – apart from rice – also men and women were cultivated.

Methodology and fieldwork

The choice of field site for this study was a collaborative effort that involved several necessary stages. Earlier on, I had been part of a project that had included doing fieldwork in four villages in Phu Tho province, so some contacts had been established already. Moreover, the province was not too close to Hanoi, where the villages tended to be larger and with more diverse occupations. It was not too far away from the Red River delta where the conditions for wet rice cultivations were poorer, which in turn led to a greater mix of sources of income, but for different reasons. I also wanted to find a village that consisted mainly of *Kinh*[5] inhabitants since this study was not intended to be concerned with the actual and theoretical aspects of relations and position of a minority group vis-à-vis the state and the majority population. Therefore, I knew upon arrival in Hanoi that the north-eastern province of Phu Tho was going to be my first choice. It was in one of the central districts of this province that I conducted this fieldwork, from October 2002 until October 2003. With much appreciated help from the Institute of Anthropology at the National Centre for

5. Kinh is the term for the majority population in Vietnam, i.e. the ethnically Vietnamese, or Viet, people. They constitute around 87% of the population. Apart from the Kinh, there are 54 recognised ethnic minority groups represented in Vietnam. http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/English/TheSocialistRepublicOfVietnam/AboutVietnam/AboutVietnamDetail?categoryId=10000103&articleId=10002652

Social Sciences and Humanities in Hanoi in introducing me to the right persons at the province level, to which I presented my study, it finally boiled down to the village which I have decided to call Lang Xanh. This village fulfilled all my desired criteria. There was a possibility for the cadres in the commune where the village is situated – and also for the villagers – to disagree with the suggestion from above to have me there, although this existed more in theory than in practice. However, I hope and even venture to say that the year we spent in the company of each other was mostly agreeable, and at least for me, often enjoyable.

Even if the focus of this study and the data collected is not of a particularly sensitive kind – even if issues of e.g. land access can be very problematic and have on several occasions turned violent in different places in the country – I have decided to give the participants other names than their real ones. Since the People's Committee of the commune was situated in the village, I have also decided not to disclose the name of the commune and to give the village a fictive name. In some sense, this is a pity, since the name of the commune is quite beautiful and the village name is almost funny in its matter-of-factly descriptive nature. Nonetheless, Lang Xanh is the name I will call the village. This means 'the green village', which I find quite nice and unobtrusive in its simplicity. I made some attempts to discuss whether or not I should give people and places their real names, but it was difficult for me to convey the contexts in which they would appear as these were so unfamiliar and foreign to the villagers. Neither can any of us really foresee what the implications might be when the text is 'out there'.

Since this is very much a village-based study that was enacted with almost no exceptions in the village and the surrounding fields, Lang Xanh – with some of its features and inhabitants – will be more thoroughly introduced in chapter two. There I will also try to give a sense of at least a fragment of the village atmosphere as well as of my relations with the local authorities and my host family.

Considering earlier experiences, I felt quite confident that at least some of the villagers would want to meet and talk with me. I had found that doing fieldwork in the rural northern parts of Vietnam, during most of the time, was rewarding and interesting; meeting the people in Lang Xanh was no exception. I started out with introducing my study to the cadres and the village leader and there were at least two reasons for this. Firstly, this is the appropriate, and only, way of gaining access to a place as a foreign researcher. I had received all the formal permissions and now I had to let the local authorities know what I intended to do. I made appointments to make semi-structured interviews with them and I came to benefit from the facts and figures they had about the village. We had informative discussions concerning farming and gender aspects of agriculture. Virtually all of them were involved in farming; even if they were not engaged in person, somebody else in their households did the farming.

The commune was not large and many of the cadres lived in or close to Lang Xanh, so some of them became frequent acquaintances.

Most of the time was spent in or close to the fields surrounding Lang Xanh. When I first arrived, it was approaching the time for transplanting the rice for the winter crop and my initial hope was that by walking the paths and roads of the village and close to the fields, I could start up little chats and conversations and then one thing would lead to another. This turned out well and just as I had hoped, the people who were working the fields or for some other reason were out and about started conversations with me, or I with them; gradually, more and more people learned about why I was there. If people were at home and saw me passing by, they often, as the custom suggested, asked me in for some tea. With the help of my assistant, I tried to discern whether it was better to decline because they were actually busy, or if they had some spare time to spend on a conversation. In broad outlines, I followed the rhythm of the farming year, so when people were occupied by farm labour I was present as well. At less hectic times, I visited people in their homes – sometimes spontaneously and sometimes as agreed in advance. Even if some of the villagers became more frequent and dearly appreciated contributors to this study, I had eventually visited all the 132 homes of the village at least once.

As mentioned earlier, I interacted more with female than male farmers. Apart from the reasons already given, the aspect of age should also be considered. The women that I spent most time with were approximately between thirty and fifty years old. One reason was probably that I was in my mid thirties and therefore felt closest to women in my own age, but it was also because women at this age spent a considerable amount of time working in the fields. If the household was affluent enough, women who were approaching their sixties and were perhaps mothers-in-law, increasingly withdrew from the fields and laboured there on a more voluntary basis. It was interesting to talk to these older women about farming, not least since they had experience from pre-collective, collective, and present-time conditions. Some of them were also quite outspoken, which their age allowed them, while others were concerned with giving me a 'proper' and 'correct' picture of the situation, according to a mix of local morality and political correctness. Young and recently married women were often too shy to speak their personal opinion. They had to be respectful to their husbands' families, not least their parents-in-law, as well as honouring their own parents by showing good conduct. They had not yet acquired the esteem that advancing age provides; therefore, they could not enjoy the frankness that older women could afford. In a smaller group of women in roughly the same age, say around thirty or forty years old, the atmosphere could be very relaxed with a lot of teasing and elements of indecent jokes, mixed with more serious concerns and sharing of difficulties. Notwithstanding everybody's different personalities, it was

among this age group of farming women that I learnt the most about the situation of female farmers. The age span of men that I interacted with was wider and it depended more on their personal character whether they wanted to talk with me or not. Some of them preferred to present more of a standard jargon about, e.g., gendered division of labour, or the specific traits of men and women; or they might joke about this, which of course was valuable in its own right. A handful of men seemed to enjoy discussing similar issues more profoundly.

Only during the more formal interviews with the authorities, did I take notes during the conversations. From previous experience, I had found that most people felt much more at ease when engaging in a relaxed and open-ended chat or discussion than if we had scheduled an interview and I took out pen and paper to note down what was said. I think this was related to the fact that Vietnam is a country with a firm political structure and where there is often a gap to be found between official truths and more practical and unauthorised opinions and circumstances. Many people did not want to find themselves in a situation where they had voiced an idea that might be deviating from the sanctioned version, especially with somebody they do not know. It was, however, not impossible to overcome these circumstances. When it became apparent that I was not some kind of 'expert' who made evaluations of agriculture or the villagers' knowledge, or of the level of poverty in the households in order to distribute means accordingly, people started to relax. Time also worked on my side. Staying for a year and engaging daily with the villagers was not typical 'expert' behaviour. My inclination to ask about virtually everything also helped to ensure people that I certainly was not an expert on anything. I tried to be clear with who I was and for what purposes I asked all the questions. Sooner or later, most of the villagers knew that my main interests and research were concerned with gendered aspects of farming. They realised that I spent several hours every day after lunch and in the evening writing down what I had picked up during the day, in order to write a book about this when I was back at university in Sweden. I also participated in some of the village and commune meetings where I presented my study.

Because my knowledge of the Vietnamese language was not sufficient for having deep and more advanced conversations, I had engaged a young woman, Phuong, as my assistant and interpreter. We had met in Hanoi where she had studied English. She was from the province capital of Viet Tri and was an invaluable bridge between the villagers and myself. She helped me, not only with language matters, but also in trying to elucidate and smooth out confusions that appeared in multitudes of shapes and forms. I would say that there are pros as well as cons with working with an interpreter. The downside is, of course, a deficiency in direct communication and the filtering of information through somebody else's mind. Nevertheless, there is also the advantage of the perception of two minds and the opportunity to discuss and mull the things

over that we experienced together, although with different preconditions. Ideally, I would have been completely fluent in Vietnamese and still have had someone like Phuong with whom I could exchange impressions. This was second best. She helped me fill in many of the blanks that I constantly found in my efforts to understand and ponder over courses of events and she contributed pieces of information that she picked up and that she knew would interest me, to enrich my field notes.

A couple of weeks before the fieldwork was about to commence, Phuong and I visited the People's Committee in the commune to discuss some practical arrangements. One of the main issues was where we should stay. I had all along imagined and hoped that we would find a family to stay with, but the cadres held other opinions. The first suggestion was that we should stay in Phu Tho town and travel to the village whenever we needed to collect data. It was explained to me that the facilities were much better in Phu Tho and things were more readily available. I insisted that I wanted to stay in Lang Xanh. In lack of any guesthouses or other types of public accommodation, it was suggested that we could stay at the healthcare station behind the People's Committee. As far as I could understand, none of the small number of staff was accommodated there. Even if the building had a nice view of the rice fields, there were no close neighbours and I could not imagine myself living in a healthcare clinic for one year. Eventually this point was accepted, based on the argument that it would be scary to live there alone, mainly accompanied by sick people during the day. On this, we could all agree. Some further discussions on different possibilities finally boiled down to one family that might be suitable, if they were willing to take us in. After visits and negotiations, it was decided that we could stay with them in their house.

The family consisted of Minh, who was a high school teacher in the commune, his wife Lan who was a fulltime farmer and his mother, a widow since thirteen years. After living with her other sons for some time, she had come back to stay with her eldest son. Minh and Lan had one teenage daughter who studied at grade seven and two older sons. Since both of the sons worked far away, one in Ho Chi Minh City and one in Hanoi, the house was comparatively spacious at the time. My assistant and I shared one large bed in the main room, where Lan and Minh slept in the other bed. Minh's mother and the daughter shared the smaller room. Both Minh and Lan, my landlord and landlady, had relatives in Lang Xanh as well as in neighbouring villages. Lan was from one of those villages and they had met at school; their difference in age was only one year. We stayed with this family throughout the entire fieldwork and ate most of our meals with them.

After some time, it came to my knowledge that my landlord might have been somewhat encouraged by cadres on the commune and district level to take me in as a paying guest. His first reaction had been to reject this suggestion. Some years earlier,

a small delegation from FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the Unites Nations) had been staying for some time in Lang Xanh – as far as I understood it, in order to study the diversity of some plants – and they had been confined to live in a house close to the People's Committee. The police had prohibited the villagers to go and see them; therefore these visitors had had very little contact with people in Lang Xanh. And once a girl from Lang Xanh had brought an American friend whom she had got to know during her studies in Hanoi. Apparently, many villagers had been curious to see this person, but very few had had the opportunity. Hence, the previous encounters with foreigners coming to Lang Xanh had been very limited and entailed a certain level of discomfort and secretiveness that had not appealed much to my landlord. It was understandable why he did not immediately agree to have me staying in his house for one year. However, it did not take very long to discharge the most severe apprehensions. More or less, anybody who wanted was free to see me and in the long run, I was the one who was most keen to meet people in the village.

Because we lived with a family in the village and formed our own little part of village life, everyday was a day for fieldwork and almost every hour as well. For me, nearly everything was interesting and it was impossible to foresee when something important occurred. It was a privilege to be able to live with a family and be accompanied by one and the same assistant for the entire year. I was immersed in Lang Xanh day and night and from this perspective I was often some kind of participating observer. When it came to actual farming, my intensions to participate were greater than the result. It is difficult to capture the skills of farming, not to mention the pace and the strength that the farmers had acquired over the years. Women of my age, then in their mid thirties, were at their peak as rice transplanters. Some of them were incredibly skilful and efficient. I gave the, for Vietnam so characteristic, shoulder-pole a try and suffice to say, it was not a success. Most of my efforts invoked amusement mixed with astonishment over my lacking abilities. Wearing the conical hat was the only thing that I did quite effortlessly and even with great delight as it is the most well suited headgear in the warm and humid season. Afterwards, I sometimes wished that I had spent more time trying to learn to perform the tasks in order to come closer to engaging with the land. As things where then, I did a lot of hanging around and not so much farming.

By necessity, I had to have a vantage point because participation and observation take place somewhere. The fieldworker does not experience things from above, like a birds eye view, and does not possess the all-seeing ability of an Argus eye that does not have a fixed point. My prime vantage point was the rice fields, followed by the life that took place in the home of my host family and, to a lesser extent, at other villagers' homes. Naturally, I came to know my host family best and with them, I discussed many of my thoughts and speculations. Their house was my home and my point of

departure and it was through them that I got as much of an inside view as was at all possible for me at the time. These were places where I primarily got to experience how gender processes took place in relation to land.

The disposition of the thesis

Chapter one is a historical retrospect that follows the ideological development and the claims that have been made on women, peasants, and land in Vietnam from the beginning of the revolutionary movements until the present situation. **Chapter two** consists of a presentation of the village. A brief historical background is presented, with a focus on land issues. Further, some of the main features of the village are rendered as they were recounted by some of the inhabitants. Certain key persons and the functions they represented are introduced and some of the conditions for my stay in the village are considered. **Chapter three** makes a comparison between access and control of arable land (predominantly rice fields) and residential land from a gender perspective. The villagers' attachment to these two types of land has developed in two different ways and perceptions of gender play a vital role in this. **Chapter four** takes a closer look at the farm labour that takes place in the fields and how processes of gendering were part of the farming practices of women and men. **Chapter five** concern aspects of village communality in the realm of gendered farm labour. The organisation and compensation of farm labour affected people's sense of the village community and the labour practices of women and men related differently to this. **The last chapter** sums up the main findings and arguments of the thesis and includes reflections about the variations of 'maleness' and 'femaleness' in ways of relating to the environment.

CHAPTER 1
'Women', 'peasants', and land: ideological and historical contexts

In Vietnam it has been possible, in the span of one life time, to experience French colonialism, Communist revolution, war against France and, later on, USA, followed by economic reform politics with quite dramatic changes for people's lives. All these events have been intertwined with changes in land control and with the transformation of the positions of women and peasants in society. During the entire revolutionary era, conscious and explicit normative campaigns concerning women and peasants were common. Land reforms were one of the most subversive means used by the communist regime to achieve their goals. As Vietnam moved on from revolution and warfare and into times of reconciliation, nation-building and subsequent economic reformations, these courses of events have been reflected in agricultural land management as well as in the discourses regarding women's issues and peasants' place in society. People in Lang Xanh were part of these discourses, they lived with and engaged with them, in accordance with their conditions and convictions. When male and female farmers in Lang Xanh oriented themselves as men and women, they did so in relation to ideologically informed gender ideals.

Just by walking through the streets of Hanoi, it was possible for me to get some first visual impressions of the 'role models' of femininity most cherished by the state. Large-size billboards with ideological messages pictured women as soldiers, workers, farmers and most commonly, mothers – all of them busily performing their chores for the sake of the nation. Street stands selling journals and newspapers exposed covers

of women's magazines that often flaunted models who were incredibly beautiful with white skin, flowing silky hair and a soft smile. These women represented another ideal femininity. They were aiming to please, with their low-key expressions and graceful, yet seductive looks. These pictures held connotations of sexuality, docility and consumerism, rather than struggle, hard work and heroism. At formal occasions, such as a celebration of the 8th of March International Women's day, or a simple meeting in the People's Committee in the commune of Lang Xanh, it was possible to catch glimpses of a whole range of female ideals. This could be seen in the references that spanned from half mythological female warriors, via women soldiers who fought off the US enemy while keeping the rice production intact, to present day exemplary mothers raising well-educated children. Quite soon, I could detect at least three normative types of women, each of them brought into use in accordance with the requirements of the occasion: the fighting woman, the hard-working woman and the family-oriented mother/wife. All three of them shared the spirit of self-sacrifice as they first and foremost fulfilled their duties for the sake of their families and for society at large, and they did it with appropriate grace and dignity.

In interactions with people in the village, I noticed how both women and men repeatedly made use of some normative female capacities to understand and comment on their own behaviour as well as on the behaviour of other people. Vietnam is a country where officially proclaimed ideologies play a distinct role and people are firmly embodied in these kinds of discourses. It can be said that when the ethnographic material for this thesis was gathered, a contextually defined blend of ideologically imbued norms, with references to different periods in time and diverse – however overlapping and intertwined – ideals, influenced the understanding and attitudes of the inhabitants of Lang Xanh to farmland and to the positions of farming. This included both men and women. As in many revolutionary socialist or communist states, Vietnamese women were categorised as oppressed and exploited, mainly by patriarchy and capitalism. The state continued to surround women with ideologically based movements and campaigns even after national freedom and after the war against USA was won. From this perspective, Vietnamese women have been made into transformable subjects and symbols for national ambitions of modernity, progress, and identity (Pettus 2003:6-10). These ways of using, defining, and redefining femininity have lead to contradictive and opposing feminine ideals.

For the purpose of a closer understanding of the male and female farmers in Lang Xanh and how gendered identities are shaped in relations to farmland, it is important to go back a bit in time and take a closer look at some important stages in Vietnamese history. It is of relevance to consider the ideological contexts in which mainly 'women' and 'peasants' have been characterised, and in which the ideological meanings of farm work and farmland play significant roles.

Women in revolution and political ideology

During the early twentieth century, parts of the Vietnamese population – initially urban intellectuals – started to show apparent discontent with the French colonial regime that had gradually taken control over Vietnam since the mid nineteenth century. The aspiration for national independence went hand in hand with societal modernisation and if any changes were going to take place, both traditional Confucian and more recent colonial ideas had to be fought, especially since they interlaced relatively smoothly (e.g. Bergman 1975, Marr 1981). And when resistance grew more intense and became increasingly organised, ideas about the desired roles and capacities of women were activated – not least their potential to contribute to the resistance against the colonial rule.

THE CONFUCIAN HERITAGE

For radical Vietnamese of the younger generation in the first decades of the twentieth century, the battle for freedom also meant opposing the restricting Confucian family ideals (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1992:89-91). According to Confucian doctrine, introduced by the Chinese in 111 B.C., a strict hierarchy regulated family, society and state. Factors such as title, age and gender positioned each individual in a hierarchical position vis-à-vis any other person in every single situation. Gender traits were seen as intrinsic to each sex. Therefore, womanhood gave women no other choice than to occupy the lower ranks of society, anything else would be regarded as purely unnatural. In relation to men, women were habitually considered to be inferior. The following Confucian-inspired proverb aptly captures this by stating that: "*A woman who meddles in the affairs of court or palace appears as abnormal as a chicken that crows*" (cited in Bergman 1975:25).

In certain situations, by way of age or title, women could be superior to men. However, generally, Confucianism put the vast majority of women under the rule of a superior male subject. This relationship was explicitly formulated in what is usually referred to as the *three submissions.* This meant that a daughter had to obey her father, a wife should follow her husband, and an elderly woman, or a widow, was expected to conform to the decisions of her son (Marr 1981:192). Throughout these all-embracing stages of a woman's life, a myriad of rules circumscribed her behaviour and set the standard in every detail. They were often stated in the form of epigrams and with the purpose to breed women into good daughters, wives, and mothers (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1992:93). In essence, these rules boiled down to the women's *four virtues*: 1) labour/housewifery, 2) physical appearance, 3) appropriate speech, and

4) proper behaviour (Marr 1981:192). Within these clearly demarcated and family oriented positions, women were supposed to live, act and work – ideally within the confinement of the family house.

Since Confucian gender ideals were still setting the standards in the earlier part of the resistance movement, the manners of rural women – who took more frequent part in activities outside their homes and worked closer to their husbands and other men – won little appreciation from the more radical quarters (Bergman 1975:21-25, Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1992:94, Marr 1981:197). In the countryside, men also generally had the privilege to take major decisions and to control the assets of the household. This commonly included controlling the division of labour and any land issues within a farm household.

In general, any behaviour reminiscent of self-interest was discouraged in Confucian doctrine. The well-being of the family and of society should be top priority at all times. Comparable moral values were to reappear later in history, but then under a communist banner. The radicals of the budding colonial resistance considered that such constraining norms gave little freedom for the individual to make choices in life and to alter the 'inevitable' responsibilities attached to one's gender and position[6].

WOMEN'S ISSUES AND COLONIAL RESISTANCE

At the time leading up to the revolutions, the issue of women's roles in the family and in society was used in a wider sense to discuss cultural and political questions. Under the cover of debating women's role in society, more sensitive political and anti-colonial issues could be discussed (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1992:88-89). According to the historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai, the beginning of the Revolution in Vietnam was really emerging from the context of the family. The younger radicals who questioned the Confucian legacy of gender and family relations were in effect expressing doubt of the entire societal order. French colonial rule, as well as traditional Vietnamese views on family and society, was often expressed in patriarchal terms. The position of women as victims of oppression thus appeared as a useful vantage point for opposition. Women, in their relatively repressed positions, came to symbolise the tension between generations, between the masses and the rulers, and between the colonial power and the conquered country (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1992:88-89). Consequently, when the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was founded, in 1930, the struggle for gender equality was included in the main revolutionary goals (Marr 1981:235-237).

The colonial regime did what they could to repress the resistance; in the late 1930s, many men and women were imprisoned, tortured, and executed. Women who

6 See Hue-Tam Ho Tai's book *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, Harvard University Press, 1992, for an elaboration on this subject.

managed to avoid captivity continued to be involved in the resistance movements, some of them now as armed soldiers (Marr 1981:244-246).

Despite the risks that many women were willing to take in order to fight for independence and a new order of society, male Party members did not hesitate to let women perform what was still considered to be female duties. Women were encouraged to give up their traditional family roles to join the revolutionary forces, although there was no corresponding debate urging men to fill in for the women and to share their domestic duties. Those women who actually gave up their old lives and became revolutionaries often had to remain unmarried (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1992:211-212).

THE WOMEN'S UNION

The same year as the ICP was formed, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, a female party member, established Vietnam's Women's Union. This was the first national women's organisation of the country (Marr 1981:243). The Vietnamese Women's Union is still an integral part of society with its national structure, which starts at the head quarters in Hanoi and is distributed down through the provinces, districts, and communes, with branches in more or less every village. The structure of the organisation resembles the present day Communist Party[7], with cadres at each level passing information and decrees to the lower levels and mediating reports on results and activities in the other direction. Despite the fact that the Women's Union is not formally an organ of the government, the purpose and intention of the Union and the government have always largely coincided. In practice, the Women's Union of today is a body for promoting women's concerns within the government (Tran Thi Van Anh & Kaime-Atterhög 2000:4). Through their work and their publications, the Women's Union have tried to supply women at all levels with social and moral guidelines and a will to strive to become good citizens in society (Pettus 2003:29). In 1984, Arlene Eisen wrote enthusiastically about the work of the Women's Union. Women, especially peasants, who had been enmeshed in patriarchal structures for ages needed to have their eyes opened before they could fight for the revolutionary causes of national and female liberation (Eisen 1984:119). But some of the enthusiasm may have worn off due to the slow progress of female emancipation in Vietnamese society. Werner's view of the Women's Union from 2002, for example, gives voice to a more critical stance of the Union's work. She argues that under the pretext of looking after women's best interest, the main objective of the Union still concerns the state rather than women's interests. Moreover, women's concerns are singled out as separate issues. The model of gender relations promoted by the Women's Union is "essentially paternalistic and instrumental" (Werner 2002:44).

7. Vietnam's Communist Party, which started out as the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930, then dissolved for some time during the war with France (mainly for political reasons, in order to unite outside of political preferences), was from 1951 to 1976 called the Worker's Party. After that, it was called Vietnam's Communist Party.

MAKING GOOD SOCIALIST WOMEN

Instead of losing their significance, numerous Confucian and traditionally instigated feminine virtues were extended by the communist ideology to include the hard work, devotion, and proper behaviour that was needed for the cause of the revolution and for the building the nation. In the aftermath of the 1945 revolution, when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was founded, and after 1954 when the French finally were defeated, the situation of women was becoming quite ambiguous; the plight of a contradictory double burden started to emerge. Women were supposed to learn to manage politics and state affairs as the equals of men, but in practice, they were not relieved of any of their household, family, and farming duties. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese communists kept arguing that in a socialist structure, women should no longer be exploited and be deprived of power. To some extent, this held to be true when a number of women did gain significant control in the lower levels of the state, Party, and official organs. Women were also permitted more equal legal rights, e.g. in marriage, at least on paper. They received education to a much greater extent. In certain fields of work, like teaching and medicine, women could now become professionals (Marr 1981:240, 242, 249).

White (1988:169) has pointed out that it was no coincidence that the changes in marital law, carried out in the 1950s, concurred with the Party's urge to change from the dominating household farming into a collectivisation of land and farm labour. The new marital laws prohibited such things as polygamy, child marriage and parentally arranged marriages. The traditional family structure had tied the peasant families tightly together and provided an important base for the peasants' household economy. Up until now, as mentioned above, labour division and decision-making had been male biased and marriage was an important way for a household to recruit female farm labour in the form of daughters-in-law. Traditional practices like these – with women generally performing much labour but exercising little control – made more women than men positive towards the formation of agricultural collectives.

With a collective work force, some women saw a chance of having their farm work reduced by a more equal division of labour among the members, and to gain more recognition for their labour. For some men, this would mean an increase of their labouring efforts, which had traditionally mainly comprised ploughing and preparing the fields. In areas with a strong Women's Union, the advantages of jointly used resources as a way of improving life for both male and female peasants, was brought forth (Kerkvliet 2005:75). Men, as heads of households with extensive decision power, were sometimes difficult to convince using these arguments (White 1988:169).

Collectivised farm-land and labour were central means used by the Party to conquer 'old' and 'backward' ways of thinking. Women were asked to redefine their roles and

responsibilities in society. The message the Communist regime wanted to convey to women was that the sacrifices and contributions they made to the nation were one and the same as – or even a prerequisite for – carrying out their family responsibilities; i.e. in order to be a good mother or daughter-in-law, a woman had to labour for the collective needs and *vice versa* (Pettus 2003:28-29, 32-37). In this manner "the party aimed to wed young women's hearts, minds and bodies to the socialist cause" (Pettus 2003:39).

In 1961, during the early years of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Women's Union introduced the *five goods* movement, tracing back to the Confucian *four virtues*. The core message to women was that they could and should "do all things, and do all things well" (Pettus 2003:39). More exactly, the five points spurred women to 1) fulfil the goals of production and economise well: 2) follow all state policies and laws: 3) participate in management: 4) advance in their studies: 5) raise their families and educate their children well (ibid.). The resemblance with the normative lists of Confucianismis rather striking and the expectations of the state on women seemed to have increased.

In practice, the (usually male) village leaders' and agricultural collective leaders' biased view on women's work consequently lead to a downgrading of their efforts, both in the collectives and in the households. White (1988:155) argues that any form of equalisation of power in the rural villages mainly took place among men, or male-headed households, because the income became more equally distributed. Even if some women made advancements in the local power structure, they very seldom reached the higher positions (Kleinen 1999:125, White 1988:155). It was, however, possible to see some traces of the officially supported gender equality. In theory, men and women could join the collectives on equal standards. Even if women's equality took place on paper rather than in reality, women had now made some advances compared with the villages of colonial and pre-colonial times, when women were not allowed in the village meetings and communal land was given to male household heads.

WOMEN AT WAR AGAIN

In 1965, USA launched the first serious air strikes against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The Americans had been present in South Vietnam ever since France was defeated and they supported the anti-communist regime controlling the southern region. In order to mobilise the people of the North, the Communist Party intensified their call on the high morals of the citizens and their willingness to sacrifice themselves for their country.

All the campaigning aimed at the Vietnamese women during the war against USA included the underlying idea of making sure that they were doing all they could to

contribute their labour and fighting spirit when the nation needed it. Just like during the revolution and when France was fought, the female combatants could, at least temporarily, abandon some of the traditional female traits, like docility and family obedience. Women who adjusted to the severe situation and made personal sacrifices were held in high regard – and sometimes rewarded by Ho Chi Minh himself – as role models for other women to follow (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004:52). Both men and women were expected to sacrifice their personal lives for the love of the country. Exhorted by the Party and the state, men were compelled to show their solidarity by following the "*Three Readinesses*": i.e. they should be ready to fight, to join the armed forces, and to take up whatever task the country thought necessary (Luong 1992:202). Aimed specifically at rural women, the regime simultaneously issued the "*Three Capacities*". These involved the capacity to take care of the family while encouraging men to fight, to take charge of every duty and task while the men were away, and finally, to serve the war and be prepared to fight themselves (Luong 1992:202). Women should also promise the departing men their fidelity. The Confucian heritage is made visible again in the epigrammatic form used to convey ethical messages – but also in the actual content, urging the citizens to be loyal to the nation and rise above their personal needs in gender appropriate ways (c.f. Malarney 1997:907-908).

Keeping up the work in the farming collectives was the most important contribution to the war effort made by women in the countryside. Reportedly, the war made the greatest impact on labour division in the collectives. The fact that so many of the male villagers and collective members were absent during the war made it possible for the remaining women to hold positions earlier occupied only by men. With the men away at the front, women simply had to undertake many of the traditionally male duties. They ploughed and applied manure, and they took on the role of managers of the agricultural collectives when needed. Yet the impact was only of momentary value (Kerkvliet 2005, White 1988, Wiegersma 1988:162-163, 170-171).

A RISE IN THE IDEOLOGICAL POSITION OF RURAL WOMEN

As the war against USA continued, there was a shift in the propaganda directed to the female population in the early 1970s. Instead of encouraging women to adopt a particular moral behaviour, criticism of certain women's conduct emerged. Focus was aimed at urban women developing a taste for the good life. Stimulated by influences from abroad, the shift toward the liberation of women had, according to the Party, led to younger women's desire for leisure time, nice clothes and personal beauty. In the eyes of the regime, these young women were slipping out of the moral spheres of family and good citizenship and they did not contribute

to any production or collective labour (Pettus 2003:54-55). This kind of frivolous behaviour was not equality, the Party officials stressed. These women "mistook the fruits of Revolutionary liberation for personal freedoms – an error that jeopardized the values of domestic femininity" (Pettus 2003:59). There again was a clear linkage to Confucian directions of proper female conduct. In order to counterbalance the growing 'misunderstanding' of gender equality, the Party and the Women's Union carefully pointed out that it was the duty of women to safeguard the fine qualities of Vietnamese tradition (Pettus 2003:59, 61).

Judging from the Party line of reasoning of this period, rural women stood a better chance of coming near the ideal female model. Family relations in the countryside were less influenced by any more advanced ideas of female liberation and most of the women spent their days working in the fields of the collective farm to support their families. Rural women were still viewed as being in need of education to enhance their opportunities to lift the standards of their households, but they were on the right side of the moral line as far as the Party was concerned. The 'feudal' and 'backward' ways, bearing clear traces of Confucian patriarchy, which rural women sometimes were accused of supporting, were no longer exclusively declared as incorrect. Instead, the less radical behaviour of countryside women provided a counterbalance to certain kinds of female conduct, which was threatening to slip out of control.

This can be said to be the ideological heydays of female peasants. They worked hard, either in the rice fields or in the battlefields, and they struggled to combine this with caring for children and other family members at the home front.

ECONOMIC RENOVATION AND A NEW KIND OF WOMAN

The 1980s was a time of recuperation from the damages of war and a time when the building up of a prosperous society should get going. As a result, the Vietnamese state shifted its activities, from trying to drum up people's motivation to fight against enemy assault, into making efforts aimed at economic restoration. In order to meet the pressing demands for increased productivity, not least of agricultural products, the state again started to modify its standpoint on the role of women.

In December 1986, at the sixth Party Congress, it was decided that Vietnam was going to abandon the Marxist planned economy for the benefit of a "multi-sector commodity economy" where the private sector and foreign investments should be recognised as legitimate parts of the economy (Ljunggren 1997:15). *Doi moi*, which literally means renovation, was introduced. The goal was to renovate the existing system, not only the economy, without threatening the position of the Communist

Party (Ljunggren 1997:12). The insufficiency of the agricultural collectives led to an ideologically modified reinstatement of the household as a productive and reproductive unit. This gave the economic responsibility of the households a key role in this quest.

Doi moi reinstated Vietnam into the global economy and new standards, demands, and desires appeared among the citizens. The government embarked on a tricky path where the balance between economic progress and the maintenance of national culture and morality had to be carefully managed. The regime was not interested in any fast and uncontrolled changes of values and attitudes entailed by a capitalist oriented economy, since this might lead to political appeals. An example of this delicate balancing was displayed in the work of the Women's Union in the renovation era. In order to enhance the level of modernity, they defined politically instigated material as well as spiritual goals and standards for women to try to achieve. To develop 'prosperous families' became an explicit state concern (c.f. Bélanger and Barbieri 2009:13-14). The family – which is still supposedly mainly the responsibility of the women – was their main target because this was where "the problems of economic fitness and national moral health come together" (Pettus 2003:80-81).

Vietnamese women are again encouraged to be bold, progressive, and yearning for more knowledge in order to contribute to national progress. By challenging old gender preconceptions, women are expected to transform themselves into modern Vietnamese women. But on the other hand, aspirations like these can be difficult to balance, as they are quite inconsistent with other, more family-oriented, female ideals. This is summed up rather well in an interview with the Chairperson of the Women's Union in Ho Chi Minh City, published in *Images of the Vietnamese Woman in the New Millennium*, (Le Thi Nham Tuyet [ed.] 2002). The Women's Union leader, Nguyen Thi Lap, is asked to comment on the relevance of the *four virtues* (proper labour, appearance, speech, and behaviour) for women of today. She believes that the moral standards expressed in the *four virtues* are still valid today, even though they should be applied with today's society in mind. In light of today's consumer society, she expresses her worries about young girls loosing their dignity and self-control when the attraction of material wealth becomes too strong, and in the worst case, they might fall into prostitution. She stresses that desire for wealth or career should not obstruct women from their most important task, which involves being a mother and a wife. Women should primarily be knowledgeable in organising their families and in understanding the workings of marriage. Altruism, she concludes, is an important trait that will enable women to put the community before self-interest (Le Thi Nham Tuyet [ed.] 2002:7-8).

RURAL WOMEN IN NEED OF CHANGE

Obviously, Vietnamese women are not anymore encouraged to be hardworking peasants, producing for the benefit of the nation. Women are expected to operate largely within the family and household sphere where they provide care, moral guidance and support, preferably in combination with qualified work. This is one of the ideal pictures of women promoted by the Vietnamese Women's Union. These ideal are transmitted to peasant women and they have to relate to them in one way or another (see e.g. Pettus 2003, Drummond 2004). Working at home is no longer denounced as a source of patriarchal oppression of women. Women are increasingly expected to combine their double responsibilities, for production as well as for reproduction, within the household (Truong Thanh-Dam 1997:83-84). This development is in line with the neo-Confucian currents, amalgamated into Communist ideology, placing women firmly within the households and in charge of the social, moral, and emotional values of the family.

The position of rural women is ambiguously linked to the female ideal of present day Vietnam. On the one hand, they perform most of their labour within the realm of the household and devote much of their time to nourish and care for other family members. Furthermore, as previously indicated, they have claimed comparatively little of the unsolicited kind of female liberation that some urban women might have asked for. On the other hand, peasant women are not perceived as the kind of well-educated, yet delicately mannered homemakers that the regime has been arguing for. The ideological restoration of the mother and housewife into the realm of the family has taken place with the urban, educated, and consuming family as the role model. Judging from some of the Vietnamese publications dealing with the issue of rural women in the last fifteen to twenty years, peasant women are in urgent need of adjusting to new circumstances. It should also be added that it is not easy for rural men to fit into the role of the successful breadwinner, who brings home a substantial cash income and leaves a part of it to his wife so she can use it wisely for the benefit of family harmony and prosperity.

The changing roles of 'peasants' and land

Along with 'women', the category of 'peasants' was heavily targeted by the Communist leaders during and after the battles for national liberty, as well as during the formation and progress of the socialist state. The support of the enormous group of peasants was necessary and like 'women', 'peasants' – and farmland – have continued to be defined and redefined in order to fit the requirements of the times.

BUILDING UP TO REVOLUTION – TRYING TO RADICALISE THE PEASANTRY

When the radical male literati first began debating the desired morals and customs for a Vietnam free from colonial rule, the countryside was commonly pictured as in great need of refinement and enlightenment (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1992:49, 104). This had its roots in the still influential Confucian idea of an educated elite male leadership giving moral guidance to their subjects. Ever since Vietnam became subject to Confucianism, there had been a marked disparity between the peasants and the elite, probably accentuated by the peasants' lesser observance of Confucian manners (Duiker 1995:167, Moise 1983:147). This tradition characterised the relation between the literati and the many peasants of the country (Marr 1981:28).

In the anthropologist Hy Van Luong's work on the revolution and transformation of the northern village Son-Duong, a son of a rural elite family describes how his father kept him and his brothers from engaging in manual labour. Because they were being educated to become members of the respected literati they were urged not to cross the distinct line that separated physical labour from mental efforts. The same restrictions did not apply to his female relatives (Luong 1992:68, 2010:69-71). Village power was predominantly executed by comparatively well-educated and rich men, who performed little or no manual labour. The French actually reinforced the power of the patrilineal based male elite in the villages when they replaced the former councils of notables, who used to be chosen by village men, with patrilineal representatives (Bergman 1975:40, Luong 1992:71, 78, Wiegersma 1988:53).

What was perceived as the preoccupation of peasants with family affairs and their comparably huge expenditure on rituals, such as marriages and funerals, attracted criticism from the revolutionaries (Pham Van Bich 1999:79, Pham Cao Duong 1985:51). However, from a peasant perspective, the reciprocal family rituals and relations were an important means of support in future situations – ordinary as well as more significant – and an insurance in case of upcoming hardships. The revolutionaries, on the other hand found the limited extra-family and extra-village perspective of the peasants as a sign of lacking knowledge and revolutionary spirit (Pham Van Bich 1999:81). During the mid 1920s, there was an internal debate in the Party, discussing the revolutionary qualities of the peasantry, which from a Marxist-Leninist point of view was rather limited (Luong 1992:86, Ngoc-Luu Nguyen 1987:16). According to this vein of communism, which was where the Vietnamese found their inspiration, the peasants were an unreliable class because of their property-based, self-sustaining mode of production and their alleged inclination to preserving old customs and social hierarchy. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese communists understood the potential

of the peasants. The conclusion was that peasants needed to be educated, politically organised, and made aware of class issues (Brocheux 1980:77-79, Ngoc-Luu Nguyen 1987:16, 42-43, Wiegersma 1988:92).

In 1937-38, Vo Nguyen Giap and Truong Chinh, two reputed communist leaders, addressed issues in line with those in the publication "The Peasant Question". They worried about the reluctance of the peasants to see their situation through the lens of class analysis. According to them, poor and landless peasants had a too accepting perspective on their situation and tended to blame their bad fate rather than social injustice for having to work on someone else's land for a very meagre compensation from a landlord. Some peasants even expressed a certain amount of gratitude for having the opportunity to rent land from some rich neighbour or relative[8]. 'Unlucky fates' were also commonly handled with the help of worshipping and prayer to various deities. The revolutionaries referred to this as superstition and a substitute for societal awareness. Therefore, along side with the traditional family hierarchy, peasants' spiritual matters became targets of communist campaigning (Pham Van Bich 1999:79, White 1983:75).

REVALUATING THE PEASANTS

One of the major steps in creating a new socialist society was to alter the control of land and, consequently, the old power structures in which landowning men held influential positions. Therefore, the land reformation campaign that the communist regime carried out in 1953-56 was as much a social and political scheme as it was an economic measure. Through the land reform, the old village structures were drastically changed. The power hierarchy was virtually turned upside down when the former landowners and patrilineal members of the village councils were deprived of their power and assets. From the communist perspective, the old elite had nothing to contribute to society; the model citizen was a manual labourer (Malarney 2002:28). To raise the status of the peasants, physical labour was idealised as the foundation of a new society. However, it was important that such labouring occurred for the sake of national progress, not for personal revenues. All of a sudden, the poorest peasants were appointed by the reform cadres to hold many of the leading positions in the villages. Poor peasants and workers were claimed to be the only ones to be trusted as true friends of the communist regime (Moise 1983:198, 210).

8. Despite the peasants' assumed lack of revolutionary features, smaller groups of peasants had instigated uprisings against local French, or colonial-friendly, authorities. Peasant revolts were actually a tradition dating far back in Vietnamese history, when displeased peasants had carried out violent uprisings in order to improve hard conditions (Wiegersma 1988:22, 42, 87, To Lan 1993:186). In 1930, the renowned Nghe-Tinh uprising took place when large numbers of peasants, both men and women, carried out demonstrations, created their own administration with peasant-led boards to manage land that was taken from the local landlords (Wiegersma 1988:95, Bergman 1975:52). Twelve months later, by the use of force, the French resumed their command over the two provinces while placing the blame for the unrest on the ICP (Wiegersma 1988:95-96). These events contributed to bring the communists and the peasants closer together (Marr 1981:378, Moise 1983:152, Wiegersma 1988:95-96).

The frantic pace in which the land reform was implemented, along with the occurrence of unfounded or exaggerated accusations of landlordism, resulted in the "rectification of errors" campaign in 1956. During this campaign, some of the wrongly accused landlords (*dia chu*) were reclassified and somewhat compensated for their losses. Nevertheless, during this period of time when the old social structure of the villages was more or less completely shattered, fear, grief and hate was established among many villagers that would last for a long time to come (e.g. Kleinen 1999:105, Luong 1992:195, Moise 1983:252). On the other hand, the land reform did achieve many of its ends. Land was redistributed and many poor and landless peasants received land, landlords were dispossessed of their land, and much of the village authority was in the hands of peasant cadres. Many formerly poor peasants had their circumstances improved and the support for the Communist Party among the masses of peasants had grown stronger. But the costs for getting there had been high and the initiative and implementation had been a complete top-down process (Kleinen 1999:104, Luong 1992:195).

MAKING PEASANTS COLLECTIVE

All along, the long-term goal of the Communist Party had been to turn peasants into workers, i.e. proletarians, on land that was not privately owned, but instead organised in agricultural collectives. The party considered this to put an end to land fragmentation and with efficient use of labour and other production means, this would lead to an industrialised and modern agriculture with an output much greater than the small plots of land, farmed mainly by household labour, could ever produce (Brocheux 1980:77-79, Ngoc-Luu Nguyen 1987:16, 42-43, Wiegersma 1988:92). Between 1958 and 1960, forty thousand agricultural collectives were set up in North Vietnam (Kerkvliet 2005:44, 45, 50, 65). Moreover, it was argued that the countryside ran the risk of falling back into the old power structures if the land market was allowed to work its way freely. In order to persuade poor peasants to give up the little land they had received in the preceding reformation campaign, they were ensured that a bad crop or other misfortunes would not forcibly rid them of their farmland. The agricultural collective would prevent the risks that could threaten to return them to landlessness, poverty, and debts (Kerkvliet 2005:74, Wiegersma 1988:146-7).

Moreover, with the end of 'backward' small-scale household farming, the labour and production of the peasants (not least the female) were assumed to be liberated from the confinement and control of the patriarchal family and household and could be directed to advance the entire society. It was thought that the persistently

family oriented peasants would be more collectively oriented if they were joined in collectives. Labour exchange or other communal activities, like festivals and other village ceremonies, were not unfamiliar to the rural population (see also chapter 5). Still, many peasants were rather hesitant toward farming collectives, mainly because more or less the entire agricultural production, including all the fields, the tools and other production means had to be handed over to the agricultural collective who would manage the farming activities (Kerkvliet 2005:9-12, Wiegersma 1988:145-146). The reason that farmers joined the collectives was largely a question of following the pressure of local authorities, combined with faith in the politics of the Party, which so far had seen to their needs (Kerkvliet 2005:73).

WARTIME AND INTENSIFIED COLLECTIVISATION

In Kerkvliet's (2005) work on the collectivisation process it is evident that the efforts that the peasants made during the time of collectivisation would not have taken place if the country had not been at war with USA (ca 1960-1975) and many families had some of their members fighting at the fronts. It seems that the war and the collectivisation were mutually enabling each other, and encouraged people to struggle to an extent that had been impossible under different circumstances. Considering the fact that more than eighty per cent of the population were peasants, it is understandable why the accomplishments of rural men and women in warfare and in farming turned them into important and respectable citizens at the time.

When the war against USA was finally won, the peasants' interest in collective farming declined, while the regime, with the hope to increase the control of peasants and production, wanted to merge existing collectives into even larger ones. The enlargement of the collectives generated a huge body of officers, controllers, timekeepers and so on, who transformed the labourers into passive workers receiving and carrying out orders from above (Nguyen Duc Nhuan 1983:365-366). These steps, taken in fear of losing control over the rural population and the solidarity of the peasants, were quite ill-advised as production continued to plummet.

The enlargement of collectives influenced the bond between the farmers and the fields in a negative way. The large labour brigades were divided into performing highly specialised duties and the tasks of farming became disconnected in the too specialised and often badly managed collectives. As a result, the peasants mainly worked quite disengaged from the actual outcome of their work. The detached farming process made the production of the collectives largely unpredictable, and there was little correlation between working on the fields and having rice to eat in the bowls (Nguyen Sinh Cuc 1995:78, 80). Eventually, the situation became clearly unsustainable and the breakdown of collective farming was inevitable.

GETTING LAND BACK TO THE PEASANTS

With *doi moi* (economic reformation), the household was again recognised as an economic unit and the farmers gradually gained control of their labour. For the rural families, the introduction of Decree 10 in 1988 signified the final change from collective farming to household production. This decree allowed the collectives to allocate the right of use of farmland to individual farming families (based on the number of family members) during a period of ten to twenty years. Thereby, they became free to organise and complete all farm work; they could use their share of the produce as they pleased, even to sell it at free market prices, in order to improve the family economy (Kerkvliet 2005:227-228). As a result of this decollectivisation, quite a large amount of the labour was returned to the sphere of household work, much of which was considered to be 'women's work'. Thus, the contract system initially increased agricultural production, although simultaneously contributing to a redirection of women back to the households and away from public production (Truong Thanh-Dam 1997:86-87, White 1988:175). Traditionally male duties, such as ploughing, harrowing, preparing seedlings and irrigation of the fields were still done collectively (c.f. Kerkvliet 2005:184, 188).

In 1993, the National Assembly introduced a revised land law. This law stipulated the right of use for fields with perennial crops during a period of twenty years. Around this time, many areas carried out a redistribution of arable land to the households (Kerkvliet 2005:227-228). The right to use residential land did not have a time limit and forestland could be used for fifty years. According to the law, all members of peasant households, regardless of sex, are entitled to land use rights. Men and women were to have equal opportunities to receive and make use of their land rights, even if all land is still exclusively administrated by the state[9]. Eventually, land-use certificates were issued to all the households, listing all the landholdings, and stating the name of the household head, which was usually a man. Another novelty this land law produced was the so called 'five rights', i.e. the right of "family households and individuals receiving land from the State" to exchange, transfer, rent, mortgage or give away their land use rights (Ha Thi Phuong Tien 1997:57).

The present land situation is historically unprecedented in Vietnam as it combines temporal allocation of individual/household rights to land use with ultimate state ownership. This move led to a rather substantial decline in poverty because of the increased agricultural output (National Human Development report 2001:29). This improvement has levelled out after the initial great rise. In lack of a private land market, a market in land use rights has developed, enabled by the right to transfer land rights. This has in turn led to a situation where peasants again can be landless, a crude fact for those peasants who – for reasons such as poverty or state expropriation

9. This meant that private land ownership was prohibited and the state ultimately managed all land. This is still the case.

– have been forced to sell their land rights (Tran Thi Van Anh 1999:105).

GOOD PEASANTS ARE FEW PEASANTS – YET ANOTHER DEVALUATION OF THE STATUS OF PEASANTS

The state fervently wishes to increase industrialisation and modernisation in the countryside. In order to achieve this, the engagement of rural households in non-farming activities is seen as the most desirable development. In exact reverse to the earlier policies, it was hoped that the land law was going to result in a process of concentrating land into the hands of a few large-scale and specialised farms. However, this has not largely happened yet (Nguyen Sinh Cuc 1995:113, 117). As voiced by Le Kha Phieu, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 2001, the desire is that the peasants who do not develop into sizeable agricultural producers should become "workers" and "intellectuals" (Le Kha Phieu 2001:107). Following this ideal development, rural areas will gradually be urbanised and "the Vietnamese peasantry will step by step get rid of poverty and backwardness" (Le Kha Phieu 2001:107). But in lack of capital, higher education and non-farm work, most of the farming households hang on to what little land use rights they have. Therefore, most of the farming is still household based and generates a limited amount of surplus produce. This does not mean that farmers have missed the opportunities brought forth by a more open market. Most of the farming families in the village of my fieldwork had experienced quite extensive improvements of their economic and material standard over the last fifteen to twenty years. Apart from improved farming outputs, many gave evidence of the major upgrading of the houses in the village. Previously, housing mainly consisted of cottages; now concrete houses that can stand against the weather are more common, and most households now have some electrical equipment and devices. Nevertheless, the gap between the village and such cities as Hanoi (ca 120 km to the southeast) was noticeable. The relatively high positions and prestige that the peasants received during revolution and warfare have not lasted into the present-day society. Increased demands on e.g. monetary success and technological advancement have been unattainable for many farming households.

Claims on land and the labour of 'women' and 'peasants'

In contemporary post *doi moi* Vietnam, the government still has a somewhat paternalistic attitude toward rural people, visible not least in official development reports, where they are pictured "as poor, backward, remote, unconnected, unaware, and dependant on the state for their uplift" (Taylor 2007:6). The heroic connotations of manual farm labour are largely gone, but the state's urge to encircle peasants with ideologically infused movements and policies is still there. Many villagers in

Lang Xanh saw themselves as poor, primarily economically poor, but in some sense also culturally. This cultural poverty ranged from a lack of scientific training to 'refined' behaviour and taste. The inhabitants perceived the confinement to manual household farming as as the major reason for this. The farmers' concern of appearing as outmoded was enforced by the regime's desire to be a scientific and technologically based country that had advanced from the stage of small-scale agrarian society (Taylor 2007:9-10). Furthermore, the same ambition is mirrored in the state's elevation of agricultural methods that increase production by technologically controlling nature and the environment. Following Marxist ideas, the government and its development planners promote science and technology also as a means of dissociation from the spiritual relationship that used to exist between farmers and farmland. Although reformation and collectivisation made a great rupture in the relationship between farmers and land, to some degree, the farmers still have a relation with the spirits and deities that they believe inhabit the environment (Taylor 2007:10-12).

In rural Vietnam, the relation people have to particular places, such as the access and control of farmland or residential land, has been a way to delimit and categorise according to status, class, and gender. As we have seen, in pre-revolutionary society arable land was owned by a few and laboured by many, which put a lot of power into the hands of a small number of landowners. This order was overthrown when land was distributed among the numerous peasants. However, the peasants' control of farmland was soon broken when the communist regime turned itself into the sole owner of land and, through the collectivisation process, detached the farmers from managing the land. The idealised peasants were expected to perform their assigned role as the hard-working backbone of society, but now without their own farmland, which they had been given in the preceding land reform.

The absolute rule of the government meant that it had complete power of the definition and use of land and places, which in practice meant the ability to control where and with what the farmers should work (c.f. Malarney 2002:23-24). Other important aspects of place in rural society, like patrilineal inheritance of residential land and homes and a strong tradition of virilocality, rendered much less interest from the communist regime. By exercising total land control, the state primarily wanted to lay claim on the farmers' labour. As we have seen, it defined and redefined the content and meaning of farm work depending on its needs and goals. From the farmers' perspective, labour became their most important – almost their only – asset, because this was their means to sustain themselves and their families in the collectives. Their contribution of farm labour was the ideological and practical prerequisite for the peasant population's place as state members, and when farmland was allocated to the farmers after the collectives were dismantled, it was their engagement in farm labour that entitled the households to receive land use rights for fields.

PERSISTING GENDERED DIVISION OF LABOUR

Due to the commanding nature of the societal transformations implemented by the communist regime, the state held much of the power which ideology had promised to peasants, and even more so in the case of women. Both had been depicted as categories who – with collective farming and land use as a means – should be elevated from earlier low positions in society. However, from an ideological as well as a practical perspective, gender equality and fighting against traditional labour division has clearly been set aside during the period of economic renovation – which was generally the case also in the agricultural collectives. Despite an explicit ideology of gender equality, many of the traditional ideas about the value and proper division of male and female labour lingered on after collectivisation. This could go on partly because the tradition of a rather autonomous village authority had been adopted into the collectives. The communist leaders were largely carrying on in a similar spirit. For instance, it was not uncommon that the men, and the much fewer women, within the local political and administrative structures were related to each other, or gave advantage to their kin and friends. Quite often, the leaders were practicing a distinct division between state policies and plans on the one hand and the actually running of the activities in the village on the other. The continued presence of a traditional family economy also contributed to preserve a patriarchal power structure. This was based largely on the gardens and tiny plots of land that the households could cultivate outside the agricultural collectives. The cultivation of these plots was organised by the male household heads parallel with the work in the collectives (Wiegersma 1988:162-171).

An interesting point to note is that during the period of the collectives, many of the farming activities that were supposed to continue within the households and in the realm of the family economy, were commonly tasks associated with women's duties; for example, small-scale husbandry and vegetable growing. Both the small household plots and the labour required there were usually organised by the male family head (Wiegersma 1988:148). This land, which was supposed to be only supplementary and eventually unnecessary for the collective economy, was actually sometimes providing for more than half of the income of the households. The household economy was largely of the traditional kind and therefore controlled by men. In part, it acted to preserve the traditional patriarchal structures of the families and villages (Wiegersma 1988:154-5, 166). Moreover, as pointed out earlier, women's labour in the agricultural collectives was often undervalued by male leaders. In terms of equal division of labour, it was more common that women took on traditionally 'male' farm duties, than *vice versa*. This was enhanced by the fact that the period of collective farming chiefly coincided with the war against USA. This left much of the farming, and quite a lot of the managing, to the women, while the men fought at the warfront. However, when the men returned home, the gendered division of labour

tended to fall back into conventional patterns, and women were again best suited for 'smaller', 'female' duties (c.f. Bradley 1989:47, 48).

It can be concluded that much changed in the revolution and during times of collective farming, but the status of women had not been fundamentally changed. The interest of the state in gaining control of and directing the peasants' farm labour to fulfil national and political goals overshadowed the ideological idea of gender equal labour division. Furthermore, after *doi moi* there has been a trade-off between gender equality and economic efficiency because when national liberation and reunification were attained, striving for economic achievements took the upper hand. From the perspective of farming and labour division, this development has meant a reduction of ideologically informed policies involving social and gender equality. There has been an intensification of market-driven individual and household support when each household organises and divides labour freely.

STATE DEFINITIONS OF THE ROLES OF WOMEN

Even though farm labour has, as mentioned above, lost much of its lustre, extensive manual labour in the fields is still an integral part of the lives of present-day Lang Xanh women. Female farm labour has contributed immensely to feeding the country. Rural women of contemporary Vietnam have frequently been urged to do so in their role as the allegedly proud inheritors of the national female tradition of intense work. From this perspective, Lang Xanh women were part of a traditionally recognised femininity of hard-working and morally respectable women. Hard and unselfish labour, directed toward the family and/or the state, has long been closely bound up with female morality. In creating images of national identity, both on the international and the domestic scene, definitions and depictions of 'proper' Vietnamese femininity have been central (Nguyen-vo Thu-huong 2008:44, Pettus 2003:4-15).

The ways of the state in using, defining and redefining femininity has lead to contradictive and opposing feminine ideals. While the Communist leadership has proclaimed eradication of gender differences and elevation of the status of Vietnamese women, they have simultaneously expressed ideas – fully in line with Confucian doctrine – concerning women's inherent capacities as mothers and their 'natural' aptitude to selflessness, faithfulness and industriousness. Female emancipation has been a duty as much as a privilege when Vietnamese women have been instructed to enlighten themselves and in that way contest such diverse properties as 'backwardness', patriarchy, ignorance, and immorality. The right of the state to define female labour and characteristics, depending on time and purpose, has led to complex, contradictive and elusive feminine ideals (Pettus 2003, c.f. Gal & Kligman 2000:4-6). Vietnamese men, or masculinity, has not been defined and singled out as a special category in need of transformation. The Confucian-supported patriarch was officially condemned by the Communist lead-

ers, but it was never really replaced by a different male ideal. Men could be landlords, peasants, workers, soldiers etc and in these capacities they could be either embraced or perceived as in need of change. However, they were – and still are – not only 'men'.

Today's oppositions and contradictions between a commercial and market-driven economy and the party-governed political arena are reflected in the often compelling but incompatible images of Vietnamese women. And the pattern is familiar by now. Women, not least peasant women, need to transform themselves to meet the demands of the nation. The regime has placed 'women' at the intersection of modern capitalism and traditional values and bestowed on them the duty of knitting the two together into a harmonious pattern, particularly within the sphere of the family and household. Women are thus required to have the ability to perform balancing acts between the right moral, educational, and entrepreneurial skills that modern female citizens are encouraged by the state to demonstrate.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through colonial resistance and Communist revolution, until present-day household farming within a socialist-oriented market economy, there have been attempts to direct the labour of women and peasants to serve political and national goals. By ideologically defining the positions and roles of 'women' and 'peasants', these two categories of citizens have been compelled to act and work according to the state's intentions and they have constantly had their capacities valued and defined, and then been asked to change.

During certain periods of time peasants enjoyed rather high status, like when they were elevated as the revolutionary backbone of society, or when the rural women kept up the food production during wartime. This has faded with the more recent requirements of the government. In many respects, 'women' and 'peasants' have shared fates. They have been portrayed as ardent fighters, loyally sacrificing their individual well-being for a larger cause. At other times, they have been the outmoded masses, burdensome for the nation unless they adjust properly. They have been pictured as backwards, conservative, oppressed, ideal citizens, and the backbone of society. Immanent in the position of female peasants, is thus to be one of the groups most thoroughly targeted by state ideology. Consequently, female and peasant identities in Lang Xanh were created in relation to explicit and plentiful state ideologies and were heavily influenced by these. Clearly, men were not exempted from the pressures of ideology. I will return to this in the following chapters, but as far as state movements, campaigns, and overt ideological aims and definitions go, the categories of women and peasants have been overrepresented.

From an ideological and historically informed framework, the focus will now be turned to the local context, i.e. Lang Xanh and some facets of village life.

CHAPTER 2
The village of Lang Xanh

Vinh, a close friend of my host family told us that if we had visited Lang Xanh only five or ten years earlier, most of the houses that were now made of concrete with cemented yards would have been cottages with thatched walls and roofs, with dirt yards in front. Now, when making a right-turn from the country road after travelling the nearly one hundred and thirty kilometres from Hanoi up to the northwest, into the district of Thanh Ba in Phu Tho province, a small cluster of mainly white or yellow houses could be detected among the lush green foliage. Like so many villages, Lang Xanh is surrounded by rice fields and, as a first sign of a more upland terrain, some rounded hills encircle the village. In contrast with the archetypical picture of the Vietnamese village, Lang Xanh did not consist of narrow alleys and houses crammed together, and was not bounded by a bamboo hedge. Instead, the houses were spread out rather sparsely, even if many of the residential plots were adjacent to each other. The houses were connected by a web of dirt roads and tracks, of which the main ones were casted in concrete during my stay. With few exceptions, the plots of the residential houses were enclosed by fences, walls, or hedges. Inside, you would often find chickens picking about, maybe a pigsty, some vegetable beds, fruit trees and decorative plants. Most likely, all this was guarded by at least one ferocious dog – or so it seemed to me.

The 'we' who arrived at Lang Xanh was I, together with the young woman who was my field assistant cum interpreter throughout the whole stay in the village. We were virtually joined at the hip and when one of us appeared without the other, people immediately asked where the missing one was. You could say that many of the 'I' in the text to some extent imply a 'we'.

Lang Xanh is the centre of the commune, which consists of twelve villages. From a strict administrative viewpoint, a village is not an administrative unit in Vietnam (c.f. Luong 2010:8, Malarney 2002:13). The lowest administrative level is the commune (*xa*) and in most cases, the communes are made up of villages (*lang*) that the inhabitants perceive and refer to as separate communities, and so was the case here as well. The commune's administrative centre was situated in Lang Xanh and most likely that was why this village was home to more cadres and workers than the other villages, though the majority of the inhabitants engaged in farming. These circumstances, combined with the relatively flat fields that belonged to Lang Xanh, made people in this village appear – to themselves as well as their neighbours - to spend comparatively less time toiling the fields and to have more time to engage in 'emotional' (*tinh cam*) things, like socialising, singing, meetings or just watching TV. The other villages in the commune were described as being situated 'in the forest', which was nowadays more a figurative than a literal description.

Fields and farming

Wet-rice was the main crop in Lang Xanh. This area is some distance away from the most fertile soils of the Red River delta, which meant that the land quality was reasonable even if not the best. This is probably one of the reasons why the houses were not as densely placed as in the villages in the richest delta zone. In that area, as much land as possible is used for growing rice. As far as land quality is regarded, the Mekong delta in the south of Vietnam has the most excellent conditions for wet-rice cultivation. One man dreamingly told me that there "the fields extend over immense areas and each family's fields are marked only by strings attached to poles and not cut up by a lot of banks, like here". Maybe this was as much a fantasy about the abundance of the tropical south as a hard fact, but it was true that the rice fields in this area were not exactly vast. Enfolded by the relatively few and low hills, and the roads that led to neighbouring villages, were six major areas of rice fields. Within each of these areas, each field was separated from the others by a network of banks that enabled the farmers to regulate the water level according to seasonal requirements. The size of the fields varied quite a lot. The larger ones were slightly more than one *sao*[10], while the smallest fields were just a couple of square meters. A household could have fields in all six areas, though many had their fields more gathered together. The

10 1 *sao*=360 square meters.

distribution of the fields will be discussed in more detail below. The dispersion of the fields resulted, however, in a lot of transportation of tools, fertilizers, rice seedlings and harvested crops. When the seasons so demanded, the roads and paths in and around the village were filled with men, and even more so, with women, who carried things to and from the fields with the help of shoulder poles, bicycles, and carts pulled by persons, cows, or buffalos.

Some of the fields here were sour and deep, and some were obscured by the hills, preventing them from getting as much sunshine as they would ideally need. Nevertheless, the rice fields in general gave two crops of rice per year, and between the summer and the winter crop, i.e. October to January, virtually all the households grew a crop of corn. The hills were, however, not merely an obstacle for the desired sunshine, but were also used to grow manioc – which was, just like corn, a fairly recent crop, and also primarily intended for animals – some tea bushes, and a few patches of still quite young trees could be seen. These hills were, to my initial puzzlement, often referred to as 'the forest'. Since there were not that many trees outside of Lang Xanh, except for the scattered odd plots of tiny eucalyptus-like trees, I was somewhat confused when people I met on the way to the hills commented that apparently I was heading for the forest. My landlord and one of his frequently visiting friends explained that the village used to be surrounded by lush areas of bamboo, like a forest. They both remembered how they as young boys could go out and pick nice and juicy bamboo shoots anywhere around the village. Now they had to be bought at the market. The bamboo was cut down, they said, to give way to manioc which people needed more. When food was scarce, in wartime and during collective farming, it had been necessary to grow as much crops as possible. The trees had been more plentiful then too, but farmers had cut them down to sell to the forest enterprises who needed wood for the paper factories. Now as then, people tried to make the most of the land at their disposal and there were few if any patches that were not used for the purpose of giving some crop.

When manioc was planted, in late February and early March, it was not uncommon to see whole families up on the hills. The situation was very similar with corn. Both men and women maintained that manioc and corn cultivation was incredibly easy. No particular skills were necessary and anyone, regardless of sex and age, could do it. This was evident by the fact that women and men quite often performed the same chores and quite often performed them together, even if women generally spent more time on these tasks. Seemingly none of the chores of manioc and corn growing were perceived as especially delicate or feminine. It was a pretty coarse and hard labour and, thus, a duty where most of the household members could contribute in one way or the other. With rice, the duties were much more strictly separated, as we shall see in the following chapters.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RICE

Of all the farmland in the village, the rice fields were the most highly valued type of land. When asked about their land holdings, any villager answered by stating the area of rice fields at their disposal. The same happened in discussions about fields that people had passed on to their grown-up and married children, or other farmland transactions that the households were involved in – it was all about rice fields. A family often stated its level of sustenance by saying for how many months per year they lacked rice. The poorer households in Lang Xanh normally lacked rice for a couple of months every year, which meant that the rice they grew themselves was not enough to feed them all year around, but had to be supplemented by bought rice. These families often had to sell their labour to cover for this lack. Even though the villagers were part of a monetary and commercial economy, the idea that a sufficient supply of rice was essentially the same thing as affluence still lived on. "Rice is money" as my landlord expressed it when he told me that tax, which is now payable in money, used to be paid in rice. The price of rice was, however, taken into consideration when taxes to the commune were set. Having sufficient amounts of rice conveyed a feeling of security, you knew that you would always have something to eat, and the consumption of home grown rice also ensured that the rice was of good quality and that it was clean and not full of pesticides. The villagers assured me that the sellers always kept the best rice for themselves.

In many ways, rice cultivation was the quintessence of farming in Lang Xanh and as such it was well engraved in its history and tradition. Vietnam is firmly anchored in Asia's rice belt, which stretches from India all the way to Japan. Within this area the cultures and environments are many and diverse, but through the common centrality and devotion to rice, it is still possible to detect a kind of 'rice culture' that connects the region (Hamilton 2003:23). Cultural practices encompassing rituals, organisations of communal labour, arts, and language all point to the importance of rice cultivation. In a global perspective, rice is the crop that occupies the largest area of farmland and it provides more consumed calories than any other food (Hamilton 2003:23). In places where rice cultivation dominates, the different stages in the agricultural year often greatly influence the cycle of activity, with rituals marking the most important turning points, like transplant and harvest (Hamilton 2003:30).

This was, and to some extent still is, clearly reflected in Vietnamese annual rituals. *Tet*, the Vietnamese New Year, is, for example, celebrated in the less intensive period when the last crop of the year is harvested and before the transplanting of the first crop of the new year. However, Asia's 'green revolution', which began in the late 1960s, introduced new, more hardy and high-yielding varieties that ripened quicker, thereby enabling more crops per year in several areas. This affected the rhythm of the agricultural year, which sometimes got out of step with the ritual cycle (Hamilton

2003:22, 439). In the case of Vietnam, the rituals involved with rice cultivation were also diminished by the Communist regime's aversion to rituals involving supernatural components, something that chapter three will further touch upon. Nonetheless, some households in Lang Xanh still made offerings of newly harvested rice (*com moi*) to the deities and the ancestors. This normally happened on the 5th of lunar May, on *Tet Doan Ngo,* the so-called parasite-killing festival, when offerings were made to the spirit world to avoid pestilence and disease, and on the 10th of lunar October. One male farmer, a man in his fifties, told me that his family offered new rice when they felt happy, healthy and at ease. If they were very busy or less content, they refrained from making an offering that year. According to many of the villagers, the offering of new rice is an old tradition that you do not have to follow anymore. And, as just mentioned, the traditional agricultural calendar is not followed very strictly, because the dates for the offering of new rice do not really coincide with the rice harvests anymore, with the introduction of new rice types and a more individual organisation of labour. Moreover, the relatively newly introduced crop of corn, grown between the summer and the winter rice crops, meant that harvesting was made as early as possible, so most people had already eaten from the new harvest before the traditional dates of offering new rice.

Another common factor among the 'rice cultures' is that rice, besides being a necessity in a proper human meal, in all its forms and shapes is essential in the food offerings directed to ancestors, deities, and spirits (Hamilton 2003:30). This belief was shared by the people in Lang Xanh as well. When the ancestors were offered their meal in accordance with the lunar calendar (more on this in chapter three), they, like all the other otherworldly beings, were always presented with rice and rice liquor. As a complement to this, other food items could be added according to the supply and opinion of the household. In this respect, rice is not comparable to any other food item and in Vietnam the word for 'meal' is the same as the word for cooked rice '*com*'. Hence, the phrase "have you eaten yet?" (*an com chua?*) literally translates into "have you eaten cooked rice yet?". This is a trait that many languages in rice-eating Asia have in common (Hamilton 2003:30).

Cultivating and eating rice have formed and influenced many aspects of society, and the labour involved in its production has been part of people's lives for generations. Some of the chores, like transplanting, are distinctive of this type of agriculture (c.f. Hamilton 2003:43, 51). On the whole, life in Lang Xanh was still characterised by rice cultivation, as the following chapters will demonstrate from various angles. In principle, the agricultural year started, as mentioned, with transplanting of the winter crop just after *Tet* (new year), i.e. in mid to late January, sometimes even in early February. Transplanting usually consisted of planting pre-grown rice seedlings in the water-filled fields. The seedlings were collected into bundles, brought to the

field where the transplanters carried one bundle at a time, from which they planted little bouquets of seedlings into the water-filled mud. Occasionally, smaller fields could be sowed through broadcasting instead of transplanting seedlings. This was done by throwing non-germinated rice seeds straight into the fields. This method was quicker, but the plants needed to be thinned out and the seedlings were more vulnerable to insects and rodents when they were not pre-grown. At this time of the year, the weather is often damp and cold. Transplanting was the most 'female' duty of all farming chores, and the women worked barefoot in the cold and muddy water. In most fields, the water reached knee-level, but some fields were so deep and the mud so soft that bamboo poles were laid out to walk on. Shoes or boots immediately got stuck, so bare feet were the only option. Sometimes the women wore double trousers and extra sleeves outside their shirts and jackets to protect arms and legs from the cold, but at the end of the day, their limbs were numb with cold. After two to three weeks, most of the fields were transplanted and it was time to plant manioc on the dry hill fields. At this time, most of the households also planted peanuts, sweet potatoes, beans et cetera. Just like rice, this was mainly for household consumption. From around mid February until the rice harvest in May, there was a slack in the farming season. During that period, many women engaged in raising pigs, some grew cat's ears (an appreciated mushroom) – an activity performed even more often by men – or tended to tea plants, which some households grew on the hills or in parts of their gardens. A few of the women traded in fruit and vegetables, either in Hanoi or at nearby markets. Many of the men worked as construction workers at sites in the vicinity of the village, or in other parts of the country, and only some of them came back for peak periods of farming. Most of the women who worked outside of the village returned at least to participate in transplanting and harvesting.

In early to mid May, it was time to harvest the rice fields. Basically this was done by women who cut the rice and tied it into sheaves, and men who collected and carried them, sometimes by shoulder poles but mostly by carts, back to the houses where they were stored until they were threshed and husked. When the fields were harvested, a busy time followed for the very few women and many men who ploughed and harrowed the fields in preparation for the next rice crop. By the middle of June, the fields were again transplanted with bright green rice seedlings and now it was the persistent heat that was the greatest obstacle to the women gathered in the fields. They were covered in clothes and conical hats to protect themselves from the burning sun. When August came, after another less busy period in the farming season, it was again time to harvest the rice and prepare the fields – this time for corn. From September until December (when the manioc was harvested), most of the rice fields were emptied of water and gave a crop of corn, before the cycle started all over again, with the preparing of the fields for the winter rice crop.

Chanh, a former teacher at the Agricultural College, told me that people here loved (*yeu*) the land. If they could not see to the rice fields or the manioc hills at least once a day, they would experience a growing frustration creeping up on them. In more ways than one, the farmers in Lang Xanh were attached (*gan bo*) to the land; this relationship was inevitable in the same sense as with a spouse or a relative, which is what the phrase '*gan bo*' indicated.

A walk in the village

As an introduction to the village, we will make a tour of Lang Xanh, where certain places and a few of the persons who were, in many respects, significant for this study will be presented. Along the way, some background and basics of the village structure and the land situation will be given. Just like everywhere else, when episodes from the past are discussed, all the villagers did not share the same opinions on the course of events. The rendered material in the following sections represents the subjective understandings of the persons who told me about certain events and processes that they had experienced or heard about. This reflects how I learned about the circumstances of Lang Xanh and how these were presented to me. The intention is to provide, as far as possible, a glimpse of the atmosphere as it could be experienced by an 'outsider' who dwelled in the village for a period of time.

THE PEOPLE'S COMMITTEE – ADMINISTRATIVE AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE

When entering Lang Xanh, one of the first sets of buildings to appear were the yellow rows of houses placed in a u-shape around a yard, which was the commune's People's Committee (*Uy Ban Nhan Dan* often abbreviated to UBND). This was where the Chairman, the vice-Chairman, and a handful of cadres of the commune had their offices and where their meetings were held. They were in charge of everything from budgets, infrastructure, and resources, to the socio-economic development of the commune. If they were in, people could come and visit a cadre with their concerns and there were newspapers available in the main hall, free for anyone to read. However, most of the time it was rather quiet at the UBND.

The People's Committee's principle duty is to be the executive agency of the Provincial People's Council and the State administration at a local level. Vietnam is a socialist state, lead by the Communist Party. The Party has a national structure that covers every level of political rule, from Hanoi, through the provinces and districts, down to the communes and villages. Parallel to this organisation – and more or less as a mirror image – runs the government's structure, where the People's Committee in the communes

are the smallest units, which manages state affairs and implements the policies and decisions of the government and the National Assembly. The Party and the government, with their networks of cadres are ubiquitously present, not least through the mass organisations (e.g. Women's Union, Veteran's Union and Youth Union) that are organised in a similar, nation-wide fashion. The Party, the government, and the mass organisations were all present in Lang Xanh and made their imprint on village life.

Accordingly, Lang Xanh had a representative in the commune's Communist Party and there were branches of the Women's Union, Farmers' Union, Youth Union, Veterans' Union, and Old People's Union, of which the Women's Union was the biggest with about seventy members. As with all official appointments, to be a union leader, you must be a member of the Party. All the unions and the Party had monthly meetings and virtually all of their activities were initiated and controlled according to a top-down principle. The leader of the commune's Farmers' Union told me that some of the goals were shared by most of the unions, like family planning and information about policies and regulations that are set by the Communist Party at the national level. For example, if a family had more than two children, the unions that the parents were members of could be criticised and the leaders might be seen as deficient in their assignment as union leaders. And if a couple were planning to get divorced, the union leaders – especially of the Women's Union – or other cadres, were required to talk to the couple in order to make them try to stay together.

Also, the unions took an active part in celebrating the national day on 2 September (when the declaration of independence was made in 1945). Then singing and dancing performances were held. Not least people in their late middle ages participated in the entertainment and, according to one of the cadres, they were often great dancers. The leader of the Women's Union in the commune informed me that they had received instructions from higher levels in the organisation that this year they should have a performance together with the Veterans' Union to celebrate the National Day. Rehearsals were begun at the communal 'cultural house' (*nha van hoa*) at the People's Committee a few days before. The general idea was that the unions should not only convey governmental information and decisions, but also endorse cultural and recreational activities.

The leader of Lang Xanh's division of the Women's Union had noticed a decline in the number of members. Young, newly married women with small children were not very interested in paying the yearly fee. They thought that the union was mostly about carrying out what the district told them to do. Many women were busy and did not want to spend the little free time they had on the union. The woman who was the commune leader told me that she did not particularly want to become a Women's Union leader, but found it hard to refuse.

The man from the People's Committee that I met most often was Loi. He was a man approaching his forties who lived in Lang Xanh with his wife and two sons. As the vice-Chairman of the commune's Peoples Committee he was also in charge of agricultural matters. It was his responsibility to inform the village leaders in the commune about new ideas and methods in agriculture. He and his wife had some rice fields at their disposition, though his commitments at the commune office kept him from actually performing much farm work, so his wife managed most of it. He wanted to encourage the other farmers, for example to try new types of seeds and to improve agricultural methods. According to him, many farmers were quite difficult to convince when it came to testing new ideas. The best method was to show them in practice so that they could experience the outcome for themselves. He shared the common idea that it was much easier for women to try new things if they had their husbands' support and encouragement. If not, he thought, the wives were reluctant to change the way they worked the land. Of course, Loi added, there were exceptions to be found and he mentioned my landlady as an example of an enterprising female farmer who was quick to try new things. Young people could also be rather conservative when it came to farming. According to Loi, they picked up most of their ideas from their parents and the young people who stayed and became farmers in Lang Xanh were, in most cases, those who were not successful in their studies, and lacked the means to choose some other line of work.

So far, the commune had turned down inquiries from the district about turning agricultural land into industrial grounds. According to Loi, it was important to protect the rice fields so that the farmers had sustenance. The land situation should be stable so the farmers felt that it was worthwhile to invest time and money in the land.

THE POLICE OFFICE

Just behind the People's Committee was a small building that contained two rooms. This building was also covered in the yellow plaster that can be found on so many official buildings in Vietnam. This was the commune's police office, where Tu, the chief of police in the commune, together with a couple of colleagues, could be met with.

Tu was initially very nervous about my presence in the village. He felt responsible for my safety, at the same time as he was anxious that I might pick up something unfavourable, or probe too deeply into possibly sensitive land issues. In the beginning of my fieldwork, he several times visited the household where I stayed, and he eagerly stressed the importance of a weekly plan of my whereabouts and whom I planned to talk to and about what. But when he had stated these requests he usually turned to his favourite topic, which was gender (*gioi tinh*). He knew I was interested in studying gender relations and his thought on the matter revolved much around

how men and women meet and what they are curious about and attracted to in the opposite sex. The jokes and speculations about these matters would be many during my time in Lang Xanh, but the frequency of these conversations gradually lessened. Compared to land issues, gender was a safe topic that did not invoke uneasiness or unrest among local authorities.

In the end, Tu settled with the request that I inform him when I left the village to go back to Hanoi, and also when I returned. This information was common knowledge to everyone in the village virtually at the same time as it happened, but Tu still wanted me to come and see him in connection to my comings and goings. This request intensified when, towards the end of my stay, Vietnam was hosting the Southeast Asian Games and the general level of security increased. The most notable effect of this in Lang Xanh was that the handful of women who normally went to Hanoi to sell vegetables and fruit on the streets when farming was in low season, were not allowed to continue their activity since ambulating street vendors did not fit into what the state and the organisers of the game wanted to show to the visitors.

THE VILLAGE LEADER — AND SOME FACTS AND FIGURES OF THE VILLAGE

Further into the village was the home of Binh. He had been the village leader just over three years when I arrived at Lang Xanh. His appointment did not render him an office at the People's Committee and, like the cadres in the commune, he lived in a private home. He was a thin man in his late forties and a member of the Communist Party and the Farmers' Union. Our first meeting took place in his house to which my landlords' mother had accompanied us in order to make sure that Binh's allegedly vicious dog did not eat us alive when we entered the premises. Binh told me that Party membership was a prerequisite for being a village leader. It was the people who had elected him, but the candidates where appointed by the People's Committee in the commune, and the General Secretary of the local Communist Party usually also gave his approval before the villagers could appoint their representative. The position as village leader was an intermediary role, between the villagers and the People's Committee, whom he was under the direction of. He too was somewhat nervous when I first installed myself in this village, not least because Tu, the chief of police, wanted him to report back every evening on whom I had seen and what questions I had asked people. Luckily, both for him and me, this idea quickly fell into oblivion. After Binh had accompanied me to one of the households and I had presented the main purpose of my study and asked some introductory questions related to farming and farm work, he came to the conclusion that following me around would be much too time consuming. Being a part time farmer himself and married to a full time farming woman, he already

knew all he needed to know about gendered labour division, land access, and the organisation of farm work.

The village leader knew some facts about the village that he shared with me on our first encounter. The village consisted of 132 households where 460 persons lived. Of these, six were non-farming households and did not hold agricultural land. The members of these households supported themselves as teachers, factory workers, or fulltime cadres.

Many people came to live in Lang Xanh in the 1940s. This was then a sparsely populated area and the landscape was dominated by forest-covered hills. People who settled down here came from more densely populated parts of the country, like the coastal province of Thai Binh, or from the township (*thi xa*) of Phu Tho, which was a likely target for the French soldiers during the war in the later part of the 1940s[11]. Since people came to Lang Xanh from different areas there was a mix of family lineages, where none had been, or still was, really dominating. Generally, it is not unusual that one, or a few, powerful and many-headed patrilineages exert quite extensive control over the doings at many levels in a village. Here, the village leader was keen to let me know, there were no conflicts and people helped each other, even those who were not related. No income gaps between people from certain kin groups or places of origin could be noticed, something that is not uncommon in other villages, Binh informed me.

By this time, the families had married into each other for some decades and many families had become related in this way. The myriads of connections between the households gradually revealed themselves to me, and were more intricate than I initially realised. For most of the villagers these links were so taken for granted that they were usually not mentioned. The qualities of relative, neighbour, and friend were quite often merged into one and the same person. Apart from some in-and-out-moving spouses, the population has been rather stable for the last decades, according to the village leader. After the war against USA ended in 1975, some households moved to the south of the country. Most of these households were founded by soldiers who were stationed here during the war, and when it was possible, they moved back again. But some of them stayed, usually because they had married a local woman.

From the village leader I learnt that there was only one female-headed household in Lang Xanh. This was rather unusual, I believed, but Binh said that this woman

11. Later on I learn from some more senior villagers that Lang Xanh was attacked twice by French soldiers and the residents had to hastily grab a few belongings and flee into the surrounding forest. Cows and buffalos were left to wander around freely. The French soldiers stole items and animals, and sometimes captured people. The USA war also affected the village. Some villagers left their houses to Vietnamese soldiers, and took to the then thick forest again.

was divorced and her parents were dead, so she had her own household. There were four unmarried women who had children, but according to the village leader, they all lived with their parents. Quite soon, however, we met several women who, for one reason or another, lived without a husband and most of them did not share their house with a parent. It also turned out that the woman Binh was referring to as divorced never had been married but brought up her child on her own. As it turned out, this was also the case with at least eight other women in Lang Xanh. These women originated from the village, or the surrounding neighbourhoods, and had parents or other relatives here. From a more official standpoint, these households were rather seen as offshoots of their parents' households. As far as old people were concerned, the village leader told me that most of them lived with their children. If the children were working far away for some period, the grandchildren stayed with the elderly. During my year in the village, I met only two old men and one woman who did not fit into this description. Despite their age, they preferred to live alone and do things in their own way, even if their children lived in the village and could give them a hand when it was needed. "Old people can be difficult", as one of the old men later on said to me, maybe in a moment of self-knowledge or perhaps careful diplomacy. The village leader explained that it was not uncommon for three and sometimes four generations to share a house.

Whenever it was needed, the village leader called a village meeting. To gather the people, he beat the large drum that he kept at his house. Depending on the situation, there could be two meetings in one month, or there could be several months between the meetings. The meetings were often based on some new information that had come from higher levels in the administrative structure, like new decrees or fees to be paid, or information concerning e.g. insect control, road constructions, or small husbandry projects. The number of participants in the village meetings tended to be quite small and of a relatively high average age. Other duties the village leader carried out was to collect tax from the farmers and hand it over to the cooperative or the People's Committee and – again by beating the drum – gather men together to dig the grave when a villager has passed away.

As far as the health situation was concerned there was, apart from the commune's health care station, which had one doctor, four nurses and a part time specialist in reproductive health, a nurse in each village. These nurses' main duty was to spread information to the households about sanitation, e.g. mosquito protection. Other facilities that were available to the people in Lang Xanh were one kindergarten, one primary school, and one secondary school. Virtually all the children went through nine years of schooling. College and high school attendance were lower, and the students had to travel out of the commune to get to these schools. Until now, only a handful of the young people went to university.

The last facts about Lang Xanh that the village leader provided was that at the moment, nine households had a telephone line and all had electricity and access to wells for their water supply. Slightly more than half of the households owned a motorbike and the rest at least had a bicycle. About seven months into my fieldwork, *thi xa* Phu Tho erected a telephone mast in connection with a jubilee, and this enabled the use of mobile phones.

When we were about to leave his house after our first meeting, the village leader remarked that even though the population was relatively stable, the village could be rather quiet when there were no big holidays or special occasions, e.g. weddings or funerals. When things were going on a usual, it was the youngest, the oldest, and women who dominated village life. The youth were busy studying, and some had left, at least temporarily, to learn a trade or earn some money. Quite a lot of the men went away to work, e.g. at constructions sites, often far from home and when farming was in low season, few of the women also left to engage in market activities, mainly selling fruit and vegetables. According to Binh, this set a mark on the atmosphere of the village, something we will have reason to come back to in a subsequent chapter.

MY HOST FAMILY
— MULTI-GENERATIONAL RESIDENCY, AND BEYOND

The house where my host family lived was not far from the village leader's home, and belonged in the 'high-quality' range with its concrete walls and paved courtyard. The garden, which included trees like papaya, mango, and banana, and some beautiful flowers, sloped towards a stream. What made this house stick out, though, was the fact that it had a small tiled room with a WC. This extraordinary facility had been installed when the eldest son met a woman from Hanoi, whom he married during my stay with the family. When he came to visit together with his girlfriend, she should not have to use a concrete pit adjacent to the pigsty; an arrangement that was common in most of the other houses.

My landlord had grown up in this house, which used to be his parents' home, and his elderly, widowed mother had now come back to live with her eldest son and his family. The house had once been the home of her parents-in-law and the grave of her mother-in-law was situated in the garden, not far from the fishpond. The custom of burying family members in the garden, or in the rice fields, had come to an end when the People's Committee had designated a hillside in the outskirts of the village as the official graveyard. This was where her husband and her father-in-law had their graves and where everyone who passed away in the village nowadays was buried. One of the main purposes for creating communal graveyards was to lessen

the distinctions in wealth and status that the graves used to indicate clearly, either by their impressive headstones or even small mausoleums – or by the lack of them (c.f. Malarney 2002:137). Sometimes geomancers used to be consulted by relatively well-off families to find the most prosperous direction of a grave, which could then be placed in gardens, rice fields and also in relatively public places in the village. It still happened occasionally that someone in the village contacted a geomancer in order to find the best and most prosperous plot at the graveyard. The building of mausoleums had ceased, however, and the differences between the headstones were not too striking.

My landlady was somewhat bothered by the grave in the garden, she found it old-fashioned and possibly unhygienic, but her mother-in-law did not want to hear about moving it. This house with its garden was incorporated into the family line and Minh hoped that it would continue to be so, either through one of his sons or his brother's sons.

THE CADASTRAL OFFICER AND LAND CONCERNS

In the flattest and probably most densely populated area of Lang Xanh lived Han, his wife, and their two teenage sons. My first meeting with Han, the cadastral officer in the commune, almost never came to be. Since he was in charge of the land administration in the commune, I was eager to see Han as soon as possible and we had agreed to meet at the People's Committee at 8 o'clock on a cold, damp, and grey Wednesday morning. After one hour's waiting and no sign of Han, we decided to go to his house, which was not very far away. We arrived in the middle of his breakfast, and since this was only a few days after *Tet* (the much celebrated Vietnamese new year) we were treated to sweets, fruits and some liquor. This was probably a more pleasant and relaxed atmosphere for a first meeting, and we also met Han's wife, whom we became even more acquainted with than we were with him, during our stay in Lang Xanh. I learned that on this kind of unpleasant mornings, there was no need to rush to work.

Land allocation

The processes of land allocation in this village had, according to Han, taken place approximately in the following way: In 1980, when collective farming was declining, some farmland was distributed to each household in accordance with the number of farming labourers and dependent persons in the households. This was an invention of the Communist Party, he explained[12]. In 1988, there was another allocation of

12. Corresponding to Decree 100 that was issued by the Party in early 1981. This decree stated that leaders of farming cooperatives could contract workers to perform and be responsible for some defined stages in farming, as part of the collective farm (e.g. Kerkvliet 2005:183-184). See chapter one for further facts.

farmland[13], this time more extensive than the former but, he added, people still worked under the authority of the state. Of lately, farmers are allowed to work more flexibly and to have more freedom he said, referring to the 1993 Land Law giving the farming households the right to cultivate their fields according to their own decisions and, in consequence, with full responsibility for the outcome. On average, each person had about one *sao*[14] of allocated wet-rice field. The amount could somewhat vary according to the quality of the land. There had been very few changes in the land holdings of the households for quite some time, and it turned out that the latest allocation, the one initiated by the 1993 Land Law, had been more of an update on the land holdings of the households. Some corrections had been made in relation to the number of persons, regardless of age and sex, who currently lived in the household.

At the time of the most extensive land allocation, a few of the households had been indebted to the farming cooperative, because they had taken out more resources than their earned points had covered for. Such debts had been balanced in the land allocation, with the result that these households received a relatively smaller land area. The particular circumstances of each household had had the effect that some of the families had been allocated a greater variety of fields and a relatively larger field area than others had. Taking this into account, the differences were, however, on the whole not very significante. Besides, there were few households either moving into or out of the village and most of the land transactions thus took place between the long-term residents of the village in accordance with changes in circumstances and life-cycle situation. When an individual household member moved out, there were no compulsory changes made to that particular household's quantity of farmland. Each household was free to sell, lend, or rent out the use rights to their fields.

Newly set-up households, the cadastral officer explained, received land from their parents, this was because all the farmland was allocated and there would not be a new allocation until maybe in 2013, i.e. twenty years after the Land Law was created. People had to share land to make the best of the situation, but the land shortage was not great, he assured me, and both sons and daughters were given fields from their parents. But, he added, all changes in land holdings had to be made in accordance with the Land Law. It had happened, for example, that villagers had sold fields to get some money and when this happened, both the husband and the wife of the household had to agree to the transaction. But the only the name that was set out in the Red Book (the land use certificate that each household had) was the head of household, and in most cases that was the husband. In December 1998, all the

13. This allocation corresponds to what is referred to as Decree 10 (1988). This decree constituted the beginning of the official end of collective farming (c.f. Kerkvliet 2005:227-228). See chapter two for more details.
14. 1 *sao* is 360 square meters.

households of the village were provided with a Red Book. It had taken five years to get them issued, but no major changes in the land distribution were made during this time, and now the land situation was stable and fixed until at least 2013.

The Red Book was the tangible proof of a household's land holdings, but it was not the land use certificates that informed people of which field belonged to which household. This was common knowledge among the villagers, I eventually learned. Even the teachers, the cadres, and the children all knew which field was used by whom. My landlady Lan, for instance, who held many fields that she had changed and bought and sold throughout her years as a farmer, did not feel the least worried that somebody else would lay claim to any of her fields. She had the temporary use right to several fields that were not listed in her Red Book, but she never for one moment thought that someone else might start to use it because she could not prove with her certificate that it was hers. She confidently told me that everybody knew which fields she used and she had never paid any attention to her Red Book. She did not even know which land was listed in it, and it appeared that in her particular case, the residential land in her Red Book was that which held their old house that had been sold some years ago, when they were moving in with her mother-in-law in her husband's childhood home. The certificate with their present residential land in was in the name of her mother-in-law, and her second youngest brother-in-law kept it because he and another brother, with his wife and children, were living there at the time when the land was allocated. The fields allocated to her three brothers-in-law had, by now, changed users within the family many times, and none of the Red Books in the family of her in-laws listed fields in accordance with their current users. Eventually the fields would probably be reallocated anyway, she remarked light-heartedly.

Renting fields

One way for households to get access to some extra agricultural land was to rent land from a family who were willing, or needed to, rent out some of their fields. Rice was the common currency for rice field-rentals and the agreements were made from crop to crop. Sometimes, contracts were drawn up, but in most cases such affairs were settled by oral agreement. Renting out fields to people in greater needed of them was a way to manage with spare fields, if a household's children left the village in pursuit of a non-farming career. In this way, the parents did not have to give up the use right permanently, and they would get some extra rice as rent. People who rented fields were often farmers who had formed their households, or had children, after the allocation of land had been completed.

If a household wanted to sell their use right to a field permanently, it was not difficult to find buyers. This sometimes happened, but it was only an option for the more well-to-do households. Good fields were expensive and the sellers were few, and this

kept the prices up. To summarise, farming families who had many members at the time of the land distribution but had, during the following years, for some reason experienced a decrease in household members, had benefited from the allocation in a way that other families could not.

Land access

When it came to the actual procedures of land allocation in the village, the cadastral officer was, as I experienced it, rather restrictive with information. In due course, however, the picture was gradually made clearer for me as the villagers filled in more and more of the blanks.

Many of the farmers told me, and this was confirmed by official quarters by Loi (the vice-Chairman of UBND), that the first land allocation, in the early 1980s, had been accomplished by staging a kind of lottery. This meant that one person from each household had to draw tickets – with the number of a field written on each ticket that corresponded to a cadastral map – equivalent to the amount of farmland that that particular household was entitled to. Apparently it was the villagers themselves who had requested this procedure to make it as fair as possible. This of course resulted in landholdings that were spread out in several directions around the village. What had puzzled me for some time, was the fact that quite a few households I had talked to seemed to have most of their fields in the same area and sometimes even adjacent to each other. It did not seem plausible that this could have happened by drawing 'land tickets'. The explanation was, of course, that immediately after the lottery was completed, a large number of families had started to change tickets with each other to get the fields they wanted. Loi at the People's Committee also suspected, or at least suggested, that maybe not all of the fields had ended up in the lottery either, but were already 'spoken for'. There was also a third explanation, namely that some families of soldiers who had died in the war got priority to pick some extra fields before the allocation started. The same had happened with residential land where some of the men considered as war invalids had been allowed to choose plots for their houses prior to other villagers.

My landlady, Lan, revealed that she had been swift in changing the tickets she had drawn. Her husband was a teacher and therefore not entitled to any farmland. The agricultural matters were her responsibility, and it was her name in the Red Book. She was quite content with her present fields. They were of relatively good quality and all of them situated fairly close to the house. Not all the farmers were equally content. First of all, you had had to find somebody to exchange the fields with, and they had to have fields of comparable size and quality. People who might not have qualified to get land in the first allocation when the lottery was conducted, but were allocated their land later, normally found it difficult to swap their fields, as the

quality of these was rather inferior. Lan had, however, not stopped at field-swapping. She had been courageous enough, as she put it, to ask for some extra manioc fields. These fields had, just like the rice fields, been distributed in a lottery. But as the dry hill land where manioc was grown was less valuable than the rice fields, and also of smaller quantity, the allocation of these fields had, as a consequence, been less strict. Her request had been granted and this was, she argued, mainly because many people never had actually asked for more manioc fields than they had been allocated.

The cadastral officer had not been in charge of the distribution of the manioc fields, but had dealt mainly with the rice fields. Instead, it was a person who had also been a policeman in the commune and a close neighbour of Lan, who had handled this. Unfortunately I could not inquire about these matters as this man had sadly died in an accident some years ago. His widow told me, however, that he had arranged for other persons to pick the land tickets for his households in order to avoid rumours about cheating. By and large, the villagers seemed to be content with how the land had been distributed and they thought that it had been a rather fair process, even if not perfect. Lan's conduct proved that there were some elasticity in the executing of the allocations, but she assured me that there had been no way that she could have asked for more rice fields than her household was allowed to have. One day, when we were sitting by the stream that ran just behind Lan's house, the former village leader stopped by to chat while Lan was pointing out some of her rice fields to me. He joked with her and said that as soon as she saw an unused piece of land, she turned it into a rice field. She had, according to him, the potential of becoming a 'landlord' (*dia chu*).

Clearing little pieces of unused land was what many of the farmers had done when it was still land available to clear. Even during the collective period, there had been some small pieces of land here and there that were not cultivated by the collective. Here, the villagers had grown things like vegetables and beans for household consumption. Some of the households still held these kinds of fields. They knew that in theory the commune could revoke their little plots, but in practice this was not very likely to happen since the areas were small and the quality was not the best. Today, it was not possible to find any land to clear for growing even the smallest amounts of vegetables.

Many of the households had turned a patch of land into a fishpond, usually fairly small ones, either in their gardens or out in the village. The fish were mainly for household consumption – if they were not stolen by some fish thieves passing through, before the catch had landed in the owners' dinner bowls. Fishponds were a male concern, except for the feeding that was sometimes made by women. Men who had access to rather large ponds could often be seen standing by the water's edge in the early evenings, gazing at the surface that was sometimes broken by a moving fish. During my stay in the village, the cadastral officer got to rent the largest

fishpond in the village from the commune, and from that point on he was often seen in contemplation by his pond as the darkness approached. Before, he was rarely seen spending time outdoors.

Land related discontents

On a couple of points, however, the farmers convey united criticism of the land distribution. For instance, some of the persons who had been allocated land were not actually supporting themselves as farmers even at the time of allocation. In other cases, people had changed their occupation quite recently after the land distribution and were currently possessing land use rights that they did not really need. This irritated the farmers who felt that arable land should be held available to the actual farmers. It was not fair that the farmers, especially young couples, had to rent fields from non-farming persons. The most massive discontent, though, concerned the fact that the families of landholders who passed away could keep the land of the deceased person until the next allocation while, and this was the real catch, newborn children did not get any land at all. This had the result that households formed after land had been allocated did not get any additional land when the family grew. One woman, for example, had had one child before the allocation and one after, and she thought that in some respect the youngest son ate from the field of the older son. She, and several farmers with her, argued that it would be better to allocate the fields for twenty years, but make an update of the situation of each household every three years or so. In this way, land held by deceased persons could be passed on to babies. The vice chairman at the People's Committee held similar thoughts when he argued that farmland should be available for the use of active farmers and if such a procedure should be implemented it could also compensate for the lack of land to feed the farmers' young children. "It is important to ensure the well-being of the farmers to avoid social unrest", he concluded.

The relatively stable land situation in Lang Xanh nevertheless included elements of insecurity. There were villagers who had lost smaller areas of allocated land, for instance when a road had been widened or the preschool had been built. They had not received the compensation they felt they were entitled to, and some of them had given up hope of ever having the matter solved. The household of the teacher Luc and his farming wife, for instance, had lost one of the fields where they used to grow sweet potatoes. That field used to be where the volleyball ground – the only appointed public recreational area in the village – now was. Since this was a kind of public service, they thought, they would probably never receive any sort of compensation. Cong, who had been allocated most of his fields at a later stage, due to his absence as a soldier and his wife's former state employment, called his small area of dry fields for "borrowed land". This kind of land was higher and dryer than the rice fields and therefore the commune might retract it to use as residential land,

especially if it was close to a road, he thought. He felt that the rice fields were more secure, but that even residential land could be lost. "If the state decides to build a road through your house you will lose it", he asserted, "but then you might get compensation".

It was made clear to me already at an early stage that some aspects of land were sensitive to talk about. The cadastral officer and the village leader, who had the most insight into the circumstances of land in the village, were both very reticent when it came to matters of land control and distribution. When I started to do interviews with the union leaders in the commune, I often asked if they dealt with any land issues in their union activities. This commonly caused the interviewee to assure me that there were no land conflicts in this area, they all got along well and helped each other out whenever it was needed. From their official standpoint, land issues usually meant problems and the union leaders did not want to deal with land from any kind of legal perspective. All of them told me what I was going to hear many times during my year in the village, namely that the land policies were determined by the state and they had to accept and follow them.

The villagers were slightly less tongue-tied about the allocations, and about the informal land transactions in which most of them engaged, in order to adjust their land holdings according to the changing situations of the households. Land conflicts were, however, a topic they tried to avoid, because misdeeds and disputes were not supposed to be revealed to outsiders. I was often told, and to my knowledge quite correctly, that there were no big land disputes going on in the village. There were constantly smaller disagreements going on, especially concerning the banks that divided the rice fields, or the borders of residential land. The issue of water for irrigating the rice fields was another cause for quarrels. At one of the village meetings, for example, a woman complained that when she asked the man in charge of the large water dam in the outskirts of the village to have the water turned on, he had replied that she would first have to go to the village leader and ask him. But when another woman had asked for the water to be let into the area where her field was, he had turned it on immediately. It was agreed that it was important to sort out the water issue and that the water dam was meant to serve everybody, and not only for the man in charge of the dam to raise fish in. The woman who sat beside me at the meeting, quietly remarked that this matter was brought up every year, but that it had not yet been properly solved. One single person was responsible for the main water supply in the village – a large dam that was owned by the farming cooperative (which still existed in a different form, more on this later) and charged a fee from the farmers twice a year – and he was elected at a village meeting. His job was to turn the water on and off in the areas that contained the rice fields and he was supposed to direct the water to and from the fields depending on what the fields needed. This

had to be coordinated to a certain degree, and it was important for the farmers to know when they could have water taken into the fields in order for them to prepare the fields correctly. Another woman at the meeting, who had tried to explain to me how the water supply for the rice fields was organised, assured me that water for irrigation was the most common reason for quarrel, more common than land border disagreements.

Ngan and Hieu, two faming women in their forties, on the contrary, held border infringements as the number one reason for disputes. One afternoon in Ngan's house when nobody else was around, they explained that there were plenty of occasions when some greedy person had tried to get some extra land, for example, by planting trees a little into the neighbour's garden – even if people on both sides knew where the border actually was supposed to be. The bamboo sticks that I had seen firmly hammered into some of the banks that demarcated the rice fields, got their explanation when Ngan and Hieu described their use as markers of the middle of the banks. If somebody knew that the person using the field on the other side was trying to enlarge the field somewhat by reducing the bank, often with the pretence to make the bank look neat and straight, bamboo poles were put deeply into the bank. It would then be obvious if the neighbour was making the bank thinner and the field a little larger. When describing the land disputes, they were both rather embarrassed, and they chose to give examples of quarrels that had taken place some time ago, or they discussed the disagreements in a more general way, without giving specific examples.

THE FARMING COOPERATIVE

On the other side of the road from the People's Committee, surrounded on three sides by rice fields, the rather run down buildings of the old farming cooperative were still to be found. These were also plastered in yellow, even if the surface was tarnished. The largest part of the space was left vacant for most of the time, but the row facing the road was still in use. This was where the present farming cooperative had its office. Nowadays the membership was voluntary, I learnt in a conversation with the leader of the collective, a woman in her fifties named Ly, but in fact all of the farming households in the commune were members. The approximately 500 households of the commune had provided 1046 members. There was no annual fee for membership in the cooperative, but there was an introductory fee of 28 000 VND[15] to be paid by each member. If the cooperative made any profit, it was, at the present, used to fund its activities. People in this area were poor, therefore the decision not to charge an annual fee, and when a member passed away, the family received 50 000 VND from the cooperative, the leader informed me. The activities of the cooperative did not involve actual farming anymore. It did not have any land at

15. 100 000 VND ≈ 6,5 USD (rate in April 2003).

its disposal and instead the focus was on providing services to the farmers, like selling high quality seeds and fertiliser for reasonable prices and giving courses concerning different farming techniques etc. Now, as Ly pointed out, the farmers could buy their seeds and fertilisers wherever they wanted, but to buy them from the cooperative was safe and ensured good quality. Members were given discounts, though anyone could buy agricultural products from the cooperative, but to market prices. The majority of the customers were women and there was a slight overrepresentation of female members. The farming cooperative also gave some guidelines, e.g. about when to transplant and harvest the rice and it was the village leaders' duty to pass this on to the farmers at village meetings. Many of the farmers seemed however to ignore the meetings and instead organised their farming by talking to each other whenever they happened to meet.

In the old type of cooperative the leader of the commune's Communist Party was also the leader of the collective farm. The leader, however, still needed to be a Party member. The present agricultural cooperative was under the control of the People's Committee, but unlike the rest of the political and administrative structure, there was no national organisation for agricultural cooperatives. These existed only at communal level, and cooperated with all the unions to spread information about their activities. At the moment, the positions as leader, accountant, and treasurer were held by women.

Lang Xanh had experienced around thirty years of collective farming and the leader of the commune's Communist Party told me that it had all begun with the first cooperative being formed in the province of Thai Nguyen in 1958. The whole land situation changed when the cooperatives in this area were formed in 1959. In only a few years time, all land became the property of the state and eventually organised into collective farming cooperatives.

Chi, now an old woman, had experienced the changes in land politics first hand. She took pride in having been a hardworking woman all her life, but after the revolution in 1945, she had been particularly burdened by all the work she had to do. Her husband had been a cadre at the commune office and her parents-in-law had owned several *maus*[16] of land where people worked as paid labourers:

> My mother-in-law used to employ poor people. At this time people were very poor and came here to look for work. These people were kind of adoptive children (*con nuoi*) for her, but it resulted in my parents-in-law being regarded as landlords. In 1953 my husband was sent to fight at the front in Dien Bien Phu and I and our first son stayed with my

16. 1 *mau* is 3600 square meters.

> parents-in-law and I had to do everything on my own, like working on all the rice fields. At that time nobody wanted to help a "landlord" family!

She remembered when the collective farms were starting to be formed in 1959:

> The state did not take all the fields at one time, but took them gradually and gave them to peasants. Often they took the fields just after they were transplanted! These government policies were not good. It could happen that a landlord who had lost all the fields and had to work as a hired labourer got some fields back, because now they were peasants and not landlords. I have experienced many regimes, from when Vietnam still had an Emperor, and it is always the farmers who have the most difficult lives.

She concludes by giving an example of something good that the state has achieved: "The crops are much better now and this is thanks to the new seeds that the state introduced".

It was not only fields that were confiscated by the collectives. Buffalos, cows, ploughs and even hoes had to be turned in. "All the tools had to be given to the collective". Thang, who worked in the collective for some time before he became a soldier, remembered, "and instead we had to work for points".

At present, if there was one thing that the villagers seemed to agree on, it was that the land situation had greatly improved since the collective farming had ended. According to the stories I was told, the collective farm had clearly been dysfunctional and the villagers considered things to have improved, now that the households were in charge of agriculture. People had more freedom to make their own decisions in farming, organise their work as they pleased, and reap the benefits of their labour efforts, and this was all for the better. Many still had vivid memories of the constant lack of rice and other foods during the time of collective farming, and the access to necessities like salt and fabric was often inadequate. All the hard work that people were expected to contribute had not been adequately rewarded. "Now the farmers are allowed to think for themselves", as one man put it.

Not only the political map has been rewritten, the administrative maps have also changed as old policies have been replaced with new ones. Kha, a retired teacher, told me that this commune had been allotted its present borders the same year as the cooperative was set up. The village was named Lang Xanh, but was often referred

to as *khu* 10 (division 10) by people who lived in the area. This was a remnant from the farming cooperative, which was divided into subgroups. All the villages in the commune were still referred to as their subgroup number and I only learnt to distinguish them by using the numbers 1 – 12, i.e. the number of villages in the commune. The subdivisions had altered during the years of collective farming. Division 10 had at one time been divided into two, but then merged into one again. But the name Lang Xanh, I was told, had persisted and was much older. As one woman put it, "Lang Xanh is in division 10, you can say". The size of the fields had changed as well, during collective farming. Many villagers remembered that the fields had been made as big as possible to suit the working brigade's collective duties. Nowadays, when each household had been allocated a number of fields to use, the web of banks that marked the boundaries between the fields was much finer.

Mai, a farming woman in her mid thirties, told me about how relations in her family were affected by the turbulent times of land reformation and establishment of collectives. Her grandfather had been a rather wealthy man, owning many fields and employing labourers to work on his land. When the revolutions came, all the land was taken away from the family, even the rice that was stored in the house was taken from the family. I also learned that one of the old men in the village had, as a young boy, been taken into the family by Mai's grandfather. The boy had lost his parents at an early age and he had grown up more or less like a brother to her father, who was his parents' only child. When the family lost all their land to the collective it turned out that the then young man, living like a son in the family, as Mai explained it, was a supporter of the revolution and turned against his 'adoptive father' (*bo nuoi*). Their relation was immediately broken off and he was no longer considered part of the family. But, she continued, when her grandfather eventually died, the rejected man showed up at the funeral and expressed his wish to resume his relation with the family again. As Mai's father did not have any siblings and wanted some more people in the family, he accepted the proposal. The two men, both around seventy years old, lived close to each other, but things never became the same again, she asserted.

THE *DINH* HOUSE

Another imprint from the country's turbulent history was marked by an absence rather than a presence. When proceeding further into Lang Xanh from the village leader's house and looking across the road from where my host family was living, a rather ordinary residential house could be seen that was the home of a middle-aged couple and their teenage son. If this had been in the 1940s, there would have been a *dinh* house there instead. A *dinh*[17] is a communal house where the altar of a village guardian spirit is placed and where the, often mythological, founder of the village is worshipped and commemorated. This is, or in the case of Lang Xanh, was the place

17. See Hickey (1964:218-221) for a description of the traditional *dinh*.

where communal rituals were regularly conducted. When the French troops tried to re-conquer this area around 1947, they often used places such as communal houses for accommodating their soldiers. Besides, the Communist administration, which existed in opposition with the French, did not approve of the village rituals and ceremonies staged in the *dinh* houses. When land reforms began to be implemented in the 1950s, such spiritual places were normally seized and used for much more mundane purposes. This seizing and redefinition of sacred land was a significant part of the upheaval of previous governing and land control (Malarney 2002:13, 44-46). If the *dinh* houses survived this period, they were often heavily damaged. Gradually, the political climate has become less severe on these matters and some villages have rebuilt or renovated their *dinh* houses (e.g. Malarney 2002:189-207). In Lang Xanh, the *dinh* was totally destroyed and the ground was turned into residential land.

The commune's Communist Party leader and the leader of the Veterans' Union in Lang Xanh told me that in the beginning of the collective period, the ground where the *dinh* used to be was used to keep buffalos. In 1947, the *dinh* was destroyed by locals in order to keep the French from using or wrecking it. Now, the two men said, they know that it was wrong to destroy a thing like that, but at that time, this is what they did. By word of mouth, some people still remember that the founder was a man called Han Van Dong who supposedly was a great warrior. The Communist Party leader told me how the villagers used to sacrifice a large black pig to honour the founder. The pig was only scalded and not cooked. This was to show what a fast fighter the founder was; he did not even have time to wait for the pig to be cooked. Apparently, the *dinh* had been very big, with a beautiful thick tile floor framed in large wooden beams.

Other villagers told me that the *dinh* was torn down by the communists in 1954 as a result of the 'land revolution', and turned it into a shed where buffalos were kept. Nowadays, the destruction is discarded and some villagers wanted a new *dinh* house. However, the cadres at the People's Committee were most of them too young to remember the *dinh* and, according to some, did not care about it. One of our neighbours told me that since the village lost its *dinh*, many villagers have met with bad luck, and anyone who lives where the *dinh* used to be will meet with difficulties. The parents as well as the grandparents of the present owner used to live there and it has brought bad luck to all of them. The husband's mother did not get along with her mother-in-law, his wife did not get on with his mother and now he and his wife are getting divorced. Moreover, most villagers are hardworking but nobody gets rich here, she pointed out and continued, "according to uncle Ho, good knowledge in the hands of the wrong people can be disastrous and this is what happened when the *dinh* was torn down. The general idea of land reformation was good, but to destroy the *dinh* was very wrong".

My landlord's mother maintained that the *dinh* house was destroyed by the French, along with a pagoda (*chua*) that used to stand on a hill in the outskirts of the village. When she moved here from Phu Tho town in 1945, the *dinh* was still here. For some time, people talked about rebuilding the *dinh*, but it never happened and nowadays nobody mentions it anymore, she said.

According to the old man Chanh, even if the villagers had wanted to rebuild the *dinh* house, it would not have been possible since the stone with the name and the merits of the founder is missing, and without the stone, a new *dinh* cannot be built. If an application for the building of a new *dinh* should be presented to the department for culture and information at the province level, the stone would be necessary proof that there had been a *dinh* house in the village before. Chanh claimed that the old pagoda and the *dinh* house were both torn down by the villagers in order to prevent French soldiers from either destroying them or turning the buildings into shelters.

THE PAGODA

Close to the crossroad, where you turn to enter the village, was a rather low hill with some thin trees surrounding a pagoda. The area that the pagoda served was really at least the entire commune, but it was situated closest to Lang Xanh. First and foremost, this was a popular destination for the older women in the area and at spiritual feasts and celebrations the pagoda became quite crowded.

As mentioned above, the old pagoda had been destroyed together with the *dinh*, but unlike the communal house, the pagoda was now rebuilt. This had been possible mainly thanks to the engagement of and pressure from the older members of the commune, who had also arranged a fund-raising in order to get enough money to offer to the People's Committee. The idea had been to make it difficult for the cadres to refuse using budget deficit as an excuse. People's wish to rebuild the pagoda was finally accepted and the project was even allowed a grant from the commune. The new building was fully completed in late spring when I was there and the celebrations were anticipated with great expectations. Together with other important guests, a prominent Buddhist monk was invited and a large crowd turned up to join the festivities, make contributions, say prayers, and give offerings to the divinities and the organisation of the pagoda and, finally, bring some blessed colourful rice-flour tops home as auspicious tokens to the ancestors and family members.

My landlord's mother told me that most people in Lang Xanh found the pagoda to be more important and more useful than the *dinh*, and that there was no other pagoda in the vicinity. She, like many of the old women and a few of the men, was a member of the local Buddhist Association. For them, the pagoda was the

centre of their activities and an important social and spiritual institution. So even if the previous pagoda, according to the old man Chanh, had been larger and more beautiful – with a bell that, when it was sounded, spread a delightful chime in the wind – at least it had been replaced.

THE CULTURE HOUSE (*NHA VAN HOA*)

Lang Xanh now had a 'culture house' but, as the mother of my landlord explained, this was a state concern and did not contain any altar or divine figures, and there were no connection whatsoever with spirits, mythological entities, or other unearthly beings. This house was situated in the outskirt of the village and built just recently, when Lang Xanh was appointed a 'cultural village'. To achieve the status of cultural village there were numerous criteria – including material, economic, educational and moral development - that should be met (c.f. Luong 2010:242-243). Old Cuong, a former cadre, informed me that this distinction meant that the Lang Xanh inhabitants needed to be better than other villages in every way: economic, living standard, hygiene etc. But most important of all, they need to avoid disputes and show solidarity to each other, work together and help each other, and get along well.

The village meetings were held in the cultural house and the village leader sometimes mentioned the 'cultural village' appointment in order to urge the households to, for example, pay taxes and fees and to try to discourage the two couples who were in the process of getting divorced to reconsider this decision.

In May it was the first anniversary of being a cultural village and this was celebrated by a number of song and dance acts performed by men and women, young and old and organised mainly by the Veteran's Union, Old People's Union, Women's Union, and the Youth Union. The wife of the vice-chairman of the People's Committee was the presenter, while her husband was at home with their two small boys. In general, women showed more engagement in these kinds of entertainment events.

PLACES FOR SOCIALISING

Neither the cultural house, nor the People's Committee were places where the villagers, regardless of age, came to socialise with each other. These were public buildings, but they were mainly used for official meetings and organised events. Apart from the volleyball ground, there were really no designated public spots where the villagers gathered. For old people, particularly old women, the pagoda was an important place for meeting and socialising with each other. As for the rest of the villagers, it was out in the roads and paths – usually on their way to or from the fields or some other work, or going to the markets – where they met with friends, relatives, and

neighbours. Quite a lot of socialising also took place in people's homes. Especially in the evenings, after dinner, people dropped in on each other to have some tea and a chat. This kind of leisure socialising was highly gendered. In general, men spent much more time visiting their friends and eating and drinking together. This usually happened in someone's home, where the women of the household made sure that the men had the food and drink they needed, while they themselves retreated to the back parts of the house. Men also went out on their own more often than women did. If women went out to visit someone on a less busy evening, they usually went in couples or in small groups. As we shall see later on, women found time to chat and socialise not least while they were working together in the fields. In the evenings, women spent most of the time doing laundry, feeding the pigs and performing a myriad of other household chores. The following chapters will explore how primarily women's work oriented them in certain directions and how this generated gendered understandings of access to both residential and arable land, as well as gendered divisions of labour and contributions to a sense of village community.

CHAPTER 3
Continuity and change – gender and land access

This chapter explores how some capacities, perceived to be primarily 'male' or 'female', were closely intertwined with perceptions of, and access to, two particular types of land: residential land and farmland. The main reason for this choice is that in Lang Xanh, women and men gained access to farmland and to residential land on the basis of differing premises. They were, one could say, oriented towards these two types of land in different ways. The histories, meanings, and definitions of farmland and residential land differed markedly in the village, and this held significant implications for women and men's preconditions and opportunities to gain access to these types of land.

As for residential land, these plots were inseparable from the actual houses, as well as from their inhabitants. The connections and dynamics between this type of land and the dwellers were marked by a sense of continuity in access practices, and gender played a decisive role in how access was acquired. This contrasted with the rice field, to which the Lang Xanh residents had a much more temporary and uncertain relation, and where notions of gendered access had gone through radical changes as a consequence of the drastic land regimes brought on by the 1945 revolution.

This chapter will, mainly focus on how understandings of gender-specific abilities interacted with perceptions of residential land and farmland respectively, and informed the ways in which these land categories were available to men and women.

Dwelling, building, and gender

Heidegger (1971) argues that dwelling is the mode whereby humans exist on this earth. By drawing on linguistics, Heidegger traces this human mode back to *buan*, the Old English and High German word for dwelling. Eventually, this word took on the meaning of building (*bauen* in German), and thereby the active and generative original meaning, in which this word constituted the very essence of how humans took up their existence in the environment, was lost and turned into a more narrow and less dynamic meaning. However, according to Heidegger, the concept of building still contains traces of its original meaning and, taken to mean both constructing and cultivating, it is indicative of how humans inhabit the world, i.e. how we dwell on earth. In other words, building is intrinsic to the human condition, and it is by building that the earth is gathered into particular locations and sites. A building is not erected in a predetermined location; on the contrary, he claims, it is the building that makes the location emerge by drawing together the premises of the human life-world into a meaningful locality (Heidegger 1971:144-145, 150-152). Although Heidegger abandons the cultivating aspect of human dwelling to pursue the line of building – something that we will have reason to return to – I will employ the same perspective on cultivated land. Building a house or cultivating rice on a plot of land are two different acts, but both acts are constitutive for the person who performs them, or – equally important – *not* performs them. This means that fields, too, can be taken to have the capacity of gathering together conditions for human existence into locations of mutually constituting meaning, i.e. places where people and the world come into meaningful being.

If building and cultivation are constitutive to our situation as human beings, it is highly significant for us as dwellers if and how we can engage in these two acts. If building a house on a piece of land, for example, is a major constituting act and one which is predominantly perceived as being a male capacity, the practice of house building marks a difference in ability between men and women. Hence, when a man builds a house on a piece of land, this act constitutes him as a man, as well as the place as a site for a house that is associated with a particular male builder. This sets a building dweller apart from a dweller who mainly cultivates. Thus, one important condition for how we dwell in places, which neither Heidegger nor Ingold take into account, is gender. Gender division of labour, for example, transforms the acts of building and cultivating into not only acts of dwelling, but acts of gendering as well. In Lang Xanh, men and women's involvement with farmland and residential land – i.e. building and cultivating – was highly informed by understandings of gender capacities. By doing different things in different places, men and women were directed towards the world in gender-particular ways. If our subjective relation to the world is formed from how we, as bodily beings, orient ourselves to it, then the

capacities which men and women are perceived to embody are crucial for how we dwell in particular places.

Since people and places interact, and come into being from this interrelation, none of them will ever be completed, but will always remain under construction (Ingold 2000:149, 172). It is, however, important to point out that even if places and people are mutually generated, individuals are born into already existing relations between people as well as between the dwellers and their environment. The engagement of previous generations in the environment sets the preconditions for later generations, who experience the presence of their predecessors in what the ancestors have left from their previous dwelling in the world (Ingold 2000:149, 186, 189). The landscape, Ingold (2000:189) insists, bridges generations of dwellers by being a kind of narrator of the life of former dwellers. By not conforming to the idea of a linear time, where every moment is like a bead on the string of time that disappears into the past, the idea of dwelling allows people to experience their ancestors as an embedded part of life. Ancestors' earlier presence is interwoven into the texture of land and life, which makes the beginning and end of each generation less distinct. As we will see, such a view complies quite well with the villagers' idea of ancestors and, nowadays, predominantly with residential land. In Lang Xanh, the regular practices of ancestor worshipping and reverence for deities bestowed houses and land, as well as women and men, with fundamental qualities and, thus, positioned all of them in relations to each other in gender-specific ways.

The connections with ancestors and the 'other world' was one factor that made family homes and residential land into well-integrated parts in the formation and maintenance of the inhabitants' social and spatial relations. A house also stretches out into a broader societal context, thus linking the inhabitants to e.g. state politics and economy (Carsten 2004:37). Anthropological studies have paid considerable attention to the extensive importance of the house as a link, or a key, to cultural understanding (e.g. Bourdieu 1990, Lévi-Strauss 1983, Gudeman & Rivera 1990, Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995, Carsten 2004). The site that contains the house, on the other hand, has received comparatively little consideration. However, Carsten and Hugh-Jones remark that "the space that surrounds a house is also an extension of the personal space of its occupants" (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995:3). As we will see, in the case of Lang Xanh, the piece of land that harboured the house bore far more significance than this, and was therefore of utmost importance for the people who dwelled there. Moreover, according to Ingold and Heidegger, a house and its ground are inseparable in the sense that they form a prerequisite of, and give meaning to, each other. This corresponds well with the house-related practices of the Lang Xanh peasants. As anthropological studies have shown, from a gender perspective, a house is an integral part in the making, naturalisation, and sometimes contestation,

of gender relations (e.g. Bourdieu 1990, Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995:21, Carsten 2004:50). From my fieldwork in Lang Xanh, it was apparent that this holds true also for the land that contains a residential house. The focus in this chapter will primarily be on practices regarding men's and women's access and control of residential land and the adherent houses. A comparison with access to farmland will be made at the end of the chapter.

Ancestors, residential land, and gender

For every family in Lang Xanh, the relation with the ancestors was an integral part of life. This was made evident not least by the fact that virtually all the residential houses had a minimum of one altar devoted to forefathers, principally the patrilineal ancestors of the male family head. Ancestor worship was often spoken of as a duty, in the sense that it was the responsibility of the living members of the family to honour and respect the former generations, not only while they were alive, but equally important, when they had moved on to the other world (*the gioi khac*). This transference did not mean that the ancestors ceased to exist; they continued to be around, together with other kinds of spiritual beings, but now in the other world. Thus, the relation continued in the form of worshipping at the altars in the homes.

PLACE AND ANCESTORS

The significance of ancestors' connection to certain places was made unmistakably clear to me by Sinh, a woman in her sixties who, after having enquired about the Swedish way of worshipping ancestors, learnt that Swedish people commonly did not feed or worship their ancestors at altars in their homes. She looked at me, clearly alarmed, and concluded that in that case Sweden must be full of hungry and wandering ghosts. The regular ancestor worshipping and anniversaries, preferably conducted in the house of the eldest son, made sure that the ancestors were nourished and equipped with the things they needed in their new shape and place of existence[18]. Ancestors needed a particular place to come to in order to be fed and cared for, and the home-altars provided such specific places.

In the household where I lived, it was my landlord's mother who usually performed the twice monthly regular worshipping of the ancestors of her husband and son's patrilineage. The altar was placed on the wall above a large chest of drawers and held three incense bowls, an oil lamp, and a vase with some decorative paper flowers. When the worshipping was due, the old woman usually dusted the altar and the piece of furniture, put fresh incense sticks in the bowls and started to arrange items

18. Objects such as clothes, money and gold was passed to the other world by burning votive papers and paper items symbolising these offerings. This kind of offerings were mainly made at larger events such as New Year (*Tet*) and death anniversaries. Usually the burning took place outside the house, in the courtyard.

of food that she had bought fresh from the market. She arranged the food on small plates made of plastic or china and put some of these on the altar and the rest on the chest of drawers beneath. The actual worshipping commenced when she lit the incense sticks, bowed before the altar and began to invite the relevant deities and the ancestors to come and eat from the offerings. The burning incense sticks was the link that opened up the connection to the other world and made it possible to invite otherworldly beings to come to the altar. When the sticks had burnt out, the ancestors and deities had finished their meal and the connection was broken.

Common food items to offer were cakes made of sticky rice, fresh fruit, nicely packed crackers or snacks, betel nuts accompanied with lime paste and a special kind of green leaves, and small cups of rice wine. Some cigarettes were usually included as well. The fruit varied according to season, and when the family had a visitor who brought something delicious to eat, which was a common practice, this too was offered to the ancestors for them to enjoy. Cooked food was normally offered on major events, like weddings, funerals, anniversaries, or holidays. Then the ancestors were presented with samples of the most delicate pieces of the newly prepared food and when they had had their share, i.e. when the incense had gone out, the food was removed from the altar and could be consumed by the members of the family who were living in this world.

If the ancestors were neglected, dissatisfied, or lacked an altar to return to regularly for their needs, they could turn into wandering ghosts that roamed around restlessly and troubled their descendants or other living persons (c.f. Gammeltoft 1999:70, Malarney 2002:117, Rydström 2003:88-9). Most susceptible to become a wandering ghost was a person who did not get a proper burial and was not worshipped by any relative from his or her patrilineage[19]. When close relatives – preferably children and/or a spouse – performed the funeral rituals, the soul of the diseased was gradually transformed into a 'divine soul' (*linh hon*) who could be called back to the house altar to receive the offerings and, in return, offer the living family members its protection and support in virtually any endeavour they embarked upon (Chanh Cong Phan 1993:172-174, 177-182, Rydström 2003:85-88). However, if the funeral rites for some reason could not be performed, the soul of the dead person would leave the body, but instead of transforming into a divine soul, the soul would become a 'ghost soul' (*hon ma*). If at this stage no rituals were performed to call the soul back to the house where the family of the diseased lived, the ghost soul would turn into a proper ghost (*ma*) who usually drifted around restlessly at the place of death (Chanh Cong Phan 1993:174). Consequently, many villagers told me that one of the most awful things that could happen was to die in a foreign place where no family members could see to their safe transformation into revered ancestors (c.f. Rydström 2003:88).

19. See Malarney (2002) for an extensive study of contemporary funerals and how such practices have been influenced by political changes.

If this should happen, their souls would wander uneasily for eternity. The ideal end to a person's life was to be buried in one's home village and then be worshipped by a son at the house where one used to live. Clearly, this was not always possible, but it was an ideal from which there should be as few deviations as possible. From this perspective, men and women were equally eager to have a son, whose house could provide a safe place for them as ancestors to return to for their needs.

Beliefs concerned with ancestors' ties to the home place were perhaps strengthened by the custom of caring for the ancestors' tombs that traditionally had been placed in the fields or gardens belonging to the family, but nowadays usually were gathered in a site designated by the Peoples' Committee in the commune, as the previous chapter mentioned (c.f. Malarney 1996:546). In his study of the changes of the northern Vietnamese family, Pham Van Bich (1999:20, 27) describes how, in pre-revolutionary Vietnam, sons' duties towards their forefathers made them reluctant to leave their home villages even when times were hard. The sense of rootlessness was often severe in a place where the land belonged to other families. An in-moving man was commonly perceived as a total stranger, due to his lack of ancestral connection to the place, and it could take generations before a family was considered as 'insiders' and allowed to enjoy the same privileges as the other villagers. In addition, only those men who appeared on the village member lists could partake in the allocation of communally held land, and this contributed to their disinclination to move away from the home village. Women's names never appeared on the lists (Wiegersma 1988:54-55). The bond between men, home place, and land was strong.

Some of this place-based anxiety prevailed in contemporary Lang Xanh. Men were more often than women expected to maintain close relations with their native family and village and, preferably, one son was obliged to inherit the house and care for the parents, in this and the other world. A son's house, ideally the home of the eldest son, served as a place-bound anchor for the souls of the ancestors to return to. Without such a place to serve as a bridge between this and the other world, the ancestors would also lose their otherworldly places and be forced to take the shape of wandering ghosts (Chanh Cong Phan 1993:187).

PLACE, RESIDENTIAL LAND, AND DEITIES

Besides the ancestors, other spiritual beings inhabited residential land and influenced people's lives and aspirations. Reminiscent of how the ancestors were honoured, these deities and spirits were addressed through worshipping, and the well-being of the inhabitants of a house on a broader spiritual level was thus by and large channelled through their incorporation into the patrilineage dwelling in that house.

The Land God (*tho dia* or *tho cong*) was involved in all spiritual and otherworldly dealings that were conducted at home (as opposed to the temple), and he was the first divinity that people called on when they wanted to contact their forefathers. It was through his guidance that the ancestors could find their way to the altar and to their living descendants. It was commonly believed that one Land God was in charge of an area roughly corresponding to each of the five hamlets in the village[20]. When a household intended to worship the ancestors, the session would thus start with inviting, for example, the Land God of the Manioc Tree Hamlet. The clearly place-bound characteristics of the Land God made him a link between the ancestors and the persons inhabiting a particular piece of land within his 'jurisdiction'. As we will see below, when a new house was about to be built, a ritual dedicated to the Land God was performed by a senior male person on the very first day, before the work had commenced. This was to inform the deity and hope for his blessings.

I first heard of the Land God when Loan emerged from a house opposite from where we had been sitting in the shade of the old agricultural collective building, chatting to the woman running the shop on the other side of the road. Loan was a woman approaching her sixties, who communicated with beings in the other world. She was not exactly a spirit medium (*ba dong*) who incarnated deities, but she – and some of the villagers – believed that she had the ability to connect with the spiritual world by praying and making offerings to the deities (a *thay cung*). She lived by herself, with her married son living in a house in her garden, and her unofficial third 'husband' only a couple of minutes' walk from her home. Her house had two big altars where hundreds of incense bowls were collecting a fair amount of dust. These bowls had been placed there by local women who had come to see her in some pressing matter, typically related to some kind of marital or family trouble. Now she was on her way to one of my landlord's younger brothers' house to sort out a problem with their small son, and she asked if my field assistant and I wanted to come with her. This was a busy day for her, she explained; she had performed a ritual devoted to the Land God, involving the burning of a black paper horse[21], in the house she just left. It was not clear what the problem had been about, but the trouble with the little boy in the family she was heading for was obvious; he cried a lot and did not sleep well and his mother had asked her to come and see what could be done.

When we came to the house where the boy lived, Loan was already sure about what to do. The mother of the boy had been instructed in advance about things to buy for the ritual that was going to be performed and as soon as we arrived, the two women

20. Nguyen Tu Chi writes that in the traditional villages of northern Vietnam, each hamlet had an altar, usually at the entrance, devoted to their *Tho than*, i.e. Spirit of the Soil (Nguyen Tu Chi 1993:63).
21. A black paper horse was a common offering for the Land God on special occasions. The only explanation I heard for this was that the Land God needed to cover quite large areas and a horse was a useful item for this purpose.

began to prepare trays of food, paper bundles containing small notes with the names of the recipients written on them, and paper items, e.g. imitations of bank notes, paper 'gold', and small paper clothes, to be burnt as offerings. As usual the ritual commenced with the lightening of incense sticks to establish the connection with the other world, and Loan murmured all the invitations as well as the purpose of the ritual. To check if all the offerings had been accepted by the intended recipients, Loan tossed two old copper coins on a plate in front of the altar and outside in the yard. If both coins showed the 'lucky' face up, the offerings had been accepted and the recipients were pleased. If not, it meant that some deity or ancestor was discontent with the offerings, or felt overlooked and neglected. At first the coins kept showing the malevolent face; some recipient was "just laughing and turning the back" at the offerings, Loan explained. She had to toss the coins quite a few times before they finally showed the benevolent face (c.f. Malarney 2002:100). It turned out that the problems were caused by an unsatisfied ancestor of the boy's father, and after some discussions between the two women, they agreed on an old uncle of the boy's paternal grandfather. This man had died at quite an early age, before he had any children of his own, and therefore there might not be a family who worshipped him in particular, like a son would do. If this family started to explicitly invite this man when they worshipped, the boy would probably stop crying and be calmer at night.

During the whole ritual, the mother of the boy was very attentive and when Loan had finished the offerings in a successful way, she asked for some specific advice on how to worship in the future in order to avoid further problems. Loan explained to the young woman that every time she was worshipping, she should start with stating the date and the full name of her husband, who was the household's head and whose ancestors they worshipped. Then she should proceed with inviting the Land God, other deities, like the Kitchen God for example, and then give the names of the particular ancestors they wanted to worship before inviting her husband's ancestors in general. This was the normal procedure for any ancestor worshipping.

Except from explicitly mentioning the name of this specific ancestor, the woman was advised to set up a small temple[22] (*mieu*) in her courtyard. Like most people in the village, Loan knew that the house of this family was built on ground where a temple once had been situated. Such ground was very potent, due to the demons and ghosts that tended to live there, or at least spend some time there before they moved on. Setting up a small temple would be an effective way to keep such otherworldly creatures in a benevolent mood and prevent them from entering the house and instead stay in the courtyard, where they could inflict less harm on the family. The young woman listened carefully to all the advice. She explained that she was quite inexperienced as

22. The temple she was referring to was a small concrete structure built on poles. These temple where usually only big enough to contain a couple of bowls of food and some incense.

far as worshipping was concerned. In her childhood home her mother had done all the worshipping, and therefore she had never acquired any deeper knowledge about these matters. Now, as a married woman, she found herself carrying this responsibility on behalf of her husband's ancestors since he, like many men in the village, was reluctant to perform any form of worshipping. Loan's advice about erecting a temple in the courtyard made her hesitant, though. In fear of appearing superstitious (*me tin*), she did not want any passers-by to see that her family engaged in more worshipping than what was normally required. When I met her again later, she told that they had included the ancestor in the worshipping, but they had not taken any precautions against the ghosts. The boy had, however, become calmer.

The example with the crying boy points to the link between the comfort of the living and the contentment of paternal ancestors. It also indicates that the land people dwelled on was an integral part of this relationship. Plots of land came with a history and contained otherworldly beings. The acts and events that had taken place on the piece of land that people inhabited became an intrinsic and lingering power that affected the dwellers. The consequences of this were basically dependent on how the male head of the household and his patrilineal ancestors harmonized with the deities who inhabited the site. In lucky circumstances, past occurrences did not have any unwanted bearings on the current inhabitants, and a good fit between a piece of residential land and the head of a household could bring good fortune to a family. In less lucky cases, accidental or brutal deaths, ill-fated previous dwellers, or other unfortunate events that had occurred on a piece of land, could cause all kinds of bad luck by the restless spirits who, usually due to lack of a proper place to dwell, and people to worship them, had turned into wandering ghosts.

The family living opposite the household where I stayed had their house built on a piece of the old *dinh* (a ritual communal house, see chapter two) ground. Land that had once held a *dinh* or a temple was perceived as unusually prone to ghost infestation because many souls without a home had been gathered there to find some peace and nourishment in the offerings at the altars in these buildings, since they had been deprived of this when their houses had been torn down. Apparently the family who lived across the road had met with several misfortunes. During my stay in the village, the husband and wife decided to get divorced, and they subsequently sold the house to another family in the village. The new family waited several months after they had bought the house before they moved in; until the year of the Goat[23] turned into the year of the Monkey. The reason for this was that the age of husband indicated that this would be best for them.

23. The twelve zodiacal signs are: rat, buffalo, tiger, cat, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig (Hickey 1964:75). Each animal corresponds to one lunar calendar year. The year 2003, for example, when most of this study was conducted, was the year of the goat.

GENDER DIVISION OF LABOUR AND PLACE

Most commonly, it was the eldest woman in the household who performed the regular ancestor worshipping that took place at least every 1st and 15th of each lunar month[24]. Some men conducted the rituals themselves, but in most of the village households, a woman, normally the wife or the mother of the male head of family, carried out this duty, particularly the regular, biweekly rituals. And it was, virtually without exception, women who bought and organised the items to be placed on the altars. They cooked the different dishes and arranged the fruits, sweets, and drinks that were offered to the ancestors. The sons' obligation to keep the ancestral line unbroken did, in fact, require more labour from their wives' than from themselves. The heaviest burden lay on a woman who married an eldest son, since the death anniversaries[25] usually were held in his house. Special events, such as *Tet* (the Vietnamese New Year) and death anniversaries, required a male member of the patrilineage to perform the rituals, but also compelled women to do a lot of cooking for the participants.

Since old women in Lang Xanh were the most frequent worshippers of ancestors and deities, both in the homes and at the pagoda, they usually possessed more experience than other household members in this realm. Elderly women often saw it as one of their main responsibilities to make sure that their families were well taken care of on an ancestral and spiritual level. Prompted by the lunar calendar, which stated all the main worshipping days, the women made sure that the ancestors and the deities were attended to. However, as a consequence of decades of political opposition against spiritual dealings, you could notice a fear of appearing superstitious (*me tin*). Too much involvement in ancestral and otherworldly matters could cause rumours to spread around the neighbourhood. This anxiety was more common among men than among women, as we saw in the example with the crying boy, whose father largely refrained from practicing worship. Few men engaged much in spiritual activities, and they did not seem entirely at ease when it came to dealing with deities and ancestors. A number of the village women told me that their husbands found performing ancestor worshipping either slightly embarrassing or somewhat excessive. This quite common male reluctance did not mean that men found the ancestors unimportant, they just did not want to engage much in everyday practical worshipping and, thus, left most of the actual performance of rituals to their wives or mothers.

24. Worshipping was regulated by the lunar calander.
25. After the first year of the death, when several ceremonies are held in order to assist the soul on its journey into the other world, an annual ceremony is held on the day when the ancestor passed away. This ceremony is ideally held at the home of the eldest son, and it normally involves offerings of food, snacks, fruit, alcohol, and the burning of voitve paper items. This is an occasion for the children of the diseased to show their filial piety and the siblings usually contribute to the costs of the ceremony according to their means. The death aniversaries often involve many relatives, and also friends and neighbours, who all share a meal in connection with the offerings. See e.g. Malarney 2002:138-144 for more comprehensive information about death anniversaries.

Malarney (2002) notes that age, gender, and political involvement are factors affecting Vietnamese people's attitudes towards the spiritual world. He observed that men, especially men growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, were generally more averse than women to involvements with otherworldly matters. This was even more valid regarding those men who had been connected to the party or the army, where beliefs concerning otherworldly forces that impacted on human life, so called 'superstitious thinking', was strongly condemned. As a general rule, he argues, men have been more engaged in social and political matters, while women have been responsible for the everyday care of the family[26]. This, according to Malarney, have contributed to women's greater engagement in ritual practices as they, apart from the more mundane work, also turned their hopes to the ancestors and forces of the other world for the well-being of their families[27]. The general distance between women and party politics have enabled female family members to maintain the skills as well as their beliefs in worshipping practices, while some men openly despised such procedures and claimed them to be particularly female (Malarney 2002:102-3).

My landlord was a good example of a man who claimed to disdain otherworldly interactions. For instance, he eagerly argued that the direction of a house was only important from an environmental point of view – meaning that a house should not be built in a fashion where it became too hot or too cold and so on – and did not affect the prosperity of the dwellers due to implications on the other world, as the tradition of geomancy dictated. He did not conceal his opinion about Loan, the woman who was frequently engaged by the villagers in otherworldly matters. Her skills as a fortune-teller and mediator with the other world did not impress him much. "How come she does not have any money then?", he asked in his typical rhetorical way. "If she has so much knowledge about these things, why doesn't she win the National Lottery?" Nonetheless, with two adult women in his household (his mother and his wife), his family did not lack otherworldly protection. His mother usually took care of the ancestor worship at the home altar and was also a frequent visitor to the temple, and his wife went to see Loan and other fortune-tellers on a regular basis regarding various family matters. In this way, his family was well taken care of as far as spiritual matters was concerned, and he could maintain a slightly ridiculing attitude to what was, in his opinion, exaggerated trust in unworldly matters. My landlord was a schoolteacher, and as a government employee he was more hard-

26. In the case of traditional Vietnamese villages society, principally before 1945, Neil L. Jamieson argues that in contrast to the hierarchical and more competitive male dominated practices of e.g. ancestor and village guardian spirit cults, there was a more feminine side centred around Buddhism and pagoda activities. In this context, women, often the elderly, tried to attract support for their families in their particular aspirations by worshipping different spirits (Jamieson 1993:36-7).

27. A general upsurge of female participation in religious and festival affairs has been noticed. In pre-revolutionary Vietnam, women were not allowed to participate in the communal village rituals, something that they frequently do nowadays, when the occurrence of such festivals has increased after a period of marked decline due to regime policies (see e.g. Malarney 2002:189-207, Luong 1993, Kleinen 1999:165).

pressed than other villagers to show restraint in matters concerning the otherworldly. Furthermore, he had been a young man in the aftermaths of the revolution and he had, like so many men in the village, served in the army for periods of time. His wife was a farmer and she also performed most of the household's domestic chores. This placed her further away from the critical public, or official, eye.

Both male and female ancestors were honoured with regular worshipping and celebrations on their death anniversaries, but these practices were distinctly performed within the realm of a patrilineal system of kinship. For a woman, this meant that if she died after she had married, it was the obligation of her husbands' patrilineal family to worship her. If a woman died before marriage, her natal family would commemorate her as part of her father's family group. Thus, when women engaged in ancestor worshipping they did it either as part of their fathers' or their husbands' patrilineages. This was illustrated quite vividly by Sinh, who worried about the placelessness of Swedish ancestors. She thought that if she should try to invite her dead mother from the other world while worshipping her husband's ancestors at their home-altar, these forefathers would not let the spirit of her mother in. If Sinh should try to offer her some food out in the courtyard, this would not work either. Even entering the courtyard would be hazardous for the dead woman's spirit, as she would be chased away by the ancestors of Sinh's husband. This was a very lucid example of the difference between 'inside' and 'outside' lineages[28], since it was spatially manifested by literally keeping Sinh's ancestors out. The land that contained the house where she lived with her husband was clearly delineated as a place where her husband's ancestors, but not hers, could enter. Throughout her married life, the worshipping that Sinh had conducted regularly in her home was directed towards her husband's family line.

WOMEN'S TRANSITORINESS AND IMPERMANENCE

It was a female ability to be integrated into another lineage, apart from the woman's paternal one, and also a necessity in order to preserve her husband's patrilineage. Through marriage, Vietnamese women transferred from one lineage group to another – and from one patrilineally rooted house to another – even if the transfer was not total. Women generally retained their ties to their natal families and were expected to participate in the death anniversaries of close family members (c.f. Pham Van Bich 1999:26, Luong 1992:61). Men could not become part of their wives' patrilineages, as they were perpetually connected to their own father's family line. Women's lineage mobility placed them in rather more impermanent, or transitory, positions vis-à-

28. In Vietnamese, relatives from a persons' maternal side are called 'outside' (*ngoai*) relatives, while paternal relatives are referred to as 'inside' (*noi*). Thus a paternal grandmother is called *ba noi* and a maternal grandmother is called *ba ngoai*. See Rydström (2003) for a more detailed explanation regarding the significance of the notion of 'inside' and 'outside' lineages for the understanding of male and female capacities (2003:4, 37-38).

vis the patrilineal family, compared to the unending lineage affiliation of men. A woman was meant to leave her childhood home and move into a house that, through patrilineal ancestor worship, was connected to her husband's family. If she failed to do this, there might be implications both for her and for the house she lived in.

The single mother Ngoc was a woman in her fifties with a teenage daughter who lived in an old but pleasant house,[29] comfortably situated at the centre of Lang Xanh. She had four sisters and one brother living in the village, but she still lived in their late parents' house. According to her sister-in-law, Hieu, the reason why Ngoc still lived there was that she was a rather headstrong woman. When Hieu married Ngoc's brother, his father had still been alive, and they had all lived together in his house. But, Hieu assured me, it had not been easy to live under the same roof as Ngoc. Eventually Hieu and her husband had found a house of their own in the outskirts of the village, where they now lived with two sons and one daughter. At first, her father-in-law had moved with them, but towards the end of his life, he had gone back to live with Ngoc in his own house. After the old man died, the main worshipping of his family's ancestors has been conducted in the home of the son, although the old house still contained an altar where Ngoc worshipped. As mentioned above, unmarried women belonged to their fathers' ancestry and they were free to worship their fathers' ancestors and hope for their blessings. They could not, however, do anything to preserve the fathers' lineages, because their children would in any case belong to their own fathers' patrilineage and not to their mothers'. Therefore, when Ngoc's daughter eventually married and moved to her husband, which was the most probable scenario, her mother must also move out, Hieu reasoned. If Ngoc remained, the house that had been in her husband's family for a long time had no future. According to Hieu, the house should be kept for one of her own sons, and if none of them could go and live there as an adult, the house could be kept and maintained for worshipping purposes. This, she had heard, had happened with a house in a neighbouring village. Nobody actually lived in the house anymore, but apparently the family gathered there for major events and death anniversaries. Female inheritors meant that the kinship continuum associated with residential land and houses was broken, and then, Hieu reasoned, it was better to leave the house without a permanent resident and use it to venerate the ancestors.

If Ngoc continued to live in her father's house, which contained the altar for ancestral worship, the house would be disconnected from the patrilineage. It had to be inhabited by a male heir in order to preserve its status as an integrated part of the lineage. Nonetheless, females who inherited houses were not totally unheard

29. As the only house in this village, this house sported a beautiful, if incomplete, tile floor. Apparently the tiles came from French colonial buildings in a small town not far away. When people rebelled against the French in the late 1940s, they broke up the floors in some of the houses, and took the tiles, which were then spread in the area.

of. At least two other women lived in their late parents' houses, with the consent of their brothers. In these cases, however, the houses were not connected to a particular patrilineage through several generations of male dwellers, because the women's fathers had not been heirs to family homes but had acquired their houses later in life. In Ngoc's case, her status as a single mother meant that she had not been in a position to move in with a potential husband, in his house, or in a house they had acquired together. The same situation also made her an unsuitable inhabitant of her current home because Ngoc's father's house and his lineage were merged into an inseparable unity where she did not represent a lasting link.

From a regional perspective, Croll's (1995) observation that since Chinese mothers were integrated in and not perpetually linked with their husbands' patrilineages, they wanted to ensure their long-term security and more vulnerable position by giving preference to their sons who were permanent members of their fathers' families, is illustrative. With a son as an ally, women could strengthen their positions in the family and guarantee a place for themselves in old age (Crool 1995:95). In a similar vein, Wolf (1972) noted that Taiwanese women never experienced the innate sense of belonging that a man, regardless of how his life turned out, could feel as a permanent and unquestionable part of a family. To compensate for this insecurity and to protect their interests in a male-based family, women created strong uterine bonds with their sons. From this perspective women's relationships with their sons were shown to be crucial in order to ensure a certain level of material and social status. As both Wolf and Croll pointed out, women were aware of their comparatively transient positions as daughters and wives, and therefore made strategic moves to protect e.g. their property interests. And, it can be added, just like the women in Lang Xanh, they gained their entitlement to a place to live and dwell in by their connection to a man who, as an eternal member of a patrilineage, had direct access to that place. Women's opportunities concerning access to houses and residential land as proprietors in their own right were inherently weaker than men's.

MEN'S PERMANENCE

Thirty years old Tien had just been called back home by his father from his job as a construction worker in the southern part of the country. He had been away for quite a few years, but now his farming parents were getting old and began to find it too heavy to cope with the fields, even though they had several married sons and daughters who lived in the area and gave them a hand when needed. Finally Tien's father decided that it was time for his youngest son to come back and take over the house and the farming. Still unmarried and recently returned to his home village, Tien was now on the lookout for a suitable wife. The woman who eventually married him was, as tradition required, expected to come and live with Tien and his aging

parents in their house. She was also supposed to engage in the farming and relieve Tien's mother from all the farming chores that she had been responsible for. One young woman from a neighbouring village was a candidate for some time, but one day Tien informed me that she was not going to be his wife, because she wanted to become a preschool teacher and this would not leave her enough time to take care of her share of the farming. When I left the village, there was still no wedding planned.

Tien was going to succeed his father as the resident of this house, just like his father and grandfather had done before him. The house was relatively large and of the traditional type, built of wood with beautifully carved beams supporting the roof, and not one of the relatively square concrete buildings that had dominated for decades now. The graves of Tien's paternal grandparents were situated in the outskirts of the sizeable garden surrounding the house. Tien's status as a son made him one of the links in a row of male kin and with his moving into the house, his position was spatially manifested as well. This linkage, which connected Tien with his father, his paternal grandfather and so on, was based on the conception that they all descended from a common point of origin, an original ancestor. This idea also included an understanding of an unbroken stream of sons who were embedded in the land that contained the houses, tombs, and fields where the ancestors had lived and worked (Schlecker 2005:517-8). For a peasant like Tien, whose family was not particularly wealthy, an actual or mythical point of origin was not recorded and therefore his 'source' was only known some generations back. But at this point in time, Tien's family furrow was located in this house on this land, and his future children would originate from here. Tien became a part of his ancestors' deeds and movements, that had taken place in the village and had contributed to make this a particular location for him. It was his capacity, and thus his duty, to maintain this connection between place and lineage.

Not all the families in the village were as attached to their houses as Tien's family was. Some houses were built on newly acquired ground and therefore not so tightly attached to a particular patrilineage. Usually, such houses were inhabited by men who were neither the eldest, nor the youngest, sons. Therefore, these men were not the inheritors of their parents' house and did not carry any specific duties towards their patrilineal ancestors. These obligations were taken care of by one of their brothers, who preferably stayed in the family house. Such circumstances made a house less significant for the permanence and durability of the patrilineage. A location of this kind had not accumulated much of a lineage biography yet (c.f. Tilley 1994:33). However, even families living in such houses expressed their hope that a son would establish his future family there, and show his filial piety by looking after his parents, first in their old age and later as ancestors. Each house that was dwelled in by a man and his family, constituted a part in the patrilineal permanency.

MALE PRECEDENCE OVER RESIDENTIAL LAND AND HOUSES

Traditionally, it has been the responsibility of parents to see to their sons' residential needs (c.f. Luong 1989:750, Liljeström 1998:88). By and large, this tradition still persisted in Lang Xanh. It used to be the eldest son who inherited the parental house, while his brothers, with the assistance of their parents, moved out after marriage. This usually happened as soon as it was financially feasible (c.f. Pham Van Bich 1999:27). Nowadays, as Tien was an example of, it was, however, equally common that the youngest son took over the house. It was quite customary in Lang Xanh that a youngest son became the heir of the house by lingering there after he had married, if his older brothers had already moved out.

Chi, an elderly widow, remembered that she had helped three of her four sons with obtaining their houses; one of the sons had moved from the village to work at a tea company in a nearby province, and the other three lived in Lang Xanh. She was old enough to have experienced several forms of land management in the village. Now her youngest son, with his wife and two children, lived with her in the house she used to share with her husband. She planned to spend her last years with this son, and then he was going to inherit the house. Two of her older sons had houses in the village. The eldest son had married during the period when the farming collective controlled the land. At that time people who needed new houses did not have to pay for residential land; they just applied at the board of the collective, and were allocated a piece of land for the new house if the board decided in favour of the application (c.f. Nguyen Van Suu 2004:277). Chi had made sure that there were means available to build a cottage for her son and his family on the land he had acquired. When the second son got married, things had changed and the villagers had to pay for residential land. They could either buy land from the commune or, if there was no such land available, residential land-rights could be purchased from a family who was willing to sell a plot. When the agricultural collective in the village was dissolved, some land had become available. There had, for example, been a large courtyard used for husking and drying rice, which had been turned into residential land for six households. Chi had bought the use right to one of these plots from the commune for her middle son when it was time for him to start a family. Now it contained a solid concrete building and this, she revealed, was mainly thanks to the efforts of her son and daughter-in-law.

An example from contemporary rural China shows that when a married son, who was not going to inherit the house, still lived with his parents, it was sometimes perceived as a sign of poverty, implying that the parents were unable to assist their sons in acquiring separate households (Yan 2003:145, c.f. Wolf 1966:71). The

villagers of Lang Xanh held similar opinions. It was not an attractive solution for adult sons to stay and share the house with parents and brothers, who in their turn had wives and children. People did their best to avoid such situations. Married brothers living together was perceived as a breeding ground for trouble and disputes. Quite commonly, like Chi's middle son had done, a son and his wife themselves contributed substantially to be able to acquire a house of their own. However, the norm stipulating that parents should assist their sons in acquiring a house was largely maintained. In principle, men were supposed to be the house providers and parents commonly expressed a keen involvement in their sons' residential circumstances. If the size of the garden allowed for it, parents were often quite willing to divide their residential land and distribute it between their sons in case they should wish to build houses for themselves and their families there.

Parents with sons anticipated their family's future with a kind of certainty that was reflected in acquisitions of residential land and in house building, as the example with the old woman Chi with her three sons shows. Similar conduct could be seen in neighbouring China, where Croll noticed that it was first and foremost families with sons who built new houses in the rural areas that she studied. "Those with sons built for a future; those without had no future" (Croll 1995:94). She was stunned by the difference in building activities between households with or without sons, and how maxims from pre-revolutionary times lingered in such and apparent way.

WHEN WOMEN PROVIDE RESIDENTIAL LAND

Lai and Bao, an elderly couple living in Lang Xanh, had treated their daughters in a rather unusual way as far as residential land was concerned. Lai was a retired part-time nurse and Bao a retired teacher from the teachers' college in the district town, and they were comparatively affluent. Lai had combined her nursing duties with some farming, while Bao had stuck strictly to his teacher's career. They had three daughters and one son, who was the youngest child; a family pattern that was not uncommon due to the aspiration to have at least one son. Since the son was leading quite a successful life with his wife and newborn baby in Hanoi, his parents did not expect him to return to live in the house again. Nonetheless, it was the son who was the inheritor, with the duty to keep the house intact within the branch of his patrilineage, even if he was not going to actually live there himself. Moreover, Bao was the head of a family clan that originated from another province, to which he travelled on important death anniversaries, and this was going to be his son's responsibility in the future. This family had, very atypically, taken pride in providing each of their three daughters with a piece of residential land. At one of my visits to their house, Lai took me out into the road and proudly pointed out the pieces of land that they had bought for their daughters. All the plots had prime locations, close

to their parents' house and along one of the main roads. The two sisters who had remained in the village were both teachers and lived with their husbands in houses built on these plots. The third sister's piece of land was left unused for the time being, since she lived in Ho Chi Minh City. The reasons for the old couple's quite extensive purchases of residential land was probably manifold, but it could not be denied that it was a marker of prestige for their daughters as well as for themselves. The daughters had not inherited land attached to the patrilineage, as this was the privilege of their brother, but they had been provided with residential land by their parents, something that their husbands normally should have provided. This, in addition to their comparatively high educational level, set the two sisters apart from most of the other women in the village. Their position in relation to their husbands was also influenced by their possession of residential land. It indicated that their husbands had entered into marriage without bringing houses or plots. This put the men in an ambiguous position vis-à-vis their wives and their parents-in-law. The status of the two husbands was negatively affected because they had taken the commonly 'female' position of receivers. On top of this, the two men were not equal to their wives with respect to education level. Even though they did not live under the same roof as their parents-in-law, these men were partly living in the shadow of the old couple, and as far as Lai and Bao were concerned, their daughters had married down.

Consequently, it was very unusual for a husband to move into his wife's childhood home. Any man who did this would have his position greatly compromised. A son-in-law did not have a clearly defined position among his in-laws. Normally, a man's obligations were directed towards his own lineage. And, as we have seen, his sons could not be incorporated in his wife's family as perpetuators, since they inevitably belonged to his patrilineage. Thuan, a married woman with two daughters and no sons, claimed that few men were able swallow their pride and go and live in a household where they had no obvious rights. Apparently these men were sometimes mocked and accused, mostly in a joking manner, of being like "dogs hiding under a cupboard, afraid of their masters' blows", as Thuan expressed it (c.f. Pham Van Bich 1999:28). Even though she did not have a son, she was not expecting to live with a future son-in-law in her house. Unlike daughters-in-law, who were often spoken of as acquired daughters, sons-in-law could only to a limited extent be regarded as acquired sons, according to Thuan. In her opinion, the type of arrangement where sons-in-law moved in with their wives' parents hardly ever worked out well. The parents-in-law could not fully rely on the loyalty of their son-in-law, and he, on the other hand, might find it difficult to exercise the rights and duties of a husband which would have been taken for granted if he had lived in a house on land that was attached to his own patrilineage. Like Pine shows in the Górale case from Poland, a man who only brought his labour into the household took on a position that was normally occupied by the woman (Pine 1996:451).

DEFINING RESIDENTIAL LAND — MEN AS HOUSE BUILDERS

As we have seen, men's position and authority as family members were closely connected to their residing in land and houses that were incorporated in their patrilineage. Ideally, it was the men, not their wives, who should be the providers of residential land and in charge of house construction. In the case of Lang Xanh, building was closely associated with male capacity, and house building was the male duty par excellence.

The building of a new house was a major occasion in life for people in the village (c.f. Nguyen Khac Tung 1993:38-40). It required big monetary investments and extensive organisation of all the duties involved. Women without husbands almost invariably stated house building and renovation as the greatest obstacles for a single woman to overcome. In discussions about labour division, house building was commonly at the top of men's task lists, whereas cultivating the fields often topped the range of female duties. A case-study of five communities in northern Vietnam, shows that along with weddings and funerals, house building was an occasion when virtually all the survey participants engaged in extensive networks of mutual assistance (Le Trong Cuc & Rambo 2001:193). Since it was men who acted as managers of the building projects and who performed all the major tasks involved, the networks that were formed in connection with house building had men at the core in Lang Xanh. Women were nor the builders neither the members of the household with the ability to connect a house and its inhabitants to a piece of land by consecrating a patrilineally anchored ancestor altar in the place.

In Lang Xanh, men's significance was irrefutable already before the actual construction work could commence. Besides providing the land, the skills, and much of the means, the direction of the house on the ground was associated with the male family head. The same applied to finding the right day to start building, i.e. picking an auspicious day in the lunar calendar to be the 'ground breaking day' (*le dong tho*). In both cases, the age of the male head of household had to be taken into consideration. In these circumstances age referred primarily to the years in the zodiac cycle, which consisted of the twelve animals. The year of birth was believed to have a strong influence on a person's fate (*so phan*)[30], and when a household had an adult male member, it was his fate that mainly, albeit not solely, determined how a house harmonised with the land on which it was built, and with its inhabitants. When the date was picked, the next step was to inform the Land God and the

30. A person's fate can be comparatively good or it can be 'heavy' (*so nang*). This resembles ideas of destiny, or fortune, and influences the outcome of a person's endeavours and aspirations. See Malarney (2002:95) for a more elaborate consideration of the concept of fate.

ancestors about the new house that was to be built on the plot. Commonly they were first informed on the night before the 'ground breaking day', and then the Land God was presented with a separate ceremony on the intended building site. These ceremonies should be performed by the male head of the family, since it was his age that influenced the outcome (c.f. Nguyen Khac Tung 1993:39-41). When the construction work eventually began, women quite often assisted the male builders and also cooked meals for the men who laboured on the building site. Hence, women did engage in building, but it was always a man who possessed the overall control of material as well as of spiritual matters.

When a single woman wanted to have a house built, the procedure could look like in the following example, where Thuyen, a woman in her mid thirties with two daughters and very few assets, managed to have a house built despite unfavourable circumstances. During my time in the village, Thuyen had her small cottage re-made into a concrete structure. She was officially still married, but her husband had not been seen or heard from in eight years. She finally had her house built despite her father-in-law's disapproval. From his point of view, she should not have undertaken such a major project without the consent of the head of household, i.e. her absent husband. Instead, her father and three brothers had helped her to get the necessary material and build the house. Since she lacked the support of her father-in-law, it was her father who had decided the place and outline of the house and he had performed the necessary ceremonies. When she and her two daughters moved into the new house, her father consecrated the new ancestor altar on the wall and invited the concerned deities. The patrilineage of her missing husband had been replaced by her father's lineage.

According to Heidegger, a building can be said to assemble and arrange a dispersed world into a significant locality, filled with intrapersonal and divine relations. "In this way, then, do genuine buildings give form to dwelling in its presence and house this presence." (Heidegger 1971:155-8). For a house in Lang Xanh to hold this capacity a man had to be the possessor. This is exemplified by Ngoc, who lived with her daughter in her deceased father's house. In Thuyen's case, her father became the builder and the person who gathered together the surroundings with the ancestral and the divine relations into a proper house that she could inhabit. Thuyen on her own could not communicate with the ancestors and the Land God, and she needed her father to invite the ancestors to her new altar. Young (2005:127) concludes that: "If building establishes a world, if building is the means by which a person emerges as a subject who dwells in that world, then not to build is a deprivation."

A gender perspective on access to farmland

MOBILE WOMEN AND LOCATED FIELDS

As for farmland, if we recall from chapter two, rice fields had been allocated to the villagers around 1993 and with twenty years use right, irrespective of the farmers' sex. All adults over eighteen years who did not have a salaried employment at that time received the same amount of rice fields[31]; they were, thus, categorised as farmers who worked the land. In this way, each farmer was attached to the fields that had been allocated to him or her for a period of twenty years. As long as the farmers did not move to another place or became members of another household, the fields corresponded rather well with the needs of the villagers, and each household usually regarded their total amount of fields as a joint asset. When the farmers became more mobile, however, new situations arose.

A couple of the village men had married women from neighbouring communes. An example if this is Cam. His wife still cultivated rice fields in her home village. The village was some distance away, and she only went there for more extensive work, like harvesting or transplanting the fields. Sometimes Cam came with her to take manure to the fields or to plough them, but the daily care of the fields was conducted by her parents. Quite a few women in Lang Xanh had married and moved too far away to carry out the everyday care of their fields. Some of them came from neighbouring villages and had moved to their husbands, others were born in Lang Xanh and now lived in their husbands' home villages. As in the case of Cam's wife, it was usually the woman's relatives who were responsible for the maintenance of the fields between high seasons. But at peak farming periods, women in and around Lang Xanh, sometimes accompanied by their husbands, could be seen pushing bicycles over-loaded with tools, bundles of rice seedlings for transplantation, fertilisers, or whatever the season demanded, on their way to or from their villages of origin. If this was too distant, like it was for Thu, who came from an uphill village some 500 kilometres to the south, all the labour was left to the woman's kin. Thu's mother always gave her large sacks of rice whenever she came back to see her family, as the fields were still formally hers, and since she had married after the fields were allocated, she did not have any land in Lang Xanh. The practice of patrilocality made a woman mobile – from her natal household to her husband's upon marriage – but her fields were not movable.

As already pointed out, the tradition of patrilocal residency had continued to be widely practiced throughout land reformation and collectivisation. Consequently, it had

31. Children and old people who did not have a pension from a former employment received smaller areas of rice fields.

been much easier for men to remain close to their native land resources, both as users and heirs, despite the changes in access to farmland that the different land regimes had brought about. Before the collectivisation of land, when peasant women married and left their childhood homes, they also left the fields they had used to cultivate, to farm the fields of their husbands' household (c.f. White 1988:169). The general principle was that 'out-marrying' daughters were replaced by incoming daughters-in-law, while men and land largely remained in place. This norm had basically persisted in Lang Xanh, but even though each household could manage the farmland as they wished, the system of individual allocation of fields made this practice complicated from the perspective of the farming households – not least because when young people married and moved out from their childhood homes to form their own household, they were supposed to keep working the fields they had been allocated by the state. In fact, they had to retain their fields if they were to support themselves as farmers. In most cases, the husband's family could not support the increase in household members that daughters-in-law brought about, on the available farmland, unless the same number of daughters moved out to work in fields belonging to their husbands' natal households, and so on. For families with more than one son, the situation was even more complex. If a woman married a man from her home village, or from one of the neighbouring villages, it could still be possible for her to keep working her fields. The problems increased when a woman, as in Thu's case, married a man from further away (c.f. e.g. Werner 2002:37, Tran Thi Van Anh 1999:111, Ha Thi Phuong Tien 1997:59-60). Furthermore, in Lang Xanh all arable land had been allocated, so there was no possibility of acquiring any additional fields from the commune, or clearing new plots for cultivation. In rare and lucky cases, some of the women had managed to exchange their fields with women from neighbouring villages. There had been a few instances where a woman from Lang Xanh had married a man from a nearby village, and that another woman from that same village had moved to her husband in Lang Xanh, so that they had been able to switch fields with each other.

When the twenty years of use rights for farmland come to an end, and, if the state decides to reallocate the farmland, women originating from other areas will probably be allocated fields in Lang Xanh. Until then, they will however, continue to be distantly attached to their remote fields and depend on their parents, or other family members, for help with the farming. It can even be argued that the rigidity of the allocation indirectly strengthened patrilocality since it was virtually impossible to get access to farmland outside of one's native village, something that contributed to male permanency. As we have seen, men rarely moved to their wives' home places and especially not without bringing some land assets to the household.

The fixed access to farmland made the situation for any newly married couple trying to make a living as farmers quite problematic, and even more so after they began to

have children, since there was no more farmland available for them to support their new family members (c.f. Tran Thi Van Anh 1999:110). The farmer Dat, married and the father of two small sons, summed up his family's land concerns with the following expressive remark: "Dead people have fields and people who have become teachers have fields, but none of my two children have any fields, so in practice the allocation does not work". A distribution of land that had been rather fair in 1993 did not, as a result of its static construction, reflect the changing constellations and needs of the households anymore. This gave room for numerous informal – both long-term and short-term – land transactions between the villagers, and to some extent with neighbouring villagers too. Therefore, each household's access to farmland depended to a great extent on luck, contacts, and successful negotiations with relatives and neighbours. A very common remark, made by men as well as women, when peasants commented on their farmland situation was: "Now, all we can do is work hard on the fields we have". Their labour was the most controllable asset that the farmers in Lang Xanh possessed, and the individual allocation of land had not fundamentally changed this. Because the habit of patrilocal residency had remained strong, women's work was still predominantly directed towards their husbands' households and fields. From this perspective, women were even more dependent on – and obliged to make use of – their labour as a controllable asset, compared to men, who more easily remained attached to their land.

DESACRALISED FARMLAND

In pre-revolutionary Vietnam, all land was perceived as more or less inhabited by spiritual beings (e.g. Jamieson 1993:38, Kleinen 1999:168, Malarney 2002:41), even if the rice fields were closer to the profane than to the sacral world in comparison with residential land. However, the lines between sacred and profane land was not clear-cut and definitive, as pieces of land could be more or less potent depending on their history. As in the contemporary cases of the crying boy and the family who lived on the old *dinh* ground, the definition could vary over time and according to events that occurred on a piece of land, for example accidental deaths (c.f. Abramson 2000:7-18, see also Malarney 2002:43). Examples from today's Lang Xanh concerned, however, residential land, whereas the rice fields in Lang Xanh were placed in the secular realm.

An old couple, both in their early eighties, remembered that in their youth the farmers had performed various rituals connected to agriculture. "Almost everything was affected by worshipping", the woman recalled. When they had worked in the fields, for example, the tools they used, like a sickle or a plough, had, at the beginning and the end of a working day, to be handled cautiously due to spiritual concerns. When the sickle, for example, was put back up on the wall after a day of harvesting, the old woman recalled that she had had to say a short prayer. This practice had not

endured. The impact of the communist regime's profanation strategy was evident by the unwillingness of contemporary Lang Xanh peasants to appear to be superstitious and irrational persons, who put their trust in prayers rather than in hard work. Spiritual matters were handled in the realm of the family house and, on special occasions, at the temple. Outside this area, the farmers did not perceive the land as a dwelling for otherworldly beings, or as a site for ancestral or divine contact.

As we saw in the case of house building, the local Land God had to be contacted and he was involved in all matters regarding residential land and houses. Farmland, on the other hand, was not attached to a Land God[32]. One reason for this was given by Hao, a full-time farmer in his fifties. According to him, the absence of a Land God was due to the fact that all worshipping took place at the altar inside the house and not out in the fields. In his opinion, the Land God could only be addressed at the house-altar, and he was concerned with the families' ancestral and spiritual matters and general well-being, but not with the fields as particular locations. Very few of the inhabitants expressed divergent opinions. However, a couple of villagers claimed that there was also a Farm God, but that he could not be worshipped out in the fields or inside the homes of the farmers. This god was probably venerated at the temple by the most devoted old women, they suggested to me. Bach, an elderly woman who was active at the local temple, was not so sure about the Farm God when I inquired about him. She told me that people followed the Buddhist manuscripts that were kept at the temple, and occasionally their prayers included the 'rivers and trees' and that this, according to her, really included the entire environment and, thus, also the fields. This was as far as I ever got regarding the Farm God, and he did not reappear and was not mentioned again.

As far as deities and farmland were concerned, the farmer Hao also claimed that one of the things that set Kinh people apart from some of Vietnam's ethnic groups, was the fact that the Kinh no longer performed any worshipping in the rice fields. Ethnic people, he claimed, still left some space in the middle of their fields for the purpose of worshipping. Hao's opinion suggested some awareness of the fact that even Kinh peasants had, at some point, performed worshipping out in the fields[33]. In Lang Xanh, this habit had been abandoned and was now perceived by most people to be ineffective. "The neighbours will think I am crazy" one woman said when she told me that a fortune-teller had suggested that she should light some incense and make a small offering of food and alcohol in one of her fields to enhance prosperity.

32. Kleinen has noted that in the village of Lang To, people have to some extent picked up the practice of the *vao he* (beginning of summer) ritual where spirits are asked for a good harvest. He also notes that three small shrines devoted to the Spirit of the Soil (*Ong tho*) had be erected along a village road (Kleinen 1999:169-171).

33. Malarney describes how the fields of pre-revolutionary Thinh Liet (a northern Vietnamese village) had altars at the edges where the peasants, through rituals, asked the spirits for permission to work the land and wished for a good harvest. He also explains that the entire landscape was divided into sacred and profane areas, even though the distinctions were sometimes fluid (Malarney 2002:41-44).

When Lang Xanh people worshipped in their homes or at the temple, a standard request was for the family to have 'good business' (*lam an tot*) (c.f. Malarney 2002:100). I persistently and extensively tried to find out if the farmers in the village ever whished for good harvests when they worshipped their ancestors or the deities. But despite my efforts, I could not find any evidence that indicated this. The 'business' that people included in their wishes referred to everything that the household members engaged in, in order to support themselves. As a result of my inquires about this, I was frequently told that it was not the worshipping of spiritual beings of any kind that gave farmers a good crop; it was a combination of good seeds, luck with the weather, and spending enough time working on the fields, that characterised successful farming. Indeed, I often heard farmers, especially women, commenting on the negligence of some farmer, most often also a woman, to put in the amount of labour that was required to improve their yield. Hard work had entirely replaced prayers and offerings as a way to achieve good agricultural production.

Impacts of the state on land control

From the very beginning, the Communist Party had harboured strong scepticism towards any ritual or spiritual practice that might enhance the power of a hierarchal society based on traditional patriarchy. The government saw 'superstition', which meant all practices aimed at involvement in the otherworldly (e.g. spirits, fortune-telling, and auspicious dates based on the lunar calendar), as an obstacle to progress (Malarney 1996:540-42, 2002). Rituals, such as funerals, weddings and ancestors' death anniversaries were all including a certain amount of dealings with the spiritual world, and as such they became cultural obstacles that obstructed the regime's intentions, namely to build a secularised state which repudiated patrilineally informed loyalties and 'irrational' behaviour that slowed down production, in favour of a society based on solidarity among proletarians and a rationality based on 'logical' values. Therefore, atheism and an empirical worldview based on scientific knowledge have been strongly advocated by the Communist government ever since the 1945 revolution (e.g. Luong 1993, Goodkind 1996, Malarney 2002).

Malarney (2002:79-80), points out that part of the objectives of the Communist revolution was to put an end to beliefs concerning supernatural influences, since those beliefs, according to the regime, were pacifying the peasants and keeping them from adopting a more positivistic view on the causes of events in their lives. Seen from a land perspective, the purpose was to break the entity that was formed around patrilineages, spiritual beings (including ancestors), and land, and which contributed to connect patrilineal families with property and particular places. With concrete changes in land management as a tool, the revolutionary state's intention was to abolish people's trust in the supernatural, in order to alter the peasants' relations to the

land they cultivated and inhabited. If the links between the peasants, their ancestors, and the spiritual world could be weakened, the relation between kinship ties and land would be destabilised and new norms could more easily be implemented. Despite their efforts, however, the regime never entirely managed to separate the worldly from the otherworldly, as the examples from Lang Xanh people's dealings with their ancestors and residential land have shown. The cult of the ancestors was still present, regardless of reformist winds that had, with varying intensity, encircled ritual life since the revolution (c.f. Kleinen 1999:161, Pham Van Bich 1999:224, Malarney 2002:92, Goodkind 1996:729). The secular was entangled with the sacred, and since these worlds were to some extent perceived as interdependent, an integral part of the rituals and of ancestor worshipping was to keep the relation between the two worlds harmonious. If families refrained from caring for their ancestors and the deities, people would suffer a loss of prosperity, which was assumed to be the reward of their ritual efforts (Malarney 2002:80,87, 91, Goodkind 1996:721).

To commemorate the forefathers was a deeply rooted Vietnamese tradition, and this left the communist regime no other choice than to condone the continued practice of honouring and remembering ancestors. After all, the communist cadres also had ancestors and families with the same tradition. What separated the view of the state from the more common sense understanding of the ancestors, was the resistance of the former against any dealings with the otherworldly. The regime wanted the rituals involving ancestors to be of a purely commemorative and honouring kind. This was in direct contravention of the practices and convictions involved in ancestor worship, since the ancestors dwelled in the other world (Malarney 1996:542, 544, 2002:92).

THE DETACHMENT OF PEASANTS FROM FARMLAND

Before the land reform (1953-1956), fields – predominantly rice fields – used to be connected to the sacral sphere in at least two ways; they were the loci of spiritual beings, and they provided means for ancestral and spiritual purposes. The first point was, for example, manifested in peasant ritual practices, where the deities or spirits were addressed in order to wish for a good harvest or to get permission to work the land (Malarney 2002:42, Kleinen 1999:169, Luong 1992:56). The second point was evident in the fact that rice fields owned by family clans, or by village associations devoted to the worshipping of village deities, were used to sustain worshipping practices by making sure that there were resources available for their rituals and worshipping (Phan Dai Doan & Nguyen Quang Ngoc 2002:38-39, Nguyen Tu Chi 1993:71, To Lan 1993:177-180). It had also been possible for heirless people to donate land to the local temple, or leave it in the hands of an 'adopted' family to cultivate. This was done to ensure that worshipping and death anniversaries were conducted even without male heirs, and that the expenses for these events were

covered by the land (Malarney 2002:44, To Lan 1993:178-9). As a direct result of the drastic changes in land control, and as the examples from Lang Xanh showed, none of these practices had continued. After the land reform and collectivisation, none of the farmland designed for sacred purposes had been left intact. All such land was confiscated and redistributed as regular fields. Consequently, the fields' symbolical and substantial value for the continuation of patrilineages' ancestral cults and communal worshipping vanished.

According to Tilley (2000:11, 14), the land with which people form the most durable relations, is the kind of land that enables people to feel an unbroken connection to those 'powers and figures' that initiated their relation with a particular location. These relations, in turn, are maintained through ritualised procedures. It can be argued that residential land in Lang Xanh held such qualities that had, in a way, endured through reformations and collectivisation. The peasants' relations to farmland, on the other hand, had developed in a quite different direction. One of the reasons for this was the Party's wish to create an agricultural sphere that was characterised by effectiveness and high yields, produced by specialised labour brigades. The propagated party ideology at one time stipulated that:

> When the masses still believe in the heavens, spirits, and fate, they will be powerless before natural changes and the difficulties that the old system has left behind. People will not be able to completely be their own masters, the masters of society, nor the masters of the world around them (Ninh Binh, Cultural Services 1968:6, cited in Malarney 2002:80).

Therefore, the regime attempted to redefine the meaning of land, particularly farmland. Farmland was a resource that should be worked by the peasants in a fashion similar to any other resource utilised by labourers in national production (Malarney 2002:49). The most important step in this direction was the abolishing of private ownership of land. For that reason, the state declared itself as the sole owner of all land[34] when collective farming was implemented in the late 1950s. The new land management excluded a continuous relation between the farmers and any particular fields, and the crops they produced were appropriated and distributed by the state. The large-scale and industrialised mode of production, where the peasants' labour efforts did not appear to them as having any direct or predictable correlation with the actual outcome of the farming collective, or the revenues they got for the work, resulted in unmotivated labourers. Chu Van Lam

34. The 1988 Land Law, for example, states that "Land belongs to the public under the sole management of the state. The state entrusts land to organizations and individuals for long-term use." (Liljeström 1998:9).

(1993:156) capture the atmosphere aptly when he writes that "labourers who once cared for the land as they would their own bodies began to neglect it as something foreign to them."

Undoubtedly, the collectivisation of the peasants' land and labour separated the farmers from particular fields to such an extent that it was impossible to invest them with spiritual power, or any kind of symbolic significance for the preservation of patrilineal families, and this was what the government had intended.

DEGENDERED FARMLAND

The Communist Party's idea that farmland should be incorporated into a more general sphere of national production implied that these places should be occupied by men and women alike. In order to achieve national production goals, it was regarded as necessary to include women as well as men in the labour force. At the same time it was assumed that women's equal participation in labour represented their way to emancipation, as they would be able to compete both socially and economically with men and, in this way, become their equals (see e.g. Mai Thi Tu & Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978). It can be argued that the intention of farm collectivisation was to turn the fields into public space, where women were supposed to transform themselves into equal workers, despite existing norms of patrilocality and women as family caregivers. It was assumed that women, in the shape of labourers, should be let in on an equal footing with men, on what was suddenly intended to be gender-neutral ground (c.f. Croll 1995:73, 99). But the fields had never been gender-neutral. On the contrary, the gendered division of e.g. labour and control of land had, since far back in time, been quite distinct (c.f. White 1982:45).

As an example, before the land reform, privately owned fields had been passed from father to son, where the eldest son commonly got an extra share of fields, called 'incense and fire fields' (*ruong huong hoa*), to compensate for the costs involved in his future worshipping obligations towards his parents (e.g. Pham Van Bich 1999:26, Luong 1992:74, Nguyen Tu Chi 1993:58, To Lan 1993:183, Jamieson 1993:24). According to custom, the eldest son also inherited the land that held the graves of the family ancestors. This piece of land was devoted to ancestor worship and was protected by customs so that it could be kept intact by the eldest son, who, therefore, was tied firmly to the land in this place (Wiegersma 1988:54, Luong 1992:74). In pre-revolutionary Vietnam, because of the male-biased practices of inheritance, women normally did not have access to farmland in their own right (White 1988:168). With the collectivisation in the late1950s, however, all traditional procedures for access to farmland were brought to an end.

The situation in contemporary Lang Xanh indicated that by allocating farmland in accordance with the stipulations of the Land Law (1993), the state had, in a very tangible fashion, taken on the role of provider and distributor of farmland; a procedure that formerly used to be handled by the male heads of the households. In this sense, men and women now became equals; gender did not matter when the state allocated fields to the households, and female and male farmers now acquired the same amount of farmland. And, as have been pointed out earlier in this chapter, this differed greatly from residential land, where the changes in practices of access had been relatively few. As for farmland, however, men were now put in the same receiving position as women traditionally had been.

PERSISTING TIES BETWEEN PATRILINEALLITY AND RESIDENTIAL LAND

As we have seen, the focus of the first land reform (1953-1956) was predominantly aimed at farmland, where the confiscations and redistributions were extensive. To my knowledge, the families in Lang Xanh were spared from having their houses confiscated during this reform. In other villages, however, some of the people classified as 'landlords' did not only lose their fields but also their houses, or parts of them. In the process, possessions such as ancestral altars and other family heirlooms were sometimes lost. This too was part of the intended assault on the power of the former patriarchal elite, which was manifest e.g. in their comparatively large and elaborate houses and altars. In the following 'Rectification of Errors' campaign, some of the wrongly classified families got their houses back (Malarney 2002:33, Moise 1983:213, 251). Later, when collective farming was implemented in the northern part of Vietnam (1958-1961), all land, including residential land, were formally incorporated into the collectives, and private land ownership was banned. This, of course, involved Lang Xanh as well. When this happened, the villagers by and large continued to live in the houses they had occupied before the collectivisation, so, in practice, the changes were relatively few (c.f. White 1988:170). In some cases, though, the collective board had allocated parts of people's gardens to other families who wished to build a house of their own. Some villagers remembered that the gardens of certain houses used to be much bigger because they once had included what was now somebody else's residential land. After the collectivisation ended, some of this land was restored to their former owners.

On the whole, it can be concluded that houses and residential land in Lang Xanh had by no means been exposed to fragmentation and redistribution to the same degree as had happened with farmland. Consequently, it had been possible for the families in the village to uphold not only inheritance practices, but also basic residential

principals; i.e. patrilocality and the preference for male heirs of houses and residential land. As an example, when a couple got married in Lang Xanh during the collective period, the woman just transferred to her husband's unit, if they were not already in the same one. In this manner, the wives continued to move to their husbands, and the sons adhered to their duty to stay and care for their aging parents and take on the responsibility of ancestor worshipping. With the house as a base, patrilineally oriented families could largely continue their residential, marital and some of their ritual habits.

Kerkvliet (2005) claims that the Vietnamese peasants showed their discontent with the agricultural collectives not so much by open resistance as by directing their efforts towards their social networks and the small land plots[35] outside of the collectives. Most likely, this priority added to the maintenance of the patrilineal household during the collective period. The fact that peasants largely continued to live in partilineally-oriented houses and households, and could keep small plots of land that they did not formally own, yet still controlled to a great extent, has most likely had a tremendous impact on the endurance of the rural household against state ideology. Even while the government's aversion against rituals and worshipping was at its peak, these practices could prevail in and around the houses.

Among the Górale peasants in Poland, Frances Pine (1996) has also observed that residential houses can provide outposts of persistence against socialist movements. When the state tried to absorb the households, in their capacity of economic as well as of ritual units, the Górale resolutely adhered to their domestic rituals and could, in this way, preserve the symbolic importance that the houses provided for the family clans (Pine 1996:456). In her study of the meaning of the house in the tensions that arose between the state and the Górale moral economy – that was based on ritual and kinship – she found that a main characteristic of the house was its ability to endure against ideological as well as more actual encroachment from a dominating state apparatus. Without being static units, the peasants' houses constituted main loci for passive resistance during troublesome times (Pine 1996:445).

In Lang Xanh, comparable house-based endurance could be noticed. Present day land legislation did not force, nor actually encourage, the villagers to change their inheritance practices as far as houses and residential land are concerned. The Land Law (1993) does not distinguish between men's and women's rights or responsibilities; it addresses the land-users as "family households and individuals" (Ha Thi Phuong

35. The small plots that the households could keep during collective farming were commonly referred to as 'five percent land' because it constituted about five percent of the arable land belonging to a farming collective. There were several reasons why this land existed, one of them being that the collectives were unable to provide everything that was needed to sustain the members. The party also assumed that it would keep the peasants in a more benevolent mood if they could, at least initially, continue to farm a small share of the land according to 'customs' (Kerkvliet 2005:76).

Tien 1997:57). This formulation implies gender equality as far as land access of any kind is concerned (c.f. Werner 2002:36), but does not explicitly call for any changes in access and inheritance practices concerning residential land. Contrary to the allocation of farmland, as far as access to residential land is concerned, factors like gender, kinship, and marriage practices are still decisive factors. Moreover, in contrast to farmland, which has been allocated for a period of twenty years, residential land is assigned to the users without a fixed time limit. This the villagers interpreted as a use right that, in practice, would last more or less eternally.

Gender and place – a discussion

GENDERED ACCESS TO RESIDENTIAL LAND AND HOUSES

In Lang Xanh, as we have seen, the connection between residential land, patrilineages, and patrilocality, was kept intact through persisting practices of inheritance and access, and this continued to put men and women in different positions in relation to both kinship and place. Hence, a place-based core, where the altar and the house on its plot of land formed a unity, was significant for the establishment and well-being of the family homes in Lang Xanh. A house required a household headed by a man, in combination with the land that contained it, to gather together the human world in the sense referred to by Heidegger (1971), i.e. to turn the unity of a house and a piece of land into a meaningful location by connecting the dwellers with each other as well as with the otherworldly.

It is evident that part of the male authority in a Lang Xanh household rested on this ability and on the idea that a man was the unquestionable proprietor who had provided his wife and children with a house and a piece of land. When men did not live on land that could be attached to their patrilineage, like self-obtained land, or land received from their parents, the equilibrium between male and female positions was destabilised, as in the case with Lai and Bao's daughters and their husbands. Men were not supposed to bring only their labour into a marriage; this position was preferably occupied by women. As the requirements for Tien's future wife suggested, labour was one of the most important assets that a women could contribute with to the household.

If we follow Ingold's (2000) line of thought, it can be argued that Tien came to be who he was through his interactions with his predecessors in this specific location. When he inherited the residential land, with the house belonging to it, and took up his living there, Tien positioned himself within a network of patrilineal relations that constituted both him and this place (Ingold 2000:133,149). The features of the

place contributed to make Tien the man he was, at the same time as they composed a habitat for Tien to form in his particular way. It also follows that the woman who becomes his wife will be positioned in relation to the piece of land and the house on the basis of very different premises. Tien's connection to the land and the house was customarily self-evident through his position in the patrilineage. His future wife, on the other hand, will live there because she will be incorporated into a patrilineage that has resided there for several generations. Her presence will be of a more temporary character, and will be endorsed by her relation to Tien – and the labour she provides. Even unmarried and, as yet, without children, Tien was nevertheless upholding his lineage and, unlike the single mother Ngoc, he embodied the ability to maintain the house and its connection to this place. If the house had a male head, then that house was connected with an eternal flow of related men (c.f. Schlecker 2005:517).

Women did not constitute permanent components in either the perpetuation, or the uniting, of worlds and beings. A daughter, who was supposed to leave her natal family to go and live with her husband, could not provide her parents, or her father's lineage, with the same level of comfort and security as a son could (c.f. Gammeltoft 1999:71). Where and how their sons lived was therefore of greater concern to the parents, since their old age and the future of the patrilineage depended on the sons. To provide a son with a house was a way to hold sway over his loyalties, and to create a certain kind of stability under inevitably changing circumstances (c.f. Carsten 2004:34-5). This meant that inherent in Lang Xanh women's positions as daughters, wives, and mothers, was the idea that they, as a rule, received their place of residence through a man. From this perspective, house and land was not only things to occupy, they were, as Carsten (2004:35, 37) argues, factors involved in the making and embodying of relational hierarchies. Male and female dwellers found their respective positions in relation to each other, and the location they inhabited, based on differing premises.

DIRECTING WOMEN'S PRACTICES TOWARDS THE PATRILINEAGE

Caring for the daily needs of family members has continued to be mainly a female concern. In Lang Xanh this entailed a concern for the sacred, for included in this duty was the everyday maintenance of the households' relations with deities and ancestors to ensure the comfort and safety of their family members. This was further enhanced by women's more peripheral positions in politics, which offered them relative independence to act within the spiritual sphere (Malarney 2002:102). Thus, mainly through female practices, contact with the spiritual world has remained important, even without official support and despite a rather widespread male reluctance to practice worshipping. Hence, women participated in the forming and preservation of the relations between the patrilineage and the otherworldly within the place of

the house – like Loan and the boy's mother did, when they tried to calm the crying boy by creating harmony between the ancestors of the male head of household and the place where they lived. Through practices like these, the male-oriented kinship system directed women's actions and duties in connection with worshipping towards the maintenance and preservation of the patrilineal family (c.f. Werner 2002:38, Li 1998:677), and made women's subjective actions take place within the context of the patrilineage. As mentioned before, every act of worshipping required, for instance, that a woman stated her husband or father's name before she could proceed to revere the ancestors.

The unmistakable demarcation between male and female dwellers in a place was illustrated by the 'outside' position of Sinh's natal lineage and her husband's 'inside' patrilineage. This made Sinh's position as a wife, mother, and dweller in this house apparent, not only in her relation with this world, but also in relations to the other world. The change of direction of her loyalties at marriage, from one patrilineage to another, was manifested every time she worshipped. In this way, the practice of ancestor worship continuously informed Sinh's relation to the house she lived in as well as to her husband and son's patrilineage. The ancestors, the altar, and the house with its courtyard, formed a patrilineal unity centred around her husband. Through her marriage, Sinh was now a part of this, but not her mother. Sinh and her husband were oriented toward this place from different directions. These differences were manifested in their relations to the entire span of ancestors, spirits, generations, and place, all drawn together in the house and the site that contained it.

As we have seen, women's opportunity to access residential land and houses in their own right was lesser than men's. Their inability to link the generations of the patrilineal family obstructed this. Instead, they contributed to the sustenance of male permanency through their practical involvement in the worshipping and, in this way, they balanced their transient positions with preserving abilities. Men were permanently placed in the patrilineage from the beginning, but for a woman to acquire and establish her place in her husband's family, she needed to perform a considerable amount of work.

Without adopting a gender perspective, Heidegger (1971:145) claims that dwelling consists of building and preserving. Young (2005), wanting to apply a feminist view on house and home, takes Heidegger's ideas on dwelling as one of her vantage points. She notes that he at an early stage in his reasoning deserts preserving, or cultivating, in favour of building, and how this gives men privilege over women as dwellers. As Young notes: "On the whole, women do not build." (Young 2005:126). She continues by arguing that in a male-biased gender system, men perform the building, while women become the nurturers of the male builders as well as of the

buildings they erect (Young 2005:130). From the Lang Xanh examples, we can also add women's everyday nurturing of patrilineal ancestors. Young (2005) suggests that to be a builder, or to be someone who occupies a building, is two different ways of dwelling. Since the act of building is valued higher than e.g. the preservation of houses, this contributes to a patriarchal system where women's opportunities to be active subjects fall below those of men's (Young 2005:126-127, 130).

GENDER AND ACCESS TO FARMLAND

In the case of farmland, as shown in chapter one, the land reforms were aimed at the core of the traditional family and kinship structure, in that it tried to reshape the material and symbolic base of this structure and reconstitute land into a fundament for non-kin based and gender-neutral socialism (e.g. Pham Van Bich 1999:110, Goodkind 1996:717, Kleinen 1999:150, Luong 2003:204, Malarney 2002:23-51). The success of the regime's efforts to secularise the citizens and induce them with a 'rational' and detached attitude towards land, had not been entirely effective when it came to residential land. Farmland, on the other hand, had, through radical reforms, become more detached from the patrilineal families and their apparent attachment to land control and manifestation of power and origin. Farmland was no longer regarded by the villagers in Lang Xanh as a spiritually powerful element – it was defined as comparatively public space, devoted to profane activities sanctioned by the authorities – and it did not inflict on peoples lives on a spiritual level.

Both Tilley (1994) and Abramson (2000) argue that land that has been propertied looses much of its meaning in an ontological sense, because it becomes separated from the history that has been accumulated over time, by being transferred from one holder to another as a commodity. In this way, the main purpose of the land shifts from significance and durability, to a useful means for production (Tilley 1994:21, Abramson 2000:8-18). In many ways this resembles what had happened with farmland in Lang Xanh. The greatest rupture between farmers and fields occurred when all farmland was incorporated into collective farms. The farmers had been allocated fields on a temporary basis, but their relation to this land was mediated through the state's ownership and final control. Therefore, quite contrary to residential land, which held a central position in tying men and women to particular places through marriage and kinship, formal distribution and control of farmland was now largely disconnected from kin structures and gender relations. Male and female peasants had access to arable land as a production means, and it was their status as farm labourers that legitimised their access, not their social relations (c.f. Perrotta 2000).

Hence, formal access to use rights of farmland was now gender-equal and so was the farmers' lack of ultimate control of the fields. From this perspective, men had been

downgraded and, for the first time, men and women experienced similar limitations in power. Women had, to some degree, advanced their positions in their capacity as holders of land use rights. However, since the state held the ultimate control over decisions and distribution of farmland, women had not gained in position as much as men had lost. Men were deprived of the right to own and control farmland, and so were women. In other words, women were not let into a male-dominated domain, but men were excluded from what used to be their privilege.

Because of the detachment of peasants from the fields, farmland had become separated and disengaged from private, male inheritance and control to such an extent that a gender-equal distribution was possible in the latest land allocation. You could say that the fields had, to a great extent, been 'degendered' in the process of forming a totally state controlled management of farmland. The farmland had been deprived of some of its practical use for performing characteristically male practices; however, this had not necessarily resulted in the ideal gender-neutral farmers that the regime once hoped for. This will be exemplified in subsequent chapters, where men and women, in the context of farm work, engaged with the fields in ways where notions of gender-specific traits continued to be practiced and negotiated.

CHAPTER 4
'Big work' and 'small work' – gender and labour division

As a newcomer to Lang Xanh, one of the first things I became aware of was how influential gender was on the division of many of the tasks in farming. This was especially true when it came to wet-rice cultivation. The farmers often referred to 'male' and 'female' duties in very commonsensical ways. A gendered labour division tended to appear as natural and inevitable. When male and female bodies practiced their certain skills in their particular locations this could, according to the villagers, be performed in few other ways under the prevailing circumstance (c.f. Moore 1994:72, 1996, see also e.g. Bourdieu 1977, 1990). Eventually it also became clear to me that the rice fields surrounding the village were far from gender-neutral places. The presence, or absence for that matter, of male or female farmers and the activities that they engaged in, held, depending on the gender of the actor, different meanings and implications for them as individuals and for their families and households. The ways in which men and women engaged in farm labour were highly significant parts of the practices that shaped individuals into decent and respectable female or male persons. As this chapter will explore, the actual chores that the farmers performed conveyed as much about how male and female characteristics ideally related to each other as simply give information about who did what task. The implications of a gendered division of labour expanded to encompass ideas about the appropriate – and some of the assumingly innate – characteristics of femininity and masculinity.

Doing fieldwork among farming women and men in Lang Xanh made the close connections unmistakably clear between ideologies of labour and gender discourses concerned with morality, self-fashioning and ideas of 'proper' femininity and masculinity. An investigation into the gendered division of farm work provided an insight into processes in which men and women incorporated current understandings of femininity and masculinity available at this specific time and place.

Vietnamese men and women have a long tradition of labouring the land. As pointed out in chapter one, labour is an activity that has rendered much attention from national doctrines as the duty *par excellence* whereby people – not least in the rural area – were meant to show good morals, loyalty and industriousness towards not only fellow family members and villagers, but also in relation to the state (c.f. Pettus 2003, Bélanger and Barbieri 2009:19, 33). This chapter will point at the significance of cultivating morality, especially for women, in the villagers' ideas about gender and the division of farm labour. Moral discourses concerning the performance of farm labour were used to prove, evaluate, and criticize one's own behaviour, as well as others (Moore 2007:37).

Farm work routines

In Lang Xanh, the largest share of farm labour was, as already referred to, performed by women. Men also farmed, but for many of the male inhabitants, the main focus was on other, more lucrative, types of work. They were, as mentioned before, engaged in building and construction projects, worked as teachers, cadres, and factory workers, or tried to find other salaried occupations, something that often took them out of the village for long periods of time. Women were at the core of farming and in practice, they not only performed but also organised most of the activities. Within the sphere of labour, women's farming was the most significant female activity and complemented, as well as compensated for men's engagements in other work. The skills and characteristics that were required to perform their farm work formed a central part of ideas about what it meant to be a woman in Lang Xanh. Even though the status of farming, from the perspective of the state, had considerably declined over the last decades, in the local community, women's competent farm work was a source of respectability and appreciation. The appearance of the female farming body might diverge from the ideal of smooth and pale feminine elegancy, or from the educated wage earner, but the ability of the Lang Xanh women to handle farm work was central for them – and the opportunities to present their competences were abundant.

In high seasons, like the transplanting of the winter rice crop in January, and in June, when it was time to transplant the summer crop, women worked from

early morning to late evening, only having a break for lunch in the middle of the day. "Women only take lunch naps during summer" one of the female farmers commented. She was referring to the hot weeks between late June and late August, or early September, when the summer rice crop stood to ripen in the fields. Then women could enjoy the luxury of some rest after lunch, when the heat suggested it was better to stay inside if it was not absolutely necessary to go out and work. During periods of transplanting or harvesting rice, women's workdays often started around 6 a.m. when groups of women gathered in the fields to start their work. The field holder was usually the first to arrive and the last to leave, eager to get the work done as swiftly as possible.

Despite the long and strenuous days, many women asserted that much fun was involved in working side by side with other women who were relatives, friends, and neighbours. The working groups usually consisted of two to twelve women, depending on the size of the field and how pressed for time the field holder was. If they were transplanting, they lined up and took a bundle of rice seedlings each, forming tiny bouquets from the seedlings with one hand and then bending to plant them in the muddy and water filled-field. In this manner, the seedlings were planted into neat rows, which gave a newly transplanted rice field a rather symmetrical, lined pattern. The most experienced women advanced quicker than the beginners, or the oldest women, but many worked more or less at the same pace. This allowed them to talk while they were working. Lan, my landlady, told me that when she first started to learn transplanting, she had planted five bundles the first day. An experienced woman could transplant up to one hundred bundles in a day. Harvesting was organised in a similar fashion. Women gathered at one end of the field and worked their way through it by cutting the rice stalks with sickles and tying them into sheaves with the help of rice stalks.

When the group of women took a rest from the backbreaking work of either transplanting rice seedlings, or cutting the ripe rice with sickles, they gathered and chatted, laughed, and joked together. These little breaks were sometimes taken in the shade of a large tree, or just sitting on the banks between the fields for a moment. Sometimes travelling ice cream vendors patrolled the area in the hottest working periods. They were commonly men who pushed bicycles fitted with boxes filled with little plastic bags of homemade ice cream that they offered to the labourers in the fields. Usually the field holder treated her female co-workers to this refreshment. When it was time for lunch, each woman normally went home to her own household to eat. If she was lucky, her husband, her mother-in-law, or a teenager free from school, might have prepared lunch. Otherwise, this duty also fell to the farming woman. After some more hours in the fields, the women returned to their homes in time for taking a bath and eating, probably also preparing dinner.

Even at these most busy times, there was laundry to do, children and elderly to care for and pigs and chicken to feed. All this was basically regarded as women's duties, even if other household members contributed to some extent in performing these chores as well.

When girls were between fourteen and sixteen years old, they started to learn how to transplant and harvest rice. Depending on their studies, if they continued to high school, which many did, their participation in farming was usually not very strict. For the first years, girls participated in transplanting mainly for fun. If it was possible, most parents prioritised their children's education and they also held the idea that children should be allowed to be children before they started to work. "Some have to start when they are nine years old, other women never need to learn how to transplant", as one woman described it. While I was in Lang Xanh, young boys and girls occasionally paid visits to the fields or played near to them, but they did not work. Most of the women who worked in the fields were between eighteen and sixty years old, with newly wedded young women and women who had not yet started to have grandchildren constituting the core group. The organisation and recruitment of fellow farm labourers will be dealt with further in the next chapter, but it can be said that younger daughters-in-law provided a good share of the farm labour at the same time as their mothers-in-law gradually withdrew from farming. "As soon as I married my husband, I knew I was going to be a farmer" one woman remarked. We had chatted about the hopes and dreams of young girls and she had harboured some ideas of becoming a preschool teacher; or at least, to do something different from the hard work of farming. But she had married relatively young, only nineteen years old, and her husband's family had fields to farm, so her destiny was sealed. Now she spent many of her days engaged in some kind of farm related chore.

When the farming season was in a lull, the fields still needed to be tended to. Women made sure that the water level in the rice fields was right. They applied fertilisers or manure by hand from trays woven from rattan, spread pesticides by carrying containers on their backs and spraying the fields and weeded when necessary. These tasks were not strictly performed by women, it certainly happened that a man was seen out in the fields doing one of these things, but mostly it was done by women. In low season, women went alone, or sometimes in couples, to pay their fields a visit and make sure that everything looked fine. This was a duty, but also a bit of leisure. Women could often be seen strolling to and from the fields, quite often accompanied by another woman. They went and 'visited their fields' (*di tham ruong*), and at the same time got an opportunity to leisurely move around in the area. Men also went to visit the fields, but they did not need to relate the purpose of their movements to labour and fields to the same extent as women did.

Twice a year, in preparation for transplanting, the rice seedlings were sown on smaller, dry field areas, normally some square metres in size. When the seedlings were ready to be tied into bundles for transplanting, they were about twenty centimetres high and with an almost radiant light green colour. This was not a strictly gendered task either, both men and women could be seen tending to the seedlings and quite often, men helped to transport the bundles to the prepared fields, either by shoulder poles, or carts pulled by themselves or with the help of a cow or a buffalo.

The preparation of the fields, especially the rice fields, was the work done by men most equivalent to the women's work of transplanting and harvesting rice. As soon as the rice was harvested, in May and August/September, the fields were immediately prepared for a new rice crop if it was May, and a crop of corn if it was autumn. It happened that fields were hoed by hand instead of ploughed by buffalo or cow, but this was either done on smaller fields or if the household had not been able to get hold of a ploughman and a draught-animal, due to lack of money or delayed recruitment. Most of the households did not have a cow or a buffalo to work with and they normally employed one of the around ten men and one woman, who had access to an animal and possessed the skill to plough and harrow. Hoeing could be done by women as well as men, but ploughing needed to be performed with the help of buffalos or cows. Ploughing and harrowing were valued skills and the men who engaged in this took pride in their work, as did the woman who performed the same tasks. Since many people needed their services at more or less the same time, these men and their animals could be seen out in the fields from early morning and into the evening in order to meet the demands of their services. They always worked alone. The age span of the ploughmen corresponded rather well with the transplanting women, even if men who ploughed other people's fields for payment tended to be at least twenty-five years old, and they could keep on until they felt that their bodies were too old to continue.

Sometimes at transplant period and usually at harvest time, men were engaged as carriers. Even if women too could do this, it was regarded as a male duty. At least one man, but often two, three or more, depending on the size of the fields, had to be recruited to carry, either bundles of seedling to the fields, but most commonly, harvested rice from the fields. While women cut the rice and made them into sheaves, men collected the sheaves and took them to the house of the field holder. Carrying manure to the fields, which was very heavy if this was done by shoulder pole, often fell to the men's lot. However, men were mainly busy with farming when ploughing, harrowing, and transportation of rice seedlings, sheaves and manure were required.

'Big' work and 'small' work – a dominant discourse

When I began to look at gender aspects of farm labour division in Lang Xanh, I had already heard that men do 'big' work (*viec lon*) and women do 'small' work (*viec nho*) countless times. As far as most people were concerned, this more or less fully explained how women and men divided their duties. Very soon, however, it became clear to me that transgressions of this basic labour division regularly occurred. In other words, women could often be seen performing some 'big' labour and it happened that men engaged themselves in 'small' things, even if this occurred much less frequently. Nonetheless, there was a compelling consensus considering this general definition and division of male and female farm labour.

The purport of 'big' work included a variety of activities. Practical chores like carrying heavy things, e.g. manure and rice sheaves, as well as other duties where actual muscle power was needed – pulling a cart full of manure for instance – was obviously 'big' work. But managing and decision-making responsibilities were also part of men's 'big' work. This could include expanding or reducing the number of fields, trying out a new type of rice seed, or planning what other crops than rice to grow. In terms of actual farm duties, ploughing and harrowing were definitely the two 'biggest' activities. At least ideally, the male farmers were the ones who worked with ploughs and harrows, together with their cows or buffalos. Men were also, as we have seen, supposed to carry the harvested rice, cut and tied into bundles by women, back from the field. All the transportation involving carts pulled by cows and buffalos also fell into the masculine 'big' sphere. As mentioned already, women spend more time than men labouring the fields; but from a male perspective, this did not necessarily imply that women were capable farmers in their own right. Several male farmers argued that they lay the ground, so to say, for women to work on – something they literally did when ploughing and harrowing the rice fields before women transplanted the rice.

Ideas about gender-based farm labour division were strongly intertwined with other relations associated with power or control between adult men and women. For instance, both men and women commonly argued that men were better suited for 'deep thinking' and managing larger projects, like building houses. This meant that they should have the final say in important decisions concerning, for example, economic investments beyond everyday purchases, repairing the house, digging a fishpond, or organising weddings. Men were generally perceived to possess analytical abilities greater than women's abilities. In the patrilineal family, men were the centre-pillars (*cot tru*) of the household. It was not uncommon for men, as we will see in the case with Phong below, to argue that they know how to perform all the daily labour

requirements of their households, but as men it was not their duty to actually perform many of them. Instead, they should ideally have a general overview of the situation and carry the overall responsibility for making good decisions for the household's well-being. Such well-made choices were expected to be the base women needed for performing their everyday duties. "Men are supposed to be leaders, like countries have leaders", my landlord told me one evening in a rather grand manner. "Women are women and men are men, and a man should be the director. He should know how to do everything in theory, but he does not do it all in practice. His duty is to organise, lead and manage the work of the household", he continued to explain to me.

Women's 'small' farm work included chores that were perceived as light, easy, and delicate, i.e. work that did not require great muscle strength but, on the other hand, required the assumed feminine capabilities of endurance and patience. Women's ability to work swiftly with their hands, working in a bending position for long periods of time, and being careful and painstaking in their work were acclaimed attributes of femininity. Transplanting rice seedlings into the water-filled fields was by far the farming activity most associated with women. This duty required what was understood as particular female abilities of dexterity, swiftness and bodily suppleness. The 'smallness' of female work also implied that women's chores required less mental efforts and were of minor importance. An example is when Nam, the leader of the Women's Union in the commune argued that women tended to concern themselves with everyday matters of making daily purchases, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and caring for children, in addition to their farming chores. Nam implied that they did not think so much, and often felt insecure in matters dealing with other things than housework. Men, on the other hand, were more preoccupied by things like how to improve the land use in order to increase the income from farming and they acted more like managers (c.f. Gammeltoft 1999, Wolf 1985:84-85). In many of the households in Lang Xanh, this claim held some veracity, but to my understanding, there were several exceptions to be found. However, this was a salient discourse concerning gender capacities and relations and, as in Nam's assertion, it gained support from more official directions as well. Han, the commune's cadastral officer also considered that men managed the farmland, while women spent more time actually working on the fields.

Young recently married women, who were still novices as farming wives in their new households, were gradually incorporated into the feminine sphere of 'small' work. Phong, a very young man who had recently married an even younger woman and now shared a household with his elderly and unhealthy father and young wife, revealed to me his strategy for transforming his still relatively inexperienced wife into a capable woman. By learning from her mother, his wife already knew how to do many things in theory; he considered that it now was her time to practice actually

doing them. For example, sowing the seedlings for transplantation, or raising pigs, were things she did not really master very well yet. As far as he was concerned, he might know how to do these things better than her at the moment, but he let her do them for the purpose of gaining practical knowledge. Phong came from a farming family with relatively limited means. When he was a boy, he had helped out where ever he was needed so, like many young men in Lang Xanh, his knowledge about 'small' work was not so small. However, as a married man, he did not actually intend to perform many of the activities that were meant to be carried out by his wife. Instead, he executed his power as the 'supervisor' of his young wife and let her be moulded by her assigned tasks into a competent female farmer.

Thus, despite the fact that the men in Lang Xanh normally spent considerably lesser time working in the fields, their tasks were in many situations attributed with more prominence compared with women's chores. Principal representations of gender relations, in which men normally held a dominating position, formed a grid through which the work of men and women was perceived. Henrietta Moore (1996:177-178) argues that the often broad and general, yet compelling, dominant representations of certain gender characteristics – she uses the statement "women are like children", or to take an example from Lang Xanh "women do 'small' work" – become powerful because they are habitually used in everyday life and thus set standards for what is appropriate. Dominant gender perceptions provide people with standings and orientations towards themselves and other persons in daily situations and even when contested, these representations of men and women form a basis from which conduct and responsiveness emanate. Similar to Lang Xanh, Moore noticed from her own fieldwork among the Marakwet in Kenya, that the actual time and effort that women invested in performing all of their farm labour duties was not reflected in the dominating discourses on the commitment of men and women in agriculture (Moore 1996:177).

In line with this basic idea about gendered labour division in Lang Xanh, some of the farmers emphasised the economic advantages attached to the principal order of work. It would be a waste of male as well as female capacities if men were too occupied by 'small' work and women tried to carry out 'big' things; the entire household would suffer from such an ineffective distribution of responsibilities. It was for the benefit of everyone if each household member concentrated on what they did best, and this was achieved when men and women acted in accordance with their 'natural' capacities. A transgression of the gendered labour division could be acceptable if the circumstances of a household had been temporarily altered, due to unforeseen matters like sickness or, as will be discussed later on, the shorter or longer absence of household members of working age. In practice, farmers' individual qualities also influenced the division of tasks. However, a well-functioning farming household consisted ideally of husband and wife at the centre, with adolescent children (if they

did not study) and members of the older generation as extra labour resources. The family was expected to organise farm work according to the basic fashion of male and female duties. When a household suffered a lack of female farm labourers this seemed, in many ways, to be more problematic than when there was a shortage of male labourers. This matter, we will have reason to come back to later in this chapter.

As the following sections will show, the existing general discourse that defined men as authoritative and their farm labour as 'big' and thus positioned women in potentially subordinate positions as the performers of 'small' work, also provided for women's active and individual self-fashioning as decent and adequate women (c.f. Mahmood 2005). Such acts of self-shaping could take place within the morally secure sphere of cultivating the fields and within the limits of established perceptions of gender capacities.

Femininity at work

The intense workloads of contemporary Lang Xanh women were integrated into their feminine identity in numerous ways. One example was The International Women's Day (8th of March), which was paid a great deal of attention in Lang Xanh, as it is all over Vietnam. The cadres of the commune gathered at the People's Committee and several speeches were delivered to honour Vietnamese women. A popular topic, which was introduced at the one-year anniversary of being appointed a 'cultural village', concerned the hardworking and courageous efforts performed by women during the wars. Traditional female virtues such as dignity, tolerance and sweetness were praised and women were reminded never to fail to care for their children and encourage their husbands in their work. The local women were appreciated for their ability to raise children who were well cared for, build up 'cultural'[36] households and engage in agricultural labour. The increase of divorces (there were two ongoing cases in the village) was mentioned as criticism and as a warning signal of the threatening decline in morality, which less diligent women might cause. This combination of praise and admonition was significant for the occasions when the officially proclaimed epitome of Vietnamese women was articulated in Lang Xanh. Women could always perfect themselves, even if they already worked hard (c.f. Drummond 2004).

It was not only on the 8th of March that women's glorified war efforts set the context for discourses concerning the hard work that women were capable of – and still today expected to perform. When Vietnam was at war against France (ca 1945-1954), and later on the USA (ca 1960-1975), many men had been absent from Lang Xanh as soldiers spread all over the country and into the neighbouring countries of Laos and

36. Households without conflicts and where the members did not engage in any 'social evils' such as gambling, drinking, drug-use or promiscuous behaviour, but instead showed diligence by hard work and good studying were referred to as 'cultural' households (see also Drummond 2004).

Cambodia. This forced women to carry the main responsibility for the sustenance of life in the village, in the families and as farmers. "During the war [against USA], when the village consisted mainly of women, children and elderly or sick men, women had to do everything", one of the men who had then been a soldier said. In a discussion about male and female farmers, Lap, a former party cadre and one of the oldest men in the village, considered that the local women had been exceptionally self-sacrificing during the war against France. According to him, they had mended and washed the soldiers' uniforms and they had sung for the wounded soldiers to send them to sleep. "People used to say that women had a plough in one hand and a rifle in the other hand. As part of the resistance against the French, women were given the so-called *three responsibilities*", Lap continued his story. These included the responsibility to care for state affairs, for the household and for fighting. "Women's responsibilities were resumed in the war with USA, when women were left in the village for ten, maybe even twenty years without any news of their husbands", he added. Our conversation had started with the farm work of men and women, Lap, however, quite soon shifted into a more ideological track and gave an example from the war, in order to convey the attitude that he felt characterised the assiduous work of Vietnamese women (c.f. Mai Thi Tu & Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978, Le Thi 2001, La Nham Thin 2002). Good women, as Lap wanted to convey to me, remained faithful and hardworking also during tough times and this was a kind of woman who was worthy of respect. Stories like this regularly came up, in official speeches at meetings and celebrations for example, and worked to direct women's attention towards an ideologically informed idea of their labour. In addition, like in the situation with Lap, it was a way to present an ideal version of Vietnamese women to 'outsiders' (c.f. Nguyen-vo Thu-huong 2005).

When men's admiration for women's hard work was voiced it was usually phrased in an air of splendour. It quite often happened, as in the example above, that Lang Xanh men started to praise Vietnamese women as a response to my inquiries about women's farm work, but they rarely celebrated particular women. Instead, they commonly talked about women in general and their ability to sacrifice themselves for the country and their families, without any concern for their own well-being. One man put it like this: "Women get up early in the morning and go to bed late, always working for the sake of their husbands and children and always giving them the best food, while settling with inferior food for themselves".

FEMALE CAPABILITY – HOW TO ACCOMPLISH EVERY TASK

"It is hard to be a Vietnamese woman" was a comment that reached my ears numerous times almost every day. Remarks of this kind were usually made by women in reference to how arduous their farming duties were, and how much more work

that awaited them when they returned home from the fields. Regardless of the norms of labour division in which men were supposed to do the heavy and 'big' work, many women found themselves doing much of the work belonging to men. Some women ploughed their fields and, as mentioned already, one woman even offered her ploughing services to other households. Women also engaged in a great amount of hoeing, mostly in the manioc fields, but sometimes in rice fields. They even carried heavy loads such as manure, when no man was available or ready to do it. It was a common belief among women that husbands were not always so dedicated to their farm duties as their wives could have wished for (c.f. Endres 1999:158, Gammeltoft 1999:163, Wolf 1985:107). An example of this arose during harvesting. Men often carried the rice from the fields, but the women I met in the fields recurrently told me that the men, if they had been present at all, were already back at their homes to have a cup of tea, a smoke, or to watch TV. It also happened quite frequently that the male members of the family, as representatives of the households, attended a wedding, a funeral, or some other event where drinking was involved. This could make the men indisposed for the rest of the day and then women had to put in some extra hours of labour to compensate for the absent men. Women's responsibility for the 'small' everyday duties included to be able to accomplish virtually all household and farm work if this was needed for one reason or the other (c.f. e.g. Gammeltoft 1999, Pham Van Bich 1999).

Only the more bold and outspoken women (qualities that were often enhanced with advancing age) explicitly said that they thought men – sometimes as a general category and sometimes as their kin or neighbours – were more inclined to avoid hard farm work than women were. Or else they said that men tended to show a careless and negligent attitude to the many tasks that formed part of their daily lives as farmers. Statements like these were commonly made in informal situations where only women who knew each other and felt comfortable with each other were present (c.f. Gammeltoft 1999:197). However, the great majority of women did not hesitate to claim that they, in their own right, were very able farmers. A common phrase that women often used was that they "*biet lam het*". This means to "know how to work until it is finished". To my understanding, this statement implied that women not only knew how to fully complete an agricultural task, but they were also capable of doing every duty involved in farming. In other words, most women were confident that they could manage with cultivating the fields on their own, without much help from men. Hong, the leader of the village Women's Union predicted that soon women might actually do half of all the ploughing that was required in the village – the most 'male' farming chore of them all. When men were not fit or available, women had to cope on their own, she concluded. Hong herself had two buffalos and she was the woman in Lang Xanh who was engaged by other villagers by other villagers to do ploughing and harrowing. She managed the farming of her

household, while her husband worked as a construction worker in another province and only came back on a handful of annual occasions.

Lang Xanh women quite frequently suggested that men, in contrast to women, did not possess the capacity to make everyday life run smoothly. Men did not cope well with the continuous making and remaking of the home place. This was a female competence that men depended on women to accomplish and it formed a necessary complement to men's roles as overall 'supervisors'. When it came to farm work, I frequently met women who either giggled or grunted with some contempt at certain men's self-proclaimed roles as farming supervisors. A couple of the women simply stated that "men do not know how to grow rice" (c.f. Gammeltoft 1999:185-186).

In the very beginning of my stay in Lang Xanh, two female friends of my landlady came to visit our house one evening after dinner, to chat and watch some TV. It was in the middle of the winter transplanting and they had spent the day in the cold water of the rice fields. They started out by telling me some quite ghastly stories about leeches creeping up women's legs and into their bodies while they work in the watery fields. The two women observed me closely to see my reaction to these stories[37] and I certainly found them unpleasant. But I was also curious to know why there were no men present in the fields at transplanting. The women replied, quickly and in unison, that men do not know how to transplant. They giggled as they added that men only know how to do "night-time transplanting". Their own bluntness then made them slightly embarrassed as they realised that they had just made a joke of obviously sexual character even though we did not know each other very well yet. This was not, however, the last time I heard jokes about the sexual implications of a gendered division of farm work.

Transplanting was the domain of women and their area of expertise. Hence, alongside of the undervaluation and subordination of women's 'small' work and the hardships of their workloads, came a sense of pride and confidence where many women gained and showed strength in their ability to cultivate the land. The female chores might be less prestigious but they were not insignificant and they were certainly not small in number. Women often expressed that they persisted in their work despite demanding circumstances. This was perceived to be a female competence that could be facilitated by – but was not entirely dependent on – the presence of men.

CULTIVATING FEMALE MORALITY

In Lang Xanh, the farmers argued that to get a good crop of rice it was important to spend adequate time on the fields. The previous chapter showed that prayers and

37. Similar stories came to my knowledge throughout the fieldwork and I suspect that they might have strains of urban legends in them.

offerings to otherworldly beings were not perceived to improve the chances of a good harvest. On the other hand, critical factors for farming included sufficient work in combination with knowledge and fine weather. The more time that was spent in the fields and the more attention they were given, the better the outcome would be. If a farmer seemed to have too much idle time, other villagers commonly saw this as a sign of carelessness and bad moral behaviour. Besides, the fields were there in the public eye for everyone to judge. Everybody knew which field belonged to which household, and one quick glance was enough for the villagers to decide if sufficient labour had been employed.

On one occasion, Lan – who was my landlady and well known for her diligent farm work – informed me that she did not intend to participate in the singing performance that was to be held in the village. "You do not earn any money from singing", she stated rhetorically. To emphasise to her point, Lan conveyed to me her ideas about the moral state of the woman living across the street. She and her husband was going through a divorce and as far as Lan were concerned, that woman had spent too much time on leisure and too little on work, while relying on her husband's apparently faltering ability to earn money. Now they were separating and had to sell their house. Lan, for her part, preferred to concentrate on the well-being of her family and what little time and energy she had left was not to be spent on entertainment outside the home. She told me that people had tried to persuade her several times to participate in singing events in the village or in the commune, but she normally refused, often by referring to all the farm work she had to do. It was important for Lan to devote her time to her family and labour. Respectability and high moral standing was for her incompatible with being seen out amusing herself in public. As far as Lan was concerned, a fun-loving woman with some weed in her rice fields possesses very little virtue.

Considering people's comments on other people's behaviour, it was clear that laziness and indolence were regarded with great disapproval in general; this was especially true in the case of women. As we have seen, women sometimes spoke of men as lazy (*luoi*) by nature. This was perceived as annoying by women, but also something they just had to accept as a rather common male characteristic (c.f. Endres 1999:158, Gammeltoft 1999:167-168). Female laziness, on the other hand, was not accepted in any way and women were quick to criticize other women for being lax and neglectful (c.f. Gammeltoft 1999:179, Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004:65). Lan, for instance, pointed to an empty rice field and remarked that no corn was planted in between rice crops on that field. The woman who tended this land plot was obviously lazy and this would prevent her from gaining any extra income. Other women's insufficiencies were frequently used to shed some light on one's own good traits. Women's close monitoring of each other's behaviour was further illustrated by Lan and her teenage

daughter one hot summer afternoon during a break from work after lunch. All of us were resting and the two of them had been lying in bed watching TV. Suddenly we heard the dogs bark as a sign that somebody was coming. In a blink, Lan and her daughter jumped out of bed and run into the kitchen, pretending to be occupied with some household chores. They had suspected that the visitors might be a couple of older women dropping in on Lan's mother-in-law, who shared the same household as Lan and her husband. This would not have been a good occasion to lie idle, because older women's judgments of daughters-in-law could be severe, even when they had reached their forties.

A handful of Lang Xanh women of working age were perceived, by themselves and by others, as weak and therefore did not do much farming. One of them ran a small shop selling daily necessities, like washing detergent, matches and sweets, together with her husband. She spent much of her time in the shop while her husband did more farm labour than most of the other male villagers. Most of these weak women often stayed at home, in or around the house, and was seldom seen out in the village. As Gammeltoft (2001:277) has showed in her work on Vietnamese women and their experiences of illness and stress, physical weakness could be a legitimate way to convey other kinds of worries and distress, which if expressed in other ways could be interpreted as self-absorption or lack of proper virtue. However, in the case of the female farmers in Lang Xanh, this approach was not always successful – especially because, as pointed out, women scrutinised each other so closely for moral flaws. The weakness of some of these women could not be derived from any easily recognized diseases or from other obvious signs of poor health, nor did they seem to be due to other kinds of suffering. Because of their lack of apparent reasons of incapacity, the sympathy for these women was not always great and it was quite common to hear remarks about them being lazy rather than ill. It was suspected that they let their husbands do much of the farm work that women were supposed to perform. Women who carried out their work despite difficult circumstances, such as physical pain and bodily weaknesses, were on the contrary held in highest esteem (c.f. Gammeltoft 1999). Women who could be suspected of trying to avoid their share of labour took great moral risks.

If we again recall the *four virtues*[38] derived from Confucianism, labour (*cong*) is the first virtue. Ngo Thi Ngan Binh (2004), in her article *The Confucian Four Feminine Virtues*, notes that according to tradition, the work of Vietnamese women should not only be accomplished, it should also be performed "in the proper manner and at the proper time" (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004:64). From her research on daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law in contemporary Ho Chi Minh City she found this to still hold true, especially among the women in the latter category. In order for a daughter-in-law to be regarded as mastering the fourth virtue, which is good behaviour/character

38. The virtues are: 1) appropriate labour 2) appropriate appearance 3) appropriate speech 4) appropriate behaviour.

(*hanh*), it was of great importance that she executed the first virtue, labour, with utmost care and diligence. *Hanh* could only be achieved by properly – in attitude as well as in actual skill – executing the daily chores. A young woman's devotion to her family-in-law was showed by the manner in which she performed her everyday work. By engaging in self-cultivation, she could, over time, build up her character and gain respect as a morally strong woman (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004:64-65). The connection between women's work and their relation to, and position in, the patrilineal family was reflected in Lang Xanh women's farm work, as the following section will explore.

WOMEN'S FARM LABOUR AND THE PATRILINEAL FAMILY

Cong was a man in his fifties with two young daughters and a wife who was a farmer. He had been injured in the war against USA and due to his pains, he could frequently be found at home during daytime. He often invited me for tea, offering interesting conversation. On one of these occasions, he told me that it was of utmost importance for the state of the family, whether or not a woman knew how to organise her work well. According to him, the wife was responsible for carrying out most of the work of the household, which did not preclude that the husband sometimes assisted her with things like cooking and laundry. He told me that preferably a wife should know how to share her work with her husband, and most importantly, how to encourage him to work. A man, he continued his reasoning, might do his fair share of the work, but without encouragement he might do it in anger and without much care. In other words, women's skill and attitude towards work was essential for the atmosphere of a family. As a father of two daughters that would eventually become someone's wives, he intended to teach them how to be gentle, hardworking and encouraging towards their husbands. According to Cong, women's hard work was perceived as crucial for keeping the husbands in a benign mood and for supporting their will to work. This, in turn, meant that the family would hold together. If a woman failed to handle the work situation well, quarrels could easily occur that might eventually lead to divorce. In such situations, it was often the wife that suffered the most, because she was often blamed for her inability to create a good atmosphere for the husband and children to dwell in; she might be accused of failing to compensate for her husband's hotter temper.

A common idea among Lang Xanh inhabitants was that if a wife behaved properly and possessed proper feminine virtues, family discords did not need to arise or grow large. This idea was also reflected in the village meetings when the topic of divorce came up, as mentioned earlier. Women should be able to keep up their daily work and endure to preserve family harmony (c.f. Endres 1999, Gammeltoft 1999, 2001, Pham Van Bich 1999, Rydström 2003, Schuler et al. 2006). In a regional perspective,

Wolf (1985:234-235) noted that in rural China, when she inquired about the kind of characteristics that signified a 'good' husband and a 'good' wife, the ability of wives to be hard working topped the list. The same answer was given both by men and women. For husbands, an even temper was the most desirable trait as far as women were concerned. This was even said to compensate somewhat for lack of helpfulness.

Consequently, what ultimately made the work of Lang Xanh women rewarding in terms of virtue and morals was to perform their work for the benefit of their families and not as an individual pursuit. When a married woman engaged herself in farm work and took pride in keeping the fields in good condition, she also cultivated her care and respect for her children, her husband, and her parents-in-law. Lan, as we saw, was careful to point out that she avoided the singing events in order to use the time to work for her family's welfare. The self-sacrificing actions of labour and endurance that well performed farm work required were tangible proof of female loyalty. Women commonly remarked that they endured the efforts of farm work first and foremost in order to care for their children – who (especially sons) could offer security and care in old age, and endowed married women with a more stable place in their husbands' patrilineage. Consequently, a dominating moral belief in Lang Xanh was the idea that women who did not, through their persistent work, put their families as first priority could never have a harmonious family situation.

A woman who found herself in a precarious position due to her ongoing divorce was Hanh, who was in her mid thirties and, at that time, lived with her two small sons in her parents' house. She had entertained the idea of taking up some more lucrative job than farming. Applying to be a maid in a city, or even abroad, or to do business buying and selling things in markets bigger than the local ones had passed through her mind. However, the temporary market activities she had engaged in as married had been one of the things that had triggered the divorce. Her husband thought that she cared more about going off to markets and doing business than she cared about her family. According to him, Hanh had changed her personality when she engaged more extensively in market activities outside the village. She became more demanding and started to criticise him in ways she never did before. Now Hanh was afraid that if she left the village to do other work than farming, her husband would take the two sons and let them be raised by his mother. She, however, was careful to point out that all she wanted was to work hard to make sure that her sons were cared for, that was the only thing that mattered for her. In Hanh's present position, she felt that her safest choice was to stay and work on her fields. Any other actions would have negative influences on her moral standing.

Factors like a limited access to farmland and hopes for an improved economy had made some women in Lang Xanh to pursue other lines of work than farming. A

handful of married women in the thirties had, like Hanh, travelled to more distant markets where they had done business for a few weeks at a time, when farming did not demand their presence. They claimed that Lang Xanh women in general were too timid and lacked the courage to go away to buy and sell things at markets, even though it could be quite lucrative. Other women, however, considered that to be able to do this, you needed a defective consciousness, manipulated scales, and an unsophisticated personality. A handful of younger, or at least still unmarried, women had left the village to be market traders or street vendors in Hanoi, or to work at restaurants cooking for construction or factory workers, and one had left for China to work with something that was rather unclear. Not even her parents were sure what she did, but it might have something to do with being an assistant and interpreter for a Chinese woman. Most of these women were surrounded with rumours and gossip about them being prostitutes and those who had left recently were constantly reminded by their parents not to get into trouble. Some of the parents ensured that they trusted their daughters, but they also considered that young women were always more vulnerable than men. If it was at all possible, parents tried to send their adolescent children to live with, or near, a relative to make sure that they were safe. As far as women's labour was concerned, the only place outside of the home that did not put women's morality and virtue at risk was the fields. Virtually all activities outside of the physical, as well as moral, sphere of farm labour within the village held great potentials for transgressions of moral demarcations.

Women's virtue lay primarily in the performance of their continuous everyday work. Not performing adequately could, as shown, be a reason for ruptures within a family. The belonging of men to the family unit was less fragile, not least due to their firm anchorage in the patrilineal kinship system. Hence, the temporality of the belonging of women to their husbands' families connected female morality closely to their daily work inside of the patrilineal family. Lang Xanh women were required to work constantly on their virtues as respectable members of the patrilineal family – they did not have a self-evident position as family perpetuators to fall back on (c.f. Rydström 2003:96). As noted above, a daughter-in-law's way into her husband's family and her possibility to gain their respect, was achieved through her carefully performed labour (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004). In addition, practices such as patrilocality contributed to the necessity of women to work out a place for themselves as 'outsiders' brought into their husbands' patrilineages by marriage; this is a matter that was discussed at greater length in chapter three. Men, on the other hand, were not constantly obliged to display their belonging and devotion; to some extent this was taken for granted, since men in themselves constituted the patrilineal family.

From one perspective, it is possible to understand women's unlamented and selfless endurance, which contributed to the preservation of the patrilineal family, as female

passivity and subordination. As the positions in the family of the women of Lang Xanh often were of inferior character, their relatively lesser status provided them with little room to question or to resist their duties. This was particularly the case for younger females who were not yet mothers-in-law. San, a young woman, pregnant with her first child whose husband was engaged in some temporary work in Hanoi, concluded, in company with her parents-in-law, that it was the fate of women, and especially of daughters-in-law to work hard. Before her marriage, when still living with her parents, she had not had to work this much. Now she found herself to be the main labourer of the household. While her mother-in-law assisted her in some of her chores, she was expected to carry out most of the farm work. If she did not do this, she ran the risk of upsetting her husband and her parents-in-law. Furthermore, as a few women asserted, she might even be beaten. Dignity and virtue were best preserved by silent compliance. Talking back to a husband or a parent-in-law could only lead to trouble in the family and was regarded as lack of respect and filial duty – two definite signs of immorality (c.f. e.g. Gammeltoft 1999, Rydström 2003). Therefore, the frequent absence of open resistance to their situation was simultaneously women's way to safeguard their position in the family. This kind of 'active' compliance included elements of hard work, because, as Gammeltoft notes, "endurance does not come naturally, but requires a lot of effort in everyday life" (Gammeltoft 1999:213).

Each woman had to accomplish the farm labour herself; this signified morality and decency for her and her family. Since it was so closely bound up with respectability, nobody else could really compensate for a woman's absence or evaded work efforts. In the case of women, neglecting one's work duties could always be called into question. If, or when, men performed 'women's labour, the meaning and implication of the work was altered.

Masculinity and farm work

When women's work expanded into the male area of 'big' things, like when women ploughed the fields or managed most of the farming by themselves, which happened frequently, this did not necessarily pose a threat to the basic order of labour division or to the dominant gender discourse surrounding the sphere of farm work. Instead, as we have seen, such acts could contribute to a woman's respectability and good morals and men could retain their positions as 'directors'. Men's relation to farm labour was, on the other hand, more frail. Even if the majority of the men in Lang Xanh were to some degree engaged in farming as well, their relation to farm work was more constricted as far as transgressions of a gendered division of labour was concerned. Men's farm duties were fewer and they risked, rather than improved, their status and

reputation when they deviated from what was perceived as ideal behaviour. Men who ventured into the realm of 'female' farm duties had little or nothing to gain from this in terms of prestige or morals. As we will see, male positions in Lang Xanh were manifested as much by the farm work that they *refrained* from doing as by the labour that they actually performed.

At an early stage of my stay in Lang Xanh it became apparent to me that most men felt awkward doing womanly things like harvesting and, to an even greater extent, transplanting. Many of the villagers knew of men who used to transplant, but it was always talked about in past tense, declared as a consequence of exceptional circumstances (e.g. poverty and lack of female labourers), or done by someone who lived in another village. When men talked about male transplanters, they always gave other men as examples and very rarely admitted to this kind of activity themselves. Nevertheless, a handful of local men were pointed out as more or less experienced in transplanting. Most commonly, people mentioned a pair of twin-brothers, now in their late thirties, who came from a poor family where the mother had been a widow for a long time. Their household had lacked labourers when they were young and the two brothers had been obliged to work hard to assist their mother in any task that was needed. When I asked them about their experiences of transplanting they did not look too keen on the topic and simply declared that they had not had much of a choice. Someone had to do it, and lacking women or the money to hire female labourers, the task of transplanting had fallen to their lot. However, this had been part of their childhood, now they were both married and their wives did all the transplanting that was needed.

The only two men I saw transplanting rice throughout my stay in Lang Xanh were the adolescent sons of a divorced and unwell woman. She also had an older but still unmarried daughter – one of the street vending women with a dubious reputation – who did her best to return for a few days at the peak of rice harvest or transplanting. But for a few busy days of summer transplanting, her two sons also helped. Their situation resembled the twin brothers when they were young. Like the rest of the very few men who admitted to transplanting, these two sets of brothers stressed that if they, for some reason, had to engage in this activity, they would never do it on somebody else's fields. They would only do this kind of labour as an exception to the rule, when their families really needed it. In contrast, women quite often transplanted other people's rice fields, as part of their labour exchange; or in some cases, for payment, as will be dealt with in the next chapter. It was obvious that transplanting, with its close association with femininity, did not attribute male actors with any desired qualities. It was commonly a sign of poverty and low status if men had to transplant rice.

RISKING AND PROTECTING MASCULINITY

While they were busy with transplanting the summer rice crop, Huong and Thuy, two female farmers in their mid forties, recounted their opinion of men's attitude to farm work, which was, as far as they were concerned, often inadequate. Thuy told me that her husband went out drinking rather than work on the fields. Even if they only had vegetables to eat, he did not care. In the adjoining field, Huong was transplanting with some other women while one of her teenage sons carried the bundled rice. The son laughingly suggested that if his father – who was the cadastral officer in the commune – would go to work on one of their fields, the sky would open up and it would immediately start to rain. This was his way of telling me what an earth-shaking deed this would be. On the one hand, this kind of behaviour was generally understood to be part of men's 'natural' inclination to be 'lazy' (*luoi*) and somewhat defiant – male traits that women had to endure (c.f. Gammeltoft 1999, Rydström 2003). However, laziness as a male characteristic existed predominantly as a concept in a female context. From a male viewpoint, on the other hand, men had to be careful in their farm work in order to avoid crossing the fine line between being hardworking and helpful and appearing to be submissive or effeminate. In this sense, refraining from women's 'small' work was often a matter of cultivating appropriate masculinity. Nonetheless, a number of women spoke warmly about their supportive husbands, and to a certain extent, assisting one's wife in her farm work could add appreciation to an already respected man. Practiced in excess though, it could harm a man's image, according to how ideas about masculinity were construed by the villagers. Nevertheless, some men did engage in undoubtedly female duties like harvesting or, as the above examples showed, even rice transplanting. In these cases the men were running the risk of being apprehended as unmanly and '*so vo*' (afraid [of the] wife).

'*So vo*' was a frequently occurring concept and a popular topic for jokes in Lang Xanh. Everybody knew somebody who they thought was 'afraid of his wife', who acted obediently and submissively towards her. For instance, one elderly woman complained that her son, who lived in a neighbouring village, never came to help her with any farming. This was because he was '*so vo*', and his wife kept him from coming to assist her. Men who seemed to accept being bossed around by their wives could easily fall victims to gossip and condescending remarks. Cong, the man with the two young daughters told me that he was hot tempered and a man of few words, while his wife was more talkative and sociable; but he did not batter his wife, even if their characters were quite different. The reason why he did not beat her was not because he was afraid of her, but because he respected her, and this, he carefully pointed out, was an important difference. However, Cong explained, there existed men who were frightened of their wives and accepted their dominant characters and they were teased for their weakness. But respecting his wife was a good quality and not a cause

of mockery. There was no equivalent concept for women who were afraid of their husbands, Cong made clear in reply to my question. According to him, it was not unusual, or a deviation from convention, with marriages where wives were scared of their husbands and silently abided their will.

Even though the concept of '*so vo*' was often used as a joke, it certainly had serious connotations. A man who was not the 'manager' of the family but instead followed his wife's orders was perceived to lack respectability. From this perspective, it was important for men to avoid performing duties that their wives seemingly had told them to do, or to carry out chores that, due to their female character, should preferably have been performed by their wives, or other female family members. An example of this could be seen at harvest time. There were men of all ages – but most commonly younger ones – who preferred to wait in the shade of some trees for the rice bundles to pile up before they started to take them back from the fields, arguing that they, unlike women, did not know how to cut the rice well. By claiming their ignorance of a feminine farming duty, these men engaged in masculine self-fashioning. The young men expected to be heads of households, if they were not already so; the status of themselves and their families would benefit from them not having to learn female farm chores.

A number of Lang Xanh men in their late forties or older suffered from some kind of war injuries, even if their wounds were not always immediately visible, as was the case with Cong. Therefore, they were unable to do farm work, and many other kinds of work, without constraint. These men were referred to as being weak (*yeu*) and many of them spent much of their time at home where they did such work as caring for the animals or cooking – tasks that women normally did while their husbands worked outside the home. These men had to struggle not only with their war injuries, but also with the predicament of not being able to contribute much labour to their households. The wives of such ex-soldiers therefore had to perform many heavy duties. Either the women themselves had to do such work as hoeing or carrying manure, or another man had to be employed to do it. Yet, in most cases, their past as soldiers fighting for the country compensated for the present insufficiency of these men.

Even so, these former soldiers had to guard their masculinity when performing what little farm work they could do. At times, they joined their wives on the fields, although not for the most feminine duties. Most commonly, they helped on fields that held other crops than rice, because female farming skills, as pointed to already, were predominantly associated with rice cultivation (e.g. Le Thi 2001:2-3, Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2002:18). When I met these men working alongside their wives, they were often quick to underline that they did it mainly 'for fun' (*cho vui*), as a voluntary pastime that they could have chosen to spend in another way – watching TV or

chatting with a neighbour for example – but had now decided to pass like this. Another way, used by men as well as women, to account for why men sometimes could be found labouring together with their wives on the fields was that they had taken some time off from their own work to help (*giup*) the women with their duties (c.f. Pham Van Bich 1999:148). This allowed men to distance themselves from the farm work they were doing. At the same time, they could acknowledge the fact that they were engaged in 'small' work that should have been performed by women. By maintaining the voluntary and temporal nature of their engagement in female farm labour, men could sustain the distance in prestige between 'big' and 'small' work.

If men refrained from doing their 'big' farming chores, it was important that they did it for accepted reasons. The ideal man, as pointed out before, should be the pillar (*cot tru*) of his family – strong and able to provide for their needs, as well as being a self-confident 'director' (c.f. Tran Ngoc Angie 2004:214). Therefore, the renouncement of 'big' farm work was best tolerated when it was replaced by another 'manly' activity, like building, carpeting, factory work, or holding an official position. Men who deviated from this but lacked an accepted reason were also referred to as weak, but their weakness was seen as a flaw in their character rather than a physical state induced by external circumstances. For instance, when the father of the local barber – a man in his thirties who was also a musician at funerals – told me, the first time we met, that he had a son, he presented him as being a weak (*yeu*) man. The father had been a farmer all his life, but his son had never done any farm work, not even helped out or played to be a farmer as a boy, he told me. He had been weak from the beginning, not cut out for 'big' work. Cutting hair and playing a traditional musical instrument did not so easily fit into his father's ideas about masculinity.

Even if women in Lang Xanh sometimes expressed a desire to receive more help from their husbands in coping with the arduous farm work, this wish was attached with ambiguity. When men ventured outside the realm of appropriate male farm labour, the respectability and morality of both men and women were at risk. This was demonstrated by the reasoning of Lan and Minh, the married couple that I lived with in Lang Xanh. One day, a man told me: "Your landlord is good at transplanting, but he would never tell you about this". The idea that Minh should be skilled in transplanting rice somewhat surprised me, because he seemed quite sensitive about male and female work. A sign of this was that he had stopped helping his wife with the laundry when I moved in because he was embarrassed to be seen doing a female duty. When I asked him about transplanting, my landlord explained that he had not really transplanted by placing rice seedlings into the muddy grounds of the fields, like women commonly did. He had used the method of broadcasting the rice seeds straight into the fields, like a sower. Later on, I would learn to better understand why this was an important difference. However, he did confirm that he had done

quite a bit of farming when the children were small. Nowadays his wife did all of it. Together with Lan, he explained that because he was a full time schoolteacher and their children were almost all grown-up, it would seem strange if he had to work as a farmer as well. Most certainly, his wife assured me, his colleagues at school would tease him if he laboured the fields. They might get the impression that she in fact gave the orders around the house and not he. Moreover, his colleagues might think that Lan was not capable of organising and coping with her farm work. In their case, Minh's engagement in farm labour could hurt both his and her reputation.

It was Giang and Quy, two women in their forties, who eventually pointed me towards another dimension of the embarrassment that was attached to the idea of men doing 'women's' work. Giang admitted that she was not very skilled in transplanting because her household had the benefit of quite a lot of labourers when she was a girl. Therefore, she used to concentrate on her studies rather than doing farm work. Eventually she married a farmer and she had to work on the fields even though she lacked the proper skills. However, she would feel very sorry for her husband if he had to transplant. She said it would be embarrassing (*nguong*) for both of them. At that point of our conversation, her neighbour Quy, who was one of the most efficient transplanters in the village – many times, I had admired her swift hands when she handled the seedlings – came by and joined us for a while on her way to the fields. She claimed that men might know how to transplant, but the embarrassment of pointing their bottoms towards the sky made them avoid this task to the utmost possible extent. Men did things that they could do in an upright position, like harrowing, ploughing and carrying things, she explained. As soon as she said this, I realised that I had not seen many men working in a bending position in the fields. A couple of days later Quy shared a proverb with me in the middle of transplanting a field. A man says to his wife: "poor you, you always have to stick your bottom up towards the sky" and the woman replies: "you should not say so, because I alone have to bend down, but it feeds your whole family". At this point it was clear to me that the embarrassment did not only concern men's risk to be conceived of as weak and 'afraid of their wives', it was also a matter of bodily awkwardness and shame, when men bent forward to do a feminine task like transplanting rice.

Harvesting was another task that required working in a bending position and very few men did this. Tuan, married to one of the women who did comparatively little farming and instead spent most of the time working in their little grocery shop in the village, got some first hand experience of the 'risks' involved if men harvested rice. One morning in the very early harvesting season, he was 'caught' cutting rice together with two women. These women worked to pay off some debts they owed in the shop and he alone had come with them to harvest. Around the field were two men grazing their buffalos and they took the opportunity to chat with the harvesters while the animals

were feeding on the freshly cut rice stalks. Squatting on the banks of the field, the two men started to tease Tuan, saying that judging from the work he did, he must be half man and half woman, because no real man would bend down to cut the rice and bundle it up (c.f. Gammeltoft 1999:178). All three of them laughed and since Tuan was not really arguing against their statement about his mixed-up sex, they concluded that their assumptions must be correct. "Probably", one of them continued, "he also likes to lie underneath"; i.e. he most likely took the position of a woman during sex. This was another body position that was not intended for men, but was set aside for supposedly passive and receiving women (c.f. Popenoe 2004:161).

MEN LEFT IN CHARGE OF WOMEN'S FARM WORK

If a Lang Xanh farming woman left the village for a longer period of time, the extent of her husband's predicament when it came to 'female' farm labour became even clearer. The same year as I arrived in the village, a handful of women started to contemplate the possibility of going to Taiwan to work as maids. In Hanoi, several agencies had recently opened that arranged for Vietnamese women to go abroad to work as housekeepers. According to rumours, there was good money to be earned and the required labour was supposed to be less back-breaking than farming. Eventually a small group from the commune left, among them were two women from Lang Xanh. Both of them were married; one had a small son and the other had two teenage girls. When the two of them went to Taiwan, this meant that their husbands were left to manage the households and the fields without their wives for a long period of time. There was nothing unusual about absent husbands, as pointed out several times already. Normally, the remaining wives did not downscale the farming of the households, but continued cultivating the fields as usual. A couple of the women in Lang Xanh followed the event with the absent wives with interest and they calmly informed me that these two men would now have to hire women to do all the farming duties which their wives normally did, like transplanting and harvesting. As far as husbandry was concerned, they continued their reflections, few men with absent wives normally kept anything more than a few chickens and maybe one pig to cover for the most pressing needs. It turned out that these women's prediction was very accurate.

When the woman with the teenage daughters first introduced the idea of going to Taiwan to work as a maid, her husband did not seem too excited, but when his wife persisted, he changed his approach to the issue. In between farming, he used to work temporarily as a construction worker; this he claimed gave quite a good income. Now he began to argue that since his wife did not really earn much income from her farming anyway, she might as well leave and make some money for a change – he would manage just fine while she was away. Proudly he announced to me that he could do all the farm work his wife used to do, and he could do it much quicker

and better. When she finally left, he lent most of their fields to his younger brother's family. The few rice fields he kept were transplanted by his two teenage daughters, with the help of some female relatives and friends. After the rice was harvested, when virtually all of the farmers planted corn on the fields as an intercrop, he decided not to cultivate any corn that year. However, with some help from his daughters, he did plant manioc on the hill fields. This was quite often done by men and women together, even if women on average spent more time on manioc planting than men did. In preparation for the next rice crop, he also sowed the rice seedlings that were to be transplanted on his fields. This task was not specifically 'female' either, even if more women than men did it.

The other man – the one with the small son – did not do any farming what so ever when his wife left. He also let out or lent most of the fields to related families in the vicinity and he had female relatives to do all the transplanting and harvesting on the few fields he kept. His old mother took care of his son while he was away doing business at different markets in the area; and for the next rice crop, he did not grow any rice at all.

Naturalised gender division of farm work

The powerful and seemingly universal gender order of 'big' and 'small' work was incorporated into the everyday practices of women and men. This order derived much of its persuasive character from its ubiquitous presences in a myriad of situations in people's lives, and especially in the context of farm work. A gender-based labour division was perceived to appear by its own power, without any detectable source, and was shared – even if not agreed upon – by everyone (Bourdieu 1990:69-70, Moore 1996:177-179). The different skills that male and female farmers possessed seemed, according to the predominant view, to be immanent in the bodies of the performers.

In Lang Xanh, men as well as women explained to me that to be a farmer who worked the land – more or less without any mechanical equipment, as they did – was the most natural way of living a life. They did not oppose, or go against the innate capabilities of men and women; instead, they ordered their lives in accordance with nature. If we remember Viet, the male farmer whom I quoted in the beginning of the introduction, he put it like this: "the land tells us what to do and all we have to do is follow. We feed the land and the land feeds us". When the land got to dictate the conditions for farm labour – as many villagers perceived was the case with the manual, low-tech, farming they engaged in – men and women were encouraged to

continue to perform the chores that corresponded to their gendered innate capacities. A couple of men with whom I discussed this matter were convinced that if they had machines at their disposal to do many of the tasks, which they now did manually, things might very well look different. As one of them shrewdly pointed out "anyone can press a button", implying that the less labour the farmers did by hand, the greater were the chances of reducing the differences between the work of men and women. Presumably, machines would even out the gendered differences by performing the jobs that normally set the sexes apart due to their inherent differences in character. Male and female farmers shared the notions that the outcome of rice cultivation by means of manual labour reflected the gendered capacities of the workers. Machines, on the other hand, were regarded as working independently from the operator. It did not matter if the fingers that triggered the functions of the machine belonged to a male or a female hand.

Hence, it was widely held by Lang Xanh farmers that – in combination with the 'unaltered' ways of manually cultivating the land – the innate capacities of male and female bodies decided what kind of farm duties men and women preferably should perform. Women, for example, often argued that men's bones are harder and their bodies are stiffer. In addition, men are clumsy with their hands and lack the patience needed for more delicate work, like transplanting the rice seedlings. This literally made men quite unsuitable for some of the tasks involved in e.g. rice cultivation. Men more or less agreed with this perception of the male body. They confirmed that transplanting made their backs hurt after only a short time out in the fields and those men who did not have much experience from this particular chore assumed that they would quickly suffer pain and stiffness if they would ever give it a try. Due to the lack of swiftness in their hands, men transplanted slowly and distributed the rice seedlings in an uneven fashion on the fields. Women's bodies, on the contrary, were naturally well suited for these types of farm skills. Dam and Kha, two elderly women with a lifetime of farming experience, argued that in many cases the fairly well-known male proneness to laziness was a reason for men's reluctance to do women's work. However, when it came to rice transplanting, male indolence was ruled out as an explanation. The two women were convinced that men refrained from this task due to bodily reasons. It was men's hard hands and tall backs that prevented them from handling and planting the frail rice seedlings in a skilful way.

In line with the 'natural' and innate view of gendered division of agricultural labour, this order was often explained by the farmers as being simply 'given' (*danh cho*) to them, or that it was decided by 'god' (*Troi*)[39] (c.f. Bourdieu 1990:71). In other words, the principal division of labour between men and women appeared to be, as the farmers' ideas about manual farm work showed, natural and self-evident,

39. *Troi* literally means Heaven but is also often referring to a celestial sovereign divinity, (c.f. Nguyen Van Huyen, 1995:245).

without any detectable reasons or origins. The division emanated from the male and female bodies, and the interactions with the land. It would be to go against sense and nature to purposely alter this order. The naturalised labour division was sometimes illustrated by referring to the old and popular proverb, also cited in the introduction, which stated that "the husband ploughs, the wife transplants, and the buffalo harrows". Farmers explained that as long as they keep working by hand, the trio of man, woman, and buffalo would be at the core of their work – each of them performing the skills they best mastered. This saying was presented by the farmers in Lang Xanh as a symbolical and almost primordial structure of local gender relations. On several occasions, this division of labour was even voiced in terms of gender equality (c.f. Le Thi Nham Tuyet 2002:35). In these cases, the farmers argued that when men, women, and nature cooperated and shared their work based on a division of labour where land and people were used in an optimal way, then equality – or rather equilibrium – must reign. According to the farmers in Lang Xanh, the meaning of gender equality – which had been introduced by the Communist Party as a desirable goal – could not be to create disorder and ineffectiveness in farm labour by changing the positions of men and women. I think the farmers' thoughts on the 'natural' order of labour division is an example of when local understanding merges with a state proclaimed ideal of non-hierarchical sameness and a traditionally informed idea of a complementary – but not exchangeable – gender order, derived from Confucianism.

In Confucian cosmology, gender traits and relations are perceived as an integral part of a universal order. Male and female are linked to the complementary opposition of *yin* and *yang* (*am/duong* in Vietnamese), which ultimately relates men to women in the same way as the Heaven relates to the Earth. Harmony is reached when each and everyone occupy their proper positions, and base their acts on these structures (Gammeltoft 1999:173-174, Rydström 2004:75-77). In contrast with Communist ideology, Confucian ontology is not based on equality but on an ordered hierarchy where each person respects her or his position in the social structure. As pointed to in the introduction, a common perception among many Vietnamese is that the human body is essentially male or female, with adherent gender-specific traits and functions. This view includes an idea of a relational position of men and women that is contextually decided and complementary but, at least ideally, not interchangeable (Rydström 2003:40, 92). This is evident in how female is associated with *am* (the Chinese *yin*), earth, passivity, cold, subordination, and the negative; while male is connected with *duong* (the Chinese *yang*), heaven, movement, hot, superiority, and the positive (Rydström 2004:75-76). At the same time as this incorporates men and women into a mutual and dynamic universal order, the gendered bodies of male and female persons set women and men in different positions towards each other and the world.

The Confucian conception of the relation between men and women is accompanied by definitions of how other relations should be, like between older and younger persons; superior and subordinate; citizen and the state. Together, these relational representations become an ontological principle that – in its generality – is an indisputable system of order and meaning (c.f. Bourdieu 1977:93-94, Moore 1996:178-181). As many of the villagers considered, gendered capacities are thus an integral part of how the world is constituted and labour division in accordance with this becomes a 'natural' extension of such a worldview. Taken together, the farmers' perceptions of the inherent capacities and inseparable interaction of bodies and land that was 'given' to them, maybe by the 'heaven', or by 'god' (*Troi*), formed a primordial ontological order.

PERSISTING 'NATURAL' LABOUR DIVISION

Gradually, I realised that the division of farm work in Lang Xanh had been imbued by the idea of female 'small' work and male 'big' work since before the revolution. The state's shortcomings in enhancing gender equality in farm labour were evident in the experiences that farmers in Lang Xanh had from the time of collective farming (ca 1959-1989). According to some women who I discussed this with, the collective's working brigades included both men and women, but the activities were largely divided into male and female chores. There was a tendency to give women all kinds of duties, but virtually no men did any 'female' chores. This resembled the situation in Chinese agricultural collectives, where women's labour tended to expand into more traditional male areas, while men's labour assignments stayed relatively true to what used to be typically male tasks (e.g. Croll 1995, Jacka 1997). These trends have been noted in socialist countries on a general level; commonly the quest for gender equality has been eclipsed by an idealisation of women as mothers and caregivers (c.f. chapter one). In most socialist states, the demands and expectations of even further labour efforts were added to women's already comprehensive domestic duties, and were not complemented by propagating for men's expansion into 'female' domains of work (Molyneux 1981:178, 197-198, c.f. Mai Thi Tu & Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978).

Thus, during the height of collective labour, women's work was, at least partly, redirected from the 'traditional' family and towards the state, but their actual labour was still traditional female tasks (c.f. Nguyen-vo Thu-huong 2006:272-273). The largely unaltered household chores placed the women of the farming cooperative firmly in their conventional positions in the homes and families. This functioned as a counterbalance to some of the more 'male' duties women might have had to perform in the public sphere of the cooperative. As far as men were concerned, the farming cooperatives never posed a real challenge to established ideals of masculinity.

Even if men had been deprived of their land-owning rights (see chapter three) and much of the power to organise their families' labour, the duties they performed as cooperative labourers still guaranteed them a certain maintenance of established masculinity because they continued to perform predominantly 'big' tasks (c.f. e.g. Jacka 1997). By and large, the farming collectives had divided the chores of farming between women and men in the same way as 'heaven', or 'god', had 'given' them.

Farming skills and the making of gender

An important part of the 'naturalisation' of a gendered labour division in farming was the passing of skills from one generation to another. For instance, young females were incorporated into rice transplanting by joining older female relatives in the fields. None of the women in Lang Xanh ever considered teaching their sons to transplant, this was strictly saved for the daughters. The skill of ploughing followed a similar pattern among men. Male as well as female farmers presented these kinds of skills as something that was not taught in the more strict sense of the word. Young people do not 'study' (*hoc*) farming chores, as one father of two young sons told me, they just learn through being on the fields, by playing and experimenting at a young age and then, little by little, they develop a sense for the task at hand. By gradually acquiring particular farming skills, the young and inexperienced bodies of girls and boys incorporate the history and tradition as they experience it being embodied by the more experienced farmers. In this way, gendered farm duties became intergenerational because they formed conditions passed on from the older actors to the younger ones (c.f. Bourdieu 2000:154, Ahmed 2006:41).

Taking the weaving of string bags among Telefol women in New Guinea as an example, Ingold (2000:357) presents the idea that skill is reproduced from generation to generation by giving novice bag weavers the same task to practice over and over again. This results in a process of enskilment. He contrasts this perception of social learning with the idea of skill as something that can be conveyed and incorporated *before* it is put into actual practice. This is supposed to be learned by mimicking the exact movements of the experienced weaver, something that is impossible for a beginner. Ingold's way of reasoning about skill resembles how e.g. Jackson (1989) regards bodily movements and practices in relation to ideas and culture. Jackson argues that bodily performances are not the result of preconceived ideas, but *are* – due to their practical nature – reality in a direct way. "Persons actively body forth the world; their bodies are not passively shaped by or made to fit the world's purposes." (Jackson 1989:136).

If we take skill to be a way of modifying and tuning the body by repeatedly practicing certain actions in specific places, then a gendered division of labour skills would imply that male and female bodies are tuned in diverse ways according to the skills they learn and incorporate as young actors. The world they 'body forth' – the opportunities for movements and actions that open up in certain places – would be characterised by the gender of the body which orients itself towards the world (c.f. Young 2005). Without making a point of it, Ingold notices that Telefol girls start to develop their skills as basket weavers at the same time as their bodies start to form into adult women. The skill, he argues, is therefore grown into the body rather than attached to it. The swiftness and flow of weaving become an intrinsic part of being a Telefol woman, especially since virtually all women acquire this skill – just like rice transplanting for Lang Xanh women. Telefol men do not weave baskets. Their hands maintain the clumsiness of novice makers – much like the men in Lang Xanh when they try to transplant (Ingold 2000:360). What Ingold exemplifies is not only how skill is acquired but also – and this is a crucial aspects that he leaves out – how girls are made into proper young women by embodying certain knowledge. To embody a gendered skill is, thus, to acquire a body that is modified in a specific way because of its repeated engagement (in the world) in a mode specific to one's gender. In this way, skilled actors also become gendered actors. Hence, particular characteristics of maleness and femaleness were tuned into the bodies of the farmers in Lang Xanh through their labour. Gradually, young men and women had their particular skills incorporated into their *modus operandi*. By way of practices performed in the rice fields, their bodies had become the kind of masculine and feminine bodies that were either stiff and hard with slower and more fumbling fingers, or weaker and suppler, with swift and dexterous hands. In his elaborations on the nature of skill, Ingold holds that acquiring a skill involves incorporating perceptions and actions to the extent that they virtually become innate to the actor (Ingold 2000:358, 360). Thus, acquiring gender-particular skills is a way to become a person who orients oneself in one's surroundings in accordance to one's gender (c.f. Young 2005: Ahmed 2006).

When the women of Lang Xanh performed their 'feminine' farm duties – when they spent time bent forward transplanting a rice field for example – they became inclined to the world as females. Lang Xanh women's femininity, manifested by traits like selflessness, endurance, dexterity, and sacrifice for their children and families, could not be separated from the fields and their farm work. Rather, these traits were cultivated every time a woman worked a field. At these times, such feminine characteristics were not abstract ideas about ideal women, but were the actual worldly circumstances and lived reality of a Lang Xanh woman. Alongside with women's actual presence on the fields, the work, skills and body postures they performed during farm work informed them about their 'fate', their restrictions and their possibilities as women. Returning again to Ingold's ideas on skill, he holds forth that

by repeated bodily practices in particular environments, the actor develops a 'feel' for the task at hand (Ingold 2000:352-353). However, when Lang Xanh women learned and performed the skill of transplanting rice, I believe that it is possible to expand the acquired 'feel' for the task to include a developing of a 'feel' for which kinds of femininity that could be enacted and cultivated in this particular place. Because farming skills were, as we have seen, to a considerable extent gendered, the labour of men and women moulded them into differently constituted bodies. This, in turn, meant that male and female farmers 'bodied forth' the world, not in separate, but in mutually complementary ways. From this perspective, women's 'feminine' and 'small' farming duties were a direct realisation of the status, responsibilities and possibilities that women held in their families, in the fields and in society. When women engaged in their agricultural tasks they simultaneously sensed how they, according to their gendered position, could cultivate themselves and what was required of them in order to become respectable female persons.

In the case of men, only a limited number of farm chores could be practiced without making themselves vulnerable to accusations of unmanly conducts. They got the 'feel' for their positions as leaders of family and society and as permanent manifestations of the patrilineage by standing up straight and being strong and self-determinate, i.e. by restricting their farm labour to include primarily 'big' things. It can then be argued that "what is done with the body is the ground of what is thought and said." (Jackson 1989:131-132). Thus, moral concepts and social values – like femininity and masculinity – are conveyed and realised through properly performed bodily practices, which are enacted in the appropriate places. In this way, the morality of men and women is bound up with their situated bodily deeds. From this perspective, the farm labour of Lang Xanh women and their ability to endure hard work was a female virtue that they could practice, not only by necessity or by submitting themselves to existing gender discourses, but in order to strengthen their character and establish and ascertain respectable morals. The daily maintenance of the fields had been incorporated into female morality and this, in turn, made frequent bodily presence on the fields an integral part of femininity in Lang Xanh.

This chapter has shown ways in which farm labour interrelated with how women and men acquired gender-specific traits and characteristics. As mentioned already, the work of Vietnamese women has been the subject of attention on the national as well as on the family and household level. Women's substantial work efforts during times of revolution and warfare have been strongly encouraged and idealised. It forms an integral part of a nationally cherished femininity. The existing discourses on women as persistent and able workers made farm labour a realm where Lang Xanh women could pursue their self-fashioning. When farming women enhanced their qualities as skilled farmers by contrasting their traits to men's, or other women's, incapability

or laxness, they operated within a sphere in which 'female' practices and capabilities were recognised and even expected. Moreover, when women – in the capacities of daughters-in-law, wives, and mothers – worked in the fields, they performed skills that nourished their husbands' patrilineal family and its sustenance. In this way, women's efforts to present themselves as respectable and decent did not really pose a threat to the ideas of male superiority; instead women made active use of the means they had at their disposal within the field of farm work. Consequently, the kind of female activity that I have considered here was not the kind that formed actual resistance against prevailing norms[40]. Instead, it was the kind that made women realise themselves as actors, even if it was within an area, which in many ways was dominated by men (c.f. Mahmood 2001, 2005).

40. See Mahmood (2005) for a discussion on female agency which does not have to take shape as resistance, especially as it is perceived by Western feminist movements, against male domination, but can be women's active pursuits of morality by making use of available concepts within a certain context.

CHAPTER 5
Cultivating community – gender and labour organisation

"…work cannot be measured separately from relationships", Marilyn Strathern (1988:160) has pointed out in her work on Melanesian society. Following along this line, this chapter will show how relations based on farm labour and exchange of farm work also involved the forming, maintaining, and expression of kinship and community ties. Because Lang Xanh was still basically a village where most of the households were involved in farming, whom to work with and with what task, and how to come to handle the compensation for performed labour, was vital for the nature of intra-village relationships. In this manner, community oriented values like solidarity, unity, and equality might be enacted in the shape of farm work (c.f. Douglas 2003). Farm labour also held the potential to imply differences in equality and independence between the households, and an increasing dissociation from village community through an increased use of paid labour. It all depended on how the different farming duties were organised and compensated.

In line with the fact that most farmers mutually depended on each other for a certain level of cooperation, women's engagement in relationships of farm labour exchange with other farming women could be seen as upholding relatively equal, undifferentiated, and emotional social relations, which could even out and somewhat counterbalance the less communal and reciprocal aspects of farming and other types

of livelihood (c.f. e.g. Malarney 2002:129-130, Nguyen-vo Thu-huong 2005, Werner 2002). By being present in the village and linking together, first and foremost, other women from different generations and families into corporeal labour groups, women's communal farm labour gave the sense of village community a concrete shape (c.f. Douglas 2003).

As will be highlighted in this chapter, the predicament of either weakening or preserving a sense of a place-oriented village community was to some extent tackled by the complementary roles that women and men played in labour organisation (c.f. e.g. Moore 1988, Strathern 1988, Carsten 1989). This dilemma had to be addressed by the farmers in Lang Xanh every time they worked their fields. The way in which male and female farmers organised their labour was a statement of their attitude to their work, as well as to their neighbours, friends, and relatives. Farmers had to balance their actions and decisions carefully (c.f. Scott 1976:42). This chapter will show that these balancing acts were different and involved diverging moral impacts on male and female farmers.

A first illustration of how entangled farm labour could be with other social relations is provided by the following episode. In mid-May it was time to plough the fields in preparation for the second rice crop of the year, and Hanh, the 36 years old woman whom we met briefly in the previous chapter, was contemplating how to cope with this. As previously mentioned, she was in the middle of the torments of a divorce and this had implications for her managing and organisation of farm work. Normally, her husband would have been the obvious candidate for ploughing the fields, especially since he was more or less a fulltime farmer and the owner of a buffalo as a draught-animal. But because of the separation she did not intend to cooperate with her soon-to-be former husband. They had divided their fields between them and were now organising their farm labour separately. Hanh had already tried to hire several ploughmen, but so far nobody had agreed to undertake the job. No one wanted to become involved in the ongoing dispute between her and her husband, not even for money.

Unfortunately for Hanh she did not have any male relatives from her natal family who could plough her fields. Unfortunately, she could not ask Hong, the leader of the Women's Union in the village, who was the only woman who ploughed other people's rice fields for payment, because Hong's husband's father was the brother of her husband's grandfather. Even if Hong was only distantly related to her husband, it was not suitable to ask her – neither to hire nor for exchange of labour – to help with the ploughing.

Ploughing was a specialised 'male' skill that many villagers paid for, but in this case, when relations were tense, the social aspects overshadowed the possibilities of a more

business-like agreement. The divorce proceedings meant that even a hired ploughman risked having his moral standards called into question. He could be accused of ignoring moral aspects in favour of monetary benefits, i.e. a greedy man who 'died for money'. He might also be suspected of having an affair with Hanh and therefore being willing to compromise with his moral consciousness. It was unthinkable for Hanh to ask a man to exchange labour with her, for example, by offering to transplant rice for him in return. This would be regarded as a too intimate and lasting arrangement between a not yet divorced woman and an unrelated ploughman. Eventually, Hanh's field was ploughed by a man who neither she nor her husband was related to, and the husband claimed to be paying for the service.

Despite the intentions of the state, farming in Lang Xanh was not a fully commercialised activity, performed according to the mechanisms of market economy. It was rather part of an all-encompassing way of life where money, self-interest, communality, and morals worked together to govern daily life and social practices. The organisation of farm labour were in many ways revealing of a household's priorities, needs, and values, and placed the farmers and their families in various relationships of commonality and hierarchy upon which their social security, repute, and sustenance relied (c.f. Scott 1976, Humphrey 2002:167-170).

Working together

In many respects, matters related to the cultivation of the land united virtually everyone in Lang Xanh. People shared ideas and concerns about farming when they met in their homes, in the village, and out in the fields. Especially rice cultivation demanded a certain level of cooperation. The field holders had to be in agreement about the methods for and timing of certain stages in growing rice. For instance, some types of rice seeds did not grow properly when planted too close to other types, and if transplantation was not properly coordinated, the crops could suffer from attacks from insects and rats. If, for example, one farmer transplanted a field much earlier than her field neighbours, her crop run a greater risk of being damaged by vermin. Likewise, at harvest time, a farmer who was behind schedule risked loosing much of the remaining rice to the inevitable rats.

Anh, one of the war invalids who engaged in some agricultural tasks to the best of his ability, asserted that if you do not cooperate and communicate with the persons who farm the fields adjacent to yours, you cannot count on them showing much consideration for your fields. When people do not cooperate, farming becomes difficult and ineffective. Irrigating the rice fields – something that was normally done by digging a hole in the surrounding bank on the side facing the water flow, and then patching it up when the water level was right – was an activity that needed to be

made in cooperation with neighbouring field holders. When a rice field was bounded by other farmers' fields, which was almost always the case, it was necessary to lead water through somebody else's rice field in order to irrigate that particular field. If this was done without consideration for the neighbours, Anh explained, it could happen that newly applied fertiliser was washed away and ended up in someone else's field. Because the fields were so closely connected, all major activities, from irrigation to transplanting and harvesting needed to be performed in coordination with the surrounding field holders.

Besides the more general concern and communication, there were certain periods during the farming year when the farmers needed to form working relations with people outside of their own households, in order to cope with peak seasons. This was particularly common during rice harvest and transplantation, and in connection with ploughing and harrowing to prepare the fields for the next crop. During these periods many farmers needed the same type of labour at more or less the same time. Each household tried to recruit labourers into working teams in order to accomplish these major tasks as quick and timely as possible. For the greater part of the year, however, farming did not take up an unreasonable amount of time, and consequently it was mainly during the busiest periods that the households required extra workers to a greater extent. Most of the farmers distributed the labour duties first and foremost among the members of their households. With three or four able labourers available, a household only needed extra workers at the abovementioned peak periods of the farming year.

FARM LABOUR RECRUITMENT

My first inquiries about how the villagers organised their farm labour, and whom they usually worked with, normally rendered the same answer: "we work with anyone". Especially on 'public' or first encounters, male as well as female farmers usually expressed an including attitude, where kin, friends, and neighbours engaged in reciprocal exchange of farm labour, and 'anyone' who were available when work was needed would be included in the farming community. "We ask the first person we meet if that person can come and work" it was commonly explained to me. Such ideas of intra-village inclusion and equality corresponded well with an idealised idea of communality and village sentiment/spirit (*tinh cam*) [41], and were also in accordance with both Confucian and socialist ideals, where mutual assistance rather than individual accomplishments was given preference (c.f. Abrami & Henaff 2004:113). But these comments were also sprung from the farmers' knowledge about the norms and conditions that governed the recruitment of co-workers. They knew, of course, who could be asked to do what, where, and with whom. And because

41. *Tinh cam* translates into feeling, sentiment, or emotion and can refer to a personal capacity or to a shared feeling, like in village sentiment.

they knew this, 'anyone' of the suitable candidates for cooperation could be asked to participate in that particular farming task.

The female domination of farm work meant that women – in spite of the general idea of men as 'managers' – performed most of the organisation and recruitment of labour in the households (c.f. Le Thi 2001:108). They did this by drawing on their networks of consanguine and affined relatives and non-kin. As the previous chapter showed, when a household lacked women of working age, men usually involved their daughters and other female relatives, or hired other women to perform the female farming tasks. Very rarely did male farmers recruit others into a working party on the fields of their household, and it was even more unusual if they themselves joined in such a group. For women, this was part of their working routine. As daughters, they engaged female relatives from their fathers' and mothers' kin groups and supplemented with some friends and neighbours. When married, wives recruited women from their natal kin groups together with women from their husbands' families (c.f. Moore 1988:60-62, Carsten 1989). Women married to men with relatives living in the area, could also include male kin and friends of their husbands' in their labour groups, provided that these men were to perform the more 'male' tasks, like carrying harvested rice. In this way, the organisation of farm labour in Lang Xanh entailed the formation of extensive networks and communities of women who cultivated the fields together.

During transplanting and harvesting periods, the fields were filled with women who worked together, most of the time bent over the rice that should either be planted or cut. Most of them wore conical hats as protection against wind and weather. When I had lived in the village for a time, some of the women liked to put me to a test by pointing to the women working in the field, one by one, and ask who they were. This was not an easy task, especially not to begin with. However, my ability to recognise particular features of individual women improved and sometimes I passed the test. I also got a sense of the composition of the groups, which reflected the field holder's circumstances, as well as her preferences and means when it came to gather together a group of labourers.

Many women found it easier to make flexible and convenient agreements with kin. When working with relatives – in-laws as well as natal kin – the chances of relatively smooth cooperation were usually the best, many thought (c.f. Carsten 1989:134). The mutual and sympathetic aspects of kin relations were generally emphasised and used as arguments for the benefits of this kind of cooperation. Lan, for example, often exchanged labour with one of her sisters-in-law who lived not very far away. She explained that: "working with relatives is easiest because you can be more straightforward and you can agree to stay a bit longer on a field in order to finish it

even if it is getting late". Her experience was that the working days were more carefully counted and regulated when non-kin were involved. And as nearly every household in Lang Xanh was related to one or more of the other village households, most of the farmers could choose to either give precedence to family or to neighbours and friends.

I found Dinh sitting by a patch of land where rice seedlings were grown for later transplantation. She uprooted the little plants and tied them into handy bundles to be brought to the fields. Arguing along a similar line as Lan, she told me that she usually worked only with her two sisters "because it is much less complicated", she explained:

> With others you have to negotiate more and make sure that everything is fair, and it could be that you have to pay in cash if you cannot find the time to pay back in labour. Or you might have to ask somebody else to do it [i.e. pay back in labour] for you and it becomes complicated. It is easier with relatives and you can coordinate your work all the way.

Considering the small-scale and household-based nature of farming in Lang Xanh, close and adaptable working relations corresponded well with many of the households' labour needs. Cooperating with relatives, where the emphasis was on social relations and mutuality rather than more commercial aspects – where labour efforts were measured according to efficiency and profitability – suited many of the farmers well (c.f. Carsten 1989, Blackwood 1997, Shreeves 2002). From Lan and Dinh's point of view, establishing working relations with unrelated households was normally imbued with more careful considerations regarding equality and fairness, and the time for reciprocation was normally shorter.

Nonetheless, close neighbours were also an appreciated category of co-workers (c.f. Carsten 1989). For example, many of the unrelated women who worked together on the fields in high seasons explained that they had been good neighbours for a long time and they enjoyed and valued dearly the time they spent in each other's company. Moreover, some women pointed out, through this frequent cooperation they eventually picked up the same working pace as their co-workers, something that enhanced the much valued socialising that went on at the same time. If a family had moved from another part of the village, or from a village nearby, they quite often kept the working relation with their old neighbours who, over time, had turned into good friends.

There was, however, a multitude of reasons why some villagers avoided relatives as their main co-workers. Conflicts and tense family relations were often, but not always, the reason why labour agreements with neighbours or friends, rather than

relatives were preferred (c.f. Moore 1988:124). Farmers who preferred to work with fellow villagers found support for their behaviour in the concept of communality and mutual assistance (*tinh cam*) between fellow neighbours and farmers (c.f. Scott 1976, Luong 1992). The female farmer Nhung, for example, found it easier to ask friends and neighbours, instead of adapting to her four sisters' labour schedules. She thought that this gave her more freedom of choice when it came to decisions about when and with whom she wanted to work. With relatives, the level of constraining obligations could be experienced as outweighing the empathetic aspects (c.f. Moore 1988:124). The village's only divorced male farmer Vinh, for example, shared the opinion of Nhung. He too preferred other villagers rather than relatives for labour exchange. He saved his relatives for special family-oriented occasions like death anniversaries and funerals, events when the mutual assistance of relatives was inevitable (c.f. Scott 1976, Malarney 2002). Irrespective of how the villagers got on with their relatives, the idea of intra-village community and "we work with anyone" presented a complement to – or, rather, coexisted with – kin-based unity and support (c.f. e.g. Bloch 1974).

Spatial closeness, as well as emotional attachments, between farming neighbours, as a result of their cooperation in the farm work, was not new to the village. In fact, this had been part of the sense of a shared community before, during, and after the collective period and had resulted in close relationships (c.f. Luong 1992, Kerkvliet 2005). This was, for instance, expressed in a popular saying that I often heard when the villagers spoke about cooperation: "selling distant relatives and buying close neighbours" (*ban anh em xa mua lang gieng gan*). As this proverb illustrates, friendly relations with those living close by was regarded as more important than remote relatives, who you hardly ever saw or did not know well.

Feminisation of farming – expanding the 'inside'

In contemporary Lang Xanh, it was women who were the pivotal figures of the farming community and, as earlier chapters have already shown, it was young women who were expected to carry out most of the farm labour in each household. Grown-up but still unmarried daughters commonly engaged extensively in the exchange of labour. However, daughters-in-law were by far the category to supply most of a household's farm labour. Young San for example – the newly married, pregnant woman with a husband working in Hanoi, who figured in the previous chapter – was the main labourer of her new household, which she shared with her husband's parents. Most frequently, she exchanged labour with her sisters and sisters-in-law. Her brothers-in-law were, just like her husband, mainly engaged in what most villagers referred to as 'outside' work.

The contrast between 'outside' (*ngoai*) and 'inside' (*noi*) was often used when people in Lang Xanh talked about different work[42] and referred, for example, to spatial, compensatory, and gendered aspects of labour. With an increasing number of (mostly male) villagers engaged in wage labour outside of Lang Xanh, delineations of the places where work was performed was going on. For a few men and women, these places now encompassed countries like Malaysia and Taiwan. Others went to work in larger cities or distant provinces in Vietnam for longer or shorter periods of time. This was, of course, regarded as 'outside' work. But occupations with a regular income, even if it was in the local school or health care clinic, were also perceived as 'outside' work. In these cases, it was the comparison with the unpaid farm work that virtually all the village households engaged in to some extent, which gave the salaried jobs the epithet 'outside'.

The conceptions of 'inside' and 'outside' work were not rigid and the demarcations were not defined once and for all (c.f. Niranjana 2001:110). However, at this point in time, many of the farming duties were perceived as 'inside' labour by the villagers (c.f. Jacka 1997, Hershatter 2007). Some of the reasons for this were the low income-levels, the small-scale activity, the lack of generally recognized professionalism, and, of course, the proximity of the fields to the home. Farming formed a small but relatively solid base for the households to rely upon, but if they wanted to increase their wealth, the Lang Xanh inhabitants had to search outside of the village and the local farming. As has been mentioned above, the distribution of land has remained rather equal and did not play any significant role in socio-economic differences between the villagers. Incomes that held the potential to create greater divergences have been a result of other activities, separate from household farming (c.f. Luong 2003:100). It was clear that farming was not a lucrative profession, but more of a family concern where daily needs of sustenance were incorporated into everyday household labour routines. The perception of farming as largely a household concern was not at all new, but the marked contrast between this type of labour and an economy based on production and growth, and with demands on education and proficiency, was unique for this period.

However, the domination of women[43] definitely caused the regular farm work they did in the fields to increasingly be perceived as housework, and consequently performed on the 'inside'. Women's main responsibility for the households' farming

42. As mentioned in the introduction, the analogy of 'inside' and 'outside' was used in other contexts as well. In chapter three we met with theses concepts in the realm of paternal and maternal kin groups, and in references to e.g. villagers and non-villagers. Another example is the contrast between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese, etc. See e.g. Hy Van Luong 1992, Pham Van Bich 1998, Kleinen 1999, Hue-Tam Ho Tai 2001, Rydström 2003, for different aspects and uses of the contrast between "inside" and "outside".
43. As a result of the earlier phases of economic reform in the 1990s, more women than men lost their work opportunities in the government section, when this was drastically slimmed to give room for a market-oriented economy with a private sector. When this happened, many women went back to farming on the pieces of land that the households had received in the land allocation. More men ventured into private enterprises, often in urban areas, in a quest for money – something that the small land plots could not produce in any greater quantities (Werner 2002:35-36).

contributed to a normative delineation, where the households expanded into the fields or, conversely, the fields were further incorporated into the households. Under the existing circumstances of farming in Lang Xanh, the female 'inside' labour sphere of housework had been widened to encompass the fields and the work that was performed there. When farm work was predominantly performed by women who remained 'in place' in the village, while many of the men laboured 'outside', this altered the meaning and understanding of the position of farm work in the households as well as in the village. The labouring women made the fields into a place that female bodies inhabited with ease, especially when 'female' tasks were performed. Now it was women's daily farm work, in combination with the intense labour periods when larger groups of women gathered in the fields, that formed the most common and tangible activity in the village. The presence of labouring women was a corporeal feature of village life.

WOMEN'S PRESERVATION OF A PLACE-BASED COMMUNITY

Let us recall from the introduction and chapter three, Iris Marion Young's (2005) argument that the cultivation and, to an even larger extent, the preservation aspects of Heidegger's conception of dwelling have been overshadowed by the much more valued activity of building. Young argues that when men have completed the building phase, women step in to preserve what men have constructed. According to Young, the housework that women do is often, if not always, confined to the underrated realm of preservation. Importantly, however, the daily work of preservation also helps to maintain and give meaning to the activities and histories of people who dwell together, both on an individual and a communal level (Young 2005:127, 142-143, 145). In this way, the fields in Lang Xanh were maintained and preserved as materialisations of both the local community and the households. Like other types of household work, the result was relatively impermanent and temporary. Farm work was seasonally recurring and needed to be constantly repeated, just like much of the daily life sustaining work. This meant that through their communal farm work, women regularly formed practical and actual groups of female farmers, consisting of varying constellations of close and distant relatives, as well as friends and neighbours. In their capacity of women 'in place', i.e. at home in the village, and as the main organisers and executors of farm labour, they were continuously in contact with each other.

In addition to all the time the women spent exchanging stories, thoughts, and worries, as well as rejoicings in the fields, there were often reasons to inquire about past and future labour requirements at other spontaneous encounters as well. Friends and relatives met in the village or stopped by each other's homes, to ask if they were available for harvesting or transplanting on a certain day. Through these female

networks each household managed to assemble a working party when such was required. As some women got older and, hopefully, could reduce their presence in the fields, young women developed their skills and responsibilities, and spent more time farming. When daughters and sisters married and moved to their husbands' home villages, sons and brothers introduced new women to the labour networks through their marriages. In this manner, farming women formed fluctuating networks, which in one way or the other involved the majority of the households in the village. By being continuous and spanning past, present, and coming generations, these networks of labouring women managed to connect the present with the past as well as the future (c.f. Young 2005:143). And, as many female farmers gave evidence to, over time, companionships developed between women from different households and among some of them, intimate links of trust and support were established (c.f. Moore 1988:61, McDowell 1999:99). This kind of mutual loyalty formed a sense of village community.

Ideals and ideas of the rural village

Notions of community sentiment and spirit (*tinh cam*) have for a long time been vital ingredients in the image of the 'traditional' northern Vietnamese village. This conception is a significant part of the idea of 'home place' (*que*), that holds a central position in the lives of urban as well as rural dwellers (see e.g. Schlecker 2005). One of the first questions that strangers asked when meeting each other for the first time was "Where is your home place (*que*)?" Most rural and urban inhabitants have a village in the countryside that they count as their place of origin. This can be the place where they were born or grew up, but it can also be the village where their parents, grandparents or ancestors came from. The idea of the *que* is surrounded by an air of romanticism, in the sense that the inhabitants of the rural village are pictured as honest, helpful, and empathetic. As opposed to the city, where people are believed to be strangers to each other and do not care for or help other people, the village is assumed to be the essence of community spirit where you can always count on your neighbour (c.f. Schlecker 2005, Drummond & Thomas 2003).

As an effect of the economic renovation, as well as a globalised economy, Vietnam has seen a surge of nostalgia for an idealised image of the rural village. Urban life is, in this respect, regarded as emotionally empty, harshly materialistic, and a threat to genuine Vietnamese values. Uncertainty in times of instability, economic difficulties, and an increased urbanisation, has paved the way for a longing for another way of life, mainly among the more affluent city dwellers. This course of events has been underpinned by the government's focus on 'cultural' issues as a means to curb social fragmentation, and endorse a notion of national community. According to this discourse, the genuine Vietnamese values – such as communality, care and

consideration for others – that should be defended against 'outside' corruption have their roots in the country's 'traditional' rural villages. The perceived obsession with money and profit by the urbanites, in contrast with the empathetic and caring ways of the rural villagers, is not a new phenomenon in Vietnam, but the shift to a market oriented economy has enhanced its popularity (Drummond & Thomas 2003:7-9, Schlecker 2005:512, c.f. also Nguyen-vo Thu-huong 2005:3).

The villagers of Lang Xanh were well aware of this discourse and sometimes made use of it when reflecting on their situation. Van, a farmer in his fifties, told me:

> We might not be rich in terms of material standard, but we are rich in emotion (*tinh cam*). Few people hire labour because exchange is better for the emotions. In towns and cities it is different, but here we have very little influence from technology.

This was said while he was contemplating the great amount of low-tech manual labour that the farmers engaged in. What he considered as outdated and labour-intensive methods, were to some extent compensated for by the community spirit that labour cooperation helped to maintain. From this perspective, the attitude of mutuality and exchange of farm labour between the villagers, that Van expressed, existed in the same 'natural' sphere as the gendered labour division, which was also perceived to be in line with manual farm work, unaffected by technology and modernity. He explained that the villagers did not always keep a very close track of the working days that they spent helping other villagers with farm chores. The idea of assisting each other without calculating the expenses and seeking personal gain, was a constituting part of many, if not all, of the villagers' self-perception. Embedded in this ideal was the notion of villagers who supported community-based solidarity, and wanted to share their work and give their support to ensure that all households had a certain level of sustenance (c.f. Scott 1976, Taylor 2007).

From the perspective of villagers like the farmer Van, the solidarity that the inhabitants of Lang Xanh preferably showed towards each other was contested by e.g. the growing use of paid farm labour. Some farmers feared that when certain people became wealthier, they did not want, or need, to cooperate and socialise with the others to the same extent as before. Moral obligations to assist each other and exchange farm labour to cover for the seasonal peaks used to be the basis for village community, they claimed, and to hold on this, the people in Lang Xanh needed to continue to contribute with their time, their energy, and some of their means. If the individual quest for money overshadowed the will to engage in communal work, the local community risked destabilisation (c.f. Douglas 2003). Van, for example,

believed that this was already the case in the cities, but could still be avoided in Lang Xanh if the villagers continued to involve themselves in farm labour exchange and mutual help. A sense of village spirit also demanded that the villagers were in place to practice the sharing of activities. Monetary contributions – for labour or other activities – were not sufficient to make a community; this also required actual presence and involvement. Mary Douglas (2003:147) argues: "When a large crowd turns up, community solidarity is made visible." From Van's viewpoint, farmers who did not involve themselves in relationships of labour exchange with fellow villagers, demonstrated their disengagement from the local community and tangibly contributed to the dissolution of the same.

Agreements on labour compensation – a moral balancing act

Side by side with ideals of village communality lived the notion that people of an advanced and modern society should be able to work and gain an income, without taking into consideration relationships based on accumulated obligations to kin and friends and the maintenance of a place-based village communality (c.f. Schlecker 2005:521, Malarney 2002:211). With the introduction of the economic reform (*doi moi*) in 1986, the government has propagated private and commercial farming (Taylor 2007, Abrami and Henaff 2004:95-96). Vietnam's entrance into the global market economy made the glow of labour exchange somewhat faded, due to its association with small-scale and subsistence-based farming with rather low efficiency (e.g. Le Cao Doan 1995:122-123). This relatively new politico-economic situation gave rise to some moral re-evaluations. For many of the farmers in Lang Xanh, access to money signified material success and provided the option of hiring labour, and organise work in a way that released people from the time-consuming task of recompensing other people's labour efforts by an equivalent amount of working hours. The time gained could instead be used for some more lucrative activity. However, it was first and foremost the more affluent farmers who could use paid labour as a means of rationalisation and increasing profits. But as Van pointed out above, when a household used money to buy labour, it became less dependent on local cooperation so that the equalising effects of labour exchange weakened, together with the sense of a shared community.

To a certain extent, the sensitivity which surrounded paid farm labour could also be related to the prevailing socialist ideology – including the firmly established aversion against landlords who did not work themselves, but paid others to work in their fields (see chapter one) – which had governed farming for approximately forty years but came to its end with the 1993 land allocation. However, even though market economy and individual land use rights had been introduced, some of the villagers

in Lang Xanh were nonetheless motivated by socialist ideals. The Marxist-Leninist ideas – which had constituted some of the building-bricks when the state introduced collective farming (Kerkvliet 2005:139) – asserted that capitalism causes a shift in society, from communality and mutuality, to individualism and self-interest. In other words, the moral bonds that knit people together in communities of solidarity are destroyed by the calculating and impersonal capacities of money (c.f. Parry & Bloch 1989:4, 6). From the perspective of the state, farming had undergone an ideological change: the socialist objective of communality had been substituted for an individualistic economy based upon entrepreneurial households. For the farmers in Lang Xanh, though, farming encompassed sustenance as well as social and moral relations and positioning.

When the farmers tried to organise their labour, they also had to consider the moral implications of their decisions and practices. The frailty of the place-based village community, the need for cooperation and assistance, and the requirements for more 'effective' and profitable farming methods all had to be addressed. Each choice and action that both female and male farmers made, represented a kind of positioning in relation to the village farming community and, notably, it made them susceptible to evaluations of their moral standards by the other villagers. As the following sections will explore, women and men had to take these aspects into consideration – however in different ways – when they operated within the field of labour organisation and compensation for farm work.

REACHING AN AGREEMENT

When farmers, male as well as female, recruited labour from other households, it was decided from occasion to occasion whether the workers were to be paid back in work (i.e. labour exchange) or in money. In general, it was the relationship and requirements of the involved parties, rather than the type of labour, that determined if it was money or exchange of labour that was an appropriate compensation. It happened that the same persons sometimes exchanged labour and at other times compensated each other in cash. Depending on the parties involved, as we shall see below, any kind of compensation was not suitable for any kind of work (c.f. Carsten 1989). Factors like gender, kin, and friendship played decisive roles when it was decided if the compensation should be in cash or labour, or of it was as situation of unremunerated help. As for more distant co-workers, a need of cash or lack of time for labour exchange could result in the field holder paying for a person's labour. The circumstances of each worker as well as of the field holder were taken into consideration when making these agreements. Within a group of people working together on a field, each person had his or her own agreement with the farmer in charge of the field.

Among people who exchanged labour, the general rule was to count working days. Commonly people added up the days within one working season, and then regulated the balance between them at the end. If some discrepancies between two persons had arisen during the period, it could be evened out by cash or, more commonly, by keeping the issue in mind until the next working season. Good friends claimed that they trusted each other and normally did not feel obliged to settle any debts immediately and, as we have seen, among relatives the calculating of working hours was not always done very carefully. In the busiest periods, the farmers had to prioritise whom to exchange labour with, because there was not enough time to do this with all the partners involved. The result could be that the co-workers with the most distant relationships to the field holder had to be compensated in cash instead of time. It was the closeness of the relationship, as relatives or friends, which usually decided the order of precedence. The obligation of repaying each other in working time was strong among the most affectionate friends and the closest and dearest relatives. Monetary compensation was unthinkable if a relationship was considered to be warm and friendly – intimacy was manifested in the time people were prepared to give each other (c.f. Bourdieu 1972:180, 1990:115, Carsten 1989:123).

A certain degree of calculating did, however, often take place within the realm of farm labour, even when kin and close friends were involved. Unless a household needed help due to sickness or other unfortunate circumstances, people expected that the time and labour effort that was contributed should eventually be returned in equivalent amounts (c.f. Pine 2002:87). To perform and provide under one's ability was not accepted, and the capacity of each household was closely monitored by kin, friends, and neighbours, and formed the basis for expectations of labour contribution.

FEMALE FARMERS AND LABOUR COMPENSATION

When female farmers engaged in farm labour exchange, it could look like when Vy, a woman in her late forties, harvested rice together with four other women in her field. Two of them were her neighbours and the other two her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law. They were all exchanging labour, no monetary compensation were involved. The neighbouring women were persons with whom she had formed a trusting relationship over time, and who largely shared her circumstances as a farming woman. As for her relatives it was really more a matter of helping each other, as she put it. Over time, they would give each other a hand to the best of their abilities. Particularly elderly parents were assisted with little expectation of any kind of compensation. This was a way for children to show filial piety towards their parents in the realm of farming (c.f. Luong 1992, Pham Van Bich 1993, Malarney 2002). Among close kin, it was a personal responsibility to be present and to provide labour and this could not be taken over by just anybody, or someone who was paid

to do the work. In this sense, when close, commonly female, relatives assisted each other with farm labour they also cultivated their affiliation (c.f. Asplund 1991:80, Pine 2002:87). The same principles were applicable for close friends and neighbours too, but normally on a more voluntary and equal basis and sometimes with a stronger emphasis on fairness. The social and moral significance would be lost if monetary remuneration was involved.

Therefore, a critical part of farm labour organisation was the question of monetary compensation. Paid labour was a topic that was treated with wariness by all parties involved. This was, for instance, reflected in the fact that people rarely spoke of hired farm labour by its real name, but rather used the same modes of expressions – using social and kin related idioms – as in labour exchange, or, as often happened, people just said that they helped (*giup*) each other. Despite the fact that almost everybody in a working team knew whether their co-workers were exchanging labour with the field holder or were paid in cash, people preferred not to talk about this in the group. In a private conversation with a farmer, the nature of compensation of the labourers could be discussed, but not out on the field and not in the presence of other villagers (c.f. Scott 1976:42, Blackwood 1997:288). When I began to enquire into the issue of labour compensation, upon meeting groups of women in the fields, my questions were sidestepped with jokes or met by awkward silences. Nobody wanted to talk about monetary arrangements or even reveal the name of the field holder. Eventually I learned which field belonged to which household and who the most frequent paid labourers were, but initially this was a way to conceal the fact that labour was sometimes hired in the village. It was much easier to start a conversation about farm labour exchange. In such conversations, both men and women often praised the fun and the emotional values of exchanging labour. On much fewer occasions did farmers openly admit to support paid labour.

Lan, my landlady, was frequently pointed out as very lucky, because her husband had an income as a teacher and both her sons earned money from working in big cities, which meant that they could sometimes contribute some cash. From time to time Lan used this money to hire farm labour. She herself said that as the only farmer in her household she was too busy to exchange much labour and she liked to organise things according to her own mind and be fairly independent. This, she carefully stressed, was to the advantage of the entire household. The more efficiently she organised the farm labour, the more time did she have for improving the conditions of the household, she reasoned. Even though she stated her opinion by using a discourse of household well-being and efficiency – qualities that the previous chapter identified as distinctive features of capable wives – it was subtly indicated to me by some villagers that her 'efficient' and business-like ways reflected a certain level of coldness and dissociation. As pointed out earlier, both Lan's efficiency and her wish to organise her

work to support her family and facilitate her husbands' professional career could find support on local as well as national level (e.g. Tran Thi Van Anh & Le Ngoc Hung 1997:87-89, Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004:62-68). Nonetheless, the fact that she did not prioritise labour exchange and instead hired comparatively much labour, provoked comments from fellow villagers. Her focus on the family's well-being, and all the farm work that she engaged in herself, did not fully outweigh the way she made use of money to access farm labour. It was relatively accepted for women to hire labour when they were overburdened with work, or for some reason were prevented from participating in labour exchange. But there was a fine balance between hiring enough labour to cope with immediate demands, and paying others to work because you could afford it and, thus, consciously decrease your participation in labour exchange.

In order to reduce the provocative effects of hired labour, Lan mainly hired women and men from the neighbouring village, where she and her husband had lived when their children were small. Even if people still noticed that she hired labour, it was less conspicuous than to hire fellow villagers. People from other places, 'outsiders' in other words, were not really included in the local community and this made it easier to avoid unbalanced relations within the village (c.f. Carsten 1989:128, Blackwood 1997:286).

Another woman who challenged the idea of women's farm labour as a means for preserving village community, was Thu. She was from the southern part of the country and had married a farmer from this village. Her situation as a woman in her thirties without formal employment and with two small children was not at all unusual. What was unusual was her way of managing her farming situation. Normally, when a woman married a farmer, she spent a large amount of time cultivating the household's fields, and often engaged extensively in farm labour exchange with e.g. sisters-in-law. On one occasion, when we were alone in her home, which she also shared with her mother-in-law, Thu told me that she hired all the farm labour that her household needed. She had married into a comparatively business-minded and affluent family – her husband was one of five relatively industrious brothers – and therefore she could afford to hire labour. The fact that Thu did not have any relatives of her own in this area certainly had an impact on her choice. She had no lingering labour obligations as a daughter or a sister, to consider. A woman of lesser means and greater kin network in the village would have found it very difficult to totally renounce farm labour. Her decision not to practice farming herself, and not to engage in farm labour exchange, positioned her outside these female village networks. Her social relationships consisted largely of her in-laws and she was rarely seen out and about in the village. But her somewhat detached position, as far as the community was concerned, arose from her and her in-laws' relatively affluent situation, not from economic vulnerability – and not really from social frailness either (c.f. Moore 1994:195, Blackwood 1997:286). Her withdrawal from farm work implied an

independence from the farm-based village communality. She and her household, as well as the households of her brothers-in-law, employed an alternative, more 'progressive', way of making a living, where farming was not the main occupation and where labour relations with kin and co-villagers were not necessarily the most important (c.f. e.g. Malarney 2004, Schlecker 2005).

But for the continuance of an atmosphere of village community, it was important *how* farm work – and especially women's 'inside' labour – was organised and compensated for. A small group of women, married as well as single, were regularly seen working in the fields of fellow villagers for cash compensation. This was a way of gaining an additional income besides their own farming. A few of these women expressed, as an attempt to somewhat professionalise their work, a certain pride in being skilful and appreciated farm labourers whom people wanted to hire. But when money was used to pay for these women's farm labour, in contrast with e.g. men's 'specialised' ploughing, an element of inequality inescapably entered into the relationship. Some of these women were, for example, often the last ones to get their rice harvested, because they had been busy hiring out their labour as much as they possibly could in peak season. Their labouring for payment in other villagers' fields revealed these women's relative poverty; the other villagers knew they could not afford to turn down work opportunities and they themselves never paid for farm labour. Differences between the households in the village thus became obvious. Even though both parties were in agreement, the idea of intra-village cooperation was challenged by direct payment for farm labour (c.f. Pine 2002:87-88).

Hoa, who engaged in labour exchange bur also hired some labour when she needed, said that according to her "it is better for the emotions to exchange labour. If you only hire labour and never work on the fields yourself, you will seem like some kind of boss and people do not like this". She expressed what some of the villagers feared – to be perceived as behaving like a landlord, i.e. someone who exploited other people's labour without engaging in farm work themselves. From these points of view, women's exchange of farm labour was a critical counterbalance to disloyalty and inequalities within the village. Therefore, the way they organised and compensated for farm labour was perceived also through a moral lens, with implications for themselves as well as for the community.

MEN'S 'OUTSIDE' POSITION IN FARM LABOUR EXCHANGE

In the case of ploughing and harrowing, payment in cash frequently took place. Even relatives quite often gave ploughmen money for their labour, although often to a reduced price. Ploughing and harrowing were normally performed by men who

had, more or less, professionalised this line of work. These men owned buffalos, or in a few cases cows, as draught-animals, and had the necessary equipment to perform their skills. Ploughing and harrowing were, as pointed out in the preceding chapter, the farming chores most closely associated with men. Even though rice transplanting held a similar position for women, this was not recognised as a 'professionalised' duty that individual women specialised in, and for which they usually received cash payment. In peak periods, the ploughmen's services were highly sought after and they worked from dusk till dawn in the fields. One reason why they preferred cash instead of labour as compensation for their work was that they were so busy during the periods when their labour was needed. It would have been too complicated to keep track of all the households who owed them, and they would have had more farm labour than needed if everyone repaid them in work. Ploughing was perceived as a specialised service with a limited availability because it could only be performed by one man and his buffalo. This 'male' work could be bought for money without challenging the ideal of cooperation between relatively equal neighbours.

The men who earned most of their income from farm related activities were neither placed in the realm of 'inside', nor of 'outside', labour. Even though these men, just like the majority of the women, were regularly engaged in farm work, their labour was not referred to as 'inside' work. They were not considered to perform an extension of housework in the fields. Despite the air of professionalism that surrounded the ploughmen's work, they were not salaried as employees, and neither were they the owners of a business. They performed a one-man farming duty that did not fit into the female 'inside' networks, either in execution or compensation; hence the most 'male' farm work of all fell between the spheres of 'outside' and 'inside' labour.

If possible, Lang Xanh men worked mainly in the 'outside' sphere, earning money for the household. Men who did not bring in a sufficient amount of money from 'outside' labour found themselves, in some sense, to be 'out of place' if they stayed in the village without engaging in work that could be categorised as lucrative to a certain extent. These men's opportunities for working as hired farm labourers were rather limited and very much concentrated to the farming seasons. Only smaller amounts of money could be earned this way and the implications of this for a man's status and prestige were, as already pointed out, quite negative. There were no male equivalents to the 'inside' female dominated labour communities that appeared in accordance with the farming year.

Even if men often talked about the benefits of labour exchange, and many of them enthusiastically adhered to the principle of mutual help and support within the village, they rarely participated in labour exchange themselves. When men did participate in farm labour outside of ploughing and harrowing, like carrying

harvested rice, seedlings, and manure, their compensation sometimes consisted of a meal provided by the field holder. This normally took the form of a dinner served by the woman in the household that had received these men's assistance. Her husband who himself might, or might not, have participated in the carrying, acted the host and shared the food with the other men. It was not always the case that the woman, who very likely had harvested or transplanted the field, joined in the dinner (c.f. Vuong Xuan Tinh 1997:63-64). The meals, which always had to include generous amounts of alcohol, were largely a male affair and integrated neatly into a male-centred community where farming did not constitute the centre. These meals were a way to emphasise friendliness or kinship ties between the male workers, rather than formal labour agreements. As the previous chapter discussed, men also had an interest in expressing their participation in farm labour in terms of voluntariness and fun (*vui*), or pleasure, when it was not a question of more professionalised services. Women, on the other hand, were not customarily compensated for their farm work with a festive lunch or dinner with accompanying liquor. Men's labour compensation – often in cash or in the form of a dinner party – served to separate men from the female-dominated networks of labour exchange and, in practice, from the 'emotional' and non-hierarchical intra-village relations that the concept of *tinh cam* found support for in the realm of exchange of farm labour (c.f. Moore 1988:61, Strathern 1988:96, Carsten 1989).

SPATIAL SEGREGATION OF FARM LABOUR

As the above examples indicated – where ploughmen worked by themselves and were paid in cash for their labour, or when men who had been the carriers e.g. when women had harvested, were compensated with a dinner – there was an element of spatial segregation incorporated into these arrangements. Gendered division of farm labour often, in itself, entailed spatial segregation, when men and women performed different duties at different times and places. But also the form of compensation could result in a separation of male and female farmers into demarcated places. It did, however, happen that men and women exchanged farm labour with each other, both as kin and as neighbours. Since they, in many respects, worked with complementary tasks they, of course, needed access to each other's areas of work and found varying ways to come to suitable agreements. When both men and women were involved, as the introductory example showed, the moral aspects were not only concerned with fairness and village sentiments, but also with the virtue and reputation of the parties concerned.

When Thuyet, a woman in her forties, explained to me how she organised her farm work, it was clear that men and women were not interchangeable as working partners. She thought that women normally felt most at ease when working in the company

of other women: "Women work at the same pace and are more or less equally strong and they chat and laugh well together. You do not do this with men." The women Thuyet referred to were primarily other farming women, kin and non-kin, from Lang Xanh. She engaged in labour exchange with many of them, but also used hired labour if time was short. Sometimes she also exchanged labour with men, but such an exchange implied that they would settle the scores by performing separate duties and, quite likely, at different times and places. Thuyet explained how labour exchange with women and with men could differ:

> For example, I might transplant rice for one woman and later maybe she helps me to plant manioc. But we will do both of these things together. If it is a man, I could ask him to carry manure to my field and then I will transplant for him. I would not carry manure together with him and he would not transplant with me.

Thus, spatial separation as well as task-oriented separation, all governed by perceptions of gender, was taken into consideration and then applied in each situation. One effect of this was that a man who, for example, joined a group of transplanting women would be quite 'out of place' (c.f. Ahmed 2006:135-136, McDowell 1999:145) because the fields were women's 'inside' domains when female tasks was performed there. The 'stiff 'and 'hard' male body had not been oriented toward this type of work, and did not inhabit a field that was in the midst of being transplanted, with the same 'naturalness' as the female bodies did. The body of a transplanting man did not have a given place in the field, where his movements had not been tuned in with the task and the environment (c.f. Ahmed 2006:62). If men were present at all, they usually operated in the fringes of the female group, where they performed carrying and transportation.

Hanh (the woman mentioned at the beginning of this chapter) – this time together with her friend Toan – gave another example of the moral implications of disregarding the gender aspects of compensational agreements. These two women transplanted a smaller field for a man with a non-farmer wife. He himself was not present. With no female farmer in the household he was quite disconnected from the networks of labour exchange. He also wanted to give prominence to his activities as a carpenter in the 'outside' labour sphere, even if his assignments were relatively few, and therefore he did not really share in other villagers' farm work. And without a cow or a buffalo, he had little 'male' labour to offer in return for Hanh and Toan's work. Thus, the only way he could compensate them was in cash. There was, of course, the option that they help him to transplant the field for free, Hanh suggested, but that would have indicated a much more intimate relationship. In this case, compensation in

cash was important: "If not, people might wonder what kind of relation I have with him", Thanh firmly but giggling informed me. The moral and spatial demarcations between male and female labour and labourers implied a certain risk if a man and a woman were to engage in labour exchange by working together with the same task in the same place. Both of them would be 'misplaced' when neither spatial nor task separation was practiced, and the field would lose its meaning as a morally 'safe' place, especially for women.

Gender separated farm work was supported from a more historical perspective, where – as earlier chapters already has given examples of – good female conduct and morality, as far as possible, prescribed a gender segregated labour organisation. Looked at from this angle, the association between a spatially demarcated female labour realm and the 'inside' can be traced back to Confucian morals, where Vietnamese women's work traditionally have been confined to the 'inside' of the household. It was within the protective walls of the house, or in the compound surrounding it, that the dignity and morals of the female household members could best be safeguarded. In rural areas throughout history, women have taken an active part in farm labour, and the segregation of male and female labourers has not always been strictly enforced, or even practically applicable, due to harsh circumstances and extensive labour needs. Nonetheless, separation of male and female farm labour – in tasks, compensation, and place –still held implications for the respectability and moral status of the farmers in Lang Xanh (c.f. e.g. Marr 1981, Luong 1992:72-73, Pham Van Bich 1999:35-36).

Community, morality, and farm labour

Men's relative liberty to participate in more commercially oriented labour contexts gave them complementary roles in the socio-economic networks of a household. Even in the realm of farm labour, men found it comparatively unproblematic to engage in and talk about waged farm work. On the occasions when money was used as payment, it was important to "know how to pay people good and fair", like Tuan, a farmer in his fifties, expressed it. He explained that it was not at all difficult to find people willing to work if they were compensated fairly, and that he knew who was usually in need of cash. His approach was rational and efficient: some villagers needed cash and he offered a just sum for their labour, and everybody was satisfied with the agreement, according to him. It was, by far, more accepted for a man to hire farm labour than it was for a woman to do so. It was not, as the previous chapter discussed, expected that men should involve themselves in farming as much as possible and, if needed, on their own. And in the existing notions of masculinity there was not much room for men to exchange farm labour, as most of it was considered to take place in a female realm. It can be claimed that men's more detached labour relationships found

support in the state's assertion of efficient and progressive labour and it connected their households with the commercial economy – like San's husband who spent most of the time working as a paid labourer in Hanoi. Much of the men's work was directed towards economic and 'rational' ends, and their time, to a greater extent than women's, was considered as having a value that was measurable in money, as in the case of the ploughmen (c.f. Bourdieu 1990:117).

Women's exchange of farm labour, on the other hand, was frequently assessed – locally as well as a nationally – in the context of household duties (c.f. Molyneux 1981:198, Moore 1988:108-109, Le Thi 2001:106-107, Werner 2002:34) and, as we have seen, from the perspective of an individual as well as a communal morality. Perceived through the lens of the government's economic and developmental aspirations, women's engagement in exchange of farm labour was 'backwards' and inefficient (c.f To Duy Hop 1997:16-19, Le Ngoc Van 1997: 31-34, Hoang Ba Thinh, 1998:11-12, Le Thi 2001:109, Taylor 2007). It did not contribute to a more industrialised, professionalised, and efficient agricultural sector. However, from the perspective of family and household maintenance, women's communal labour provided a network of support and mutual assistance. At the same time, these female labour arrangements enhanced the preservation of a sense of village sentiments. It also facilitated men's opportunities to involve in money-generating activities outside the household. Ideally, women's roles in farm labour, as the preservers of solidarity between kin and neighbours, somewhat reduced the contradictions between the commercial and the communal values of farm work (Shreeves 2002:227-228). Monetary contributions were, of course, important for the households, but it was not sufficient to hold a community together. And to some extent, transactions of money served to undermine the feeling of *tinh cam*, as the short-term and unequal aspects of these arrangements set the villagers apart for each other (c.f. Douglas 2003:147-148).

Women's daily engagement in farming kept many of the women in the village, close to the children and the elderly, and in cooperation and exchange with women from other households. This nurtured notions of 'traditional' values of communality and considerate relationships between people who dwelled in the same place. In this way, women's exchange of farm labour resonated with state-sanctioned female values such as selflessness, kindness and care about other people (c.f. e.g. Le Thi 2001:5-6, Rydström 2003:51-53). Images of women with a fierce desire for money, who used unscrupulous ways to expand their income, occurred in popular media and literature as examples of the unwanted effects of a capitalistic economy. Diligent and socially considerate women who engaged in exchange of farm labour with other women were, from an ideological and communal point of view, the most appreciated women in the village (c.f. Werner 2002, Nguyen-vo Thu-huong 2005). Women who clearly preferred to hire labour, rather than engage in relations of labour exchange, risked

being perceived as depreciative of the village community in favour of economic advancement. The different forms of compensation of farm labour implicated not only the needs and resource available for a household, but conveyed moral standpoints as well. Women's exchange of farm labour positioned their families and themselves in the moral realm of village communality, and because female farm work was so closely associated with village community, their practices were bestowed with significant moral implications.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to explore how female and male farmers in Lang Xanh, through their involvement with farmland and residential land, shaped and constituted themselves and others as gendered dwellers. With these two types of land, and some of the activities that took place there, as a basis, the aim was to study how this formed part of gendering processes.

One central starting point was the relation between action and place, i.e. how bodies were shaped and perceived through their actions in particular places and how, conversely, places took on different meanings and were made available to the inhabitants depending on if the actors were male or female. But what bodies tended to do in certain places was also largely influenced by history and habitual practices (c.f. e.g. Ahmed 2006:56). The work and deeds of previous generations, in the fields and in residential land, laid the ground for the activities of the present inhabitants. Activities in the sphere of residential land were, for instance, informed by the presence of ancestors and otherworldly beings. The home-based interactions and relations between male and female dwellers and the 'other world' embodied their relations to the patrilineal family. And practices performed in the fields were inseparable from ideas concerned with histories of village, kinship, and household relations. Besides, the land-related practices, as well as the actors, were acting in contexts that were profoundly enclosed by ideological discourses.

Let us recall from the introduction, Ingold's (2000:201-207) analysis of Bruegel's painting *The harvesters*, and how the labourers and the landscape in which they work are drawn together by the activity. None of the participants work in isolation from the others, but operate in a shared social environment where their work take place in accord with the others. The actors and their actions and movements are tuned in with the surroundings and with their fellow inhabitants in a relational, or rhythmic, way. They are, as Ingold puts it, *with* the environment and each other. If we were to enter into similar scenes of Lang Xanh, but with the purpose to see not only how the inhabitants had a relational connection to the environment, but also how 'maleness' and 'femaleness' implied different ways of acting in and relating to these places, we could make the scenes appear even richer and more nuanced.

To start with, the 'emerging' of male and female farmers was effected by existing discourses concerned with defining and shaping gender-specific traits and qualities, both at state level and in the local context. For the inhabitants in Lang Xanh, land was heavily imbued with governmental, political, economic, social, and individual meanings. Their surrounding environment was a consequence of past and present actions and this informed the everyday activities in the land (c.f. Tilly 1994:23).

As chapter one showed, the three categories of 'women', 'peasants', and land have all been subject to much ideological attention. In the preparation and organisation of the 1945 revolution, as well as in the subsequent political and state directives and policies, there have been extensive concerns about the capacities and desired qualities and purposes of the three categories. The men and women in Lang Xanh were, of course, aware of and influenced by these official discourses.

For example, rural, and implicitly poorer, women were still sometimes pictured by the state as rich in virtue of the traditional kind, because of their more limited exposure to capitalism and the temptations of urban life (Taylor 2007:29, see also Nguyen-vo Thu-huong 2008). On the other hand, they were also pictured as lacking with respect to refinement and modern knowledge, compared to urban women. Thus, we can see that women in Lang Xanh could fulfil certain aspects of feminine ideals – like 'genuinity', virtuousness, and industriousness – which enhanced neo-traditional values that were assumed to protect the nation from corrupt foreign morals, while still provide incitement for investments. But it was not the labour performed by peasant women on their households' rice fields that would allow Vietnam to develop into a respectable nation on a global scale. In short, the idea of the 'simple' but honest, caring, and hard-working rural woman was officially and somewhat commercially endorsed, while the actual manual labour that these women performed in the fields was perceived as 'backwards' and coarse.

This meant that the dwellers in the fields were not the most highly esteemed citizens, and the small-scale farming that they performed took place on land that the state controlled, which made labour – i.e. the practice but not the environment – the most controllable asset of the farmers. The turbulent history and the strong ideological discourses influenced the farming techniques, the division of labour, and the availability of farmland. In this manner, the composition of the farming landscape in Lang Xanh was also part of national history and politics.

If we instead imagine, for a while, a scene where the landscape is composed mainly of residential land holding the houses where the villagers lived, another picture will emerge. As chapter three explored, in contemporary Lang Xanh, the villagers still maintained what Ingold (2000:149) calls a relational connection to residential land. This land had followed a path where the formal state ownership had left room for traditionally informed habits of access, control, and inheritance to continue. Intrinsic to the endurance of e.g. the patrilineal family and patrilocality has been the constant, even if not invariable, practicing of ancestor worship in the homes. This practice has contributed to the sustenance of the patrilineal family, and played a significant role in placing men and women in gendered relationships vis-à-vis residential land and houses.

In contrast to women, men could, in their own capacity, draw together worlds and beings into a meaningful place where their families dwelled. And, not least, they built houses in the land, which turned the place into a meaningful union between worlds and beings. Women were incorporated from their fathers' patrilineages into their husbands' and through their connections with men, they gained access to houses and residential land as daughters and wives. Instead of land, they brought their preserving labour into the marriage. Women contributed to the maintenance of the patrilineal family by nurturing the male builders and the other dwellers in this and the other world. These practices made residential land available to men and women on the basis of differing premises that, in turn, meant that they related to these places either as permanent and providing men, or as more temporary and receiving women.

With farmland, on the other hand, the relation was relatively detached from ancestral and divine contact, even though an idea of mutual nurturing between farmers and fields existed. There, the rupture in the relationships between farmers and the fields had been much more severe due to the rigorous reforms and allocations implemented by the socialist state. Access to and control of arable land was supposed to be gender-equal and men as well as women were allocated land from the state, who had taken on the traditionally patriarchal role as the provider of land. This change, I argued,

had been possible because the detachment process, where farmers and particular fields had been spiritually and practically separated, had been quite systematic and extensive. Access to farmland in Lang Xanh had been 'degendered' and 'desacralised' and it was labour rather than social and kin relations that entitled the farmers to use the land. But because farm labour was far from gender-neutral, the farmers continued to relate to each other and to the fields in clearly gendered ways.

These preconditions help set the scene for the next outlook on Lang Xanh dwelling. Here we can imagine that a successor to Bruegel had come to the village and made a contemporary Vietnamese version of *The harvesters*. The golden harvest would be rice instead of wheat and the division of labour would be practically the reverse – the women would be the harvesters, bending toward the reap rice, sickles in hand, cutting the stalks and tying them into sheaves. The men would be on their way to or from the field, either carrying heavy burdens to a waiting cart, or empty-handed, heading back to collect more sheaves. If the sheaves had not started to pile up yet, some of the men might wait in the shade of some trees or pausing by the cart before they continued their work.

As chapter four showed, many of the inhabitants of Lang Xanh saw their manual farming as the most basic way of life, infused with a notion of following what was dictated by the environment and the innate capacities of male and female bodies. Many farmers in Lang Xanh thought the gendered labour division that governed farming, especially rice cultivation, could change only if manual farm labour was given up. Without mechanisation, farming was a constituting activity that shaped their labour, their opportunities, their social positions, and their bodies.

As we have seen, farming – especially rice transplanting – had been incorporated into the making of 'good' women and appropriate femininity, while for men, farm labour activities had to be engaged in with more care and consideration. As the situation were, men's farm work was not directed to the same objectives – they did not have to constantly guard their respectability and prove their decency by labouring in the fields. Instead, men needed to confirm their positions as heads of their households. Hence, when men adopted feminine body postures and performed women's farm work, they risked reducing their masculinity. Tasks like transplanting and harvesting were regarded as 'small' not because these chores did not require any particular skills but because it was women who performed them in order to acquire female morality and respectability, based on their positions in relation to men and kinship. For Lang Xanh men, respectability and status were expressed not only by the 'big' work they did, but also by the labour that female family members performed on the account of patrilineal families and, consequently, by the 'female' farming duties that they, as men and family heads, did *not* have to do.

In this way, the particular orientations of men and women to farm labour, and how they incorporated skills that tuned their bodies either into straight, hard, and heavy-handed, or into nimble, soft, and bendable, gave the farmers a 'feel' for masculine and feminine qualities and positions. Restrictions and possibilities, as well as their relative responsibilities and abilities as men and women, were realised in practice in the performance of gendered farm labour division. This was an on-going process, a constant gendering of the male and female farmers in relation to each other and the environment in which they acted. In the performance of farm labour, ideas about gender traits could not be separated from the actual tasks, but instead constituted a lived reality, informative of the 'fates' of male and female farmers.

Hence, the people involved in a harvesting scene did not, as Ingold pointed out, act in isolation from each other, and their movements connected them with the environment as well as with the fellow labourers but, I have to add, they did so in gender-specific ways. To be a female farmer who bends to cut the rice, or a male farmer who carries the sheaves are two different ways to orient oneself to the landscape and to each other. This informs the actors as well as the patient onlooker about what it can mean to be a man or a woman in this particular place.

If we should stay on and keep looking around in the landscape, we would over time notice that the human presence in the fields mostly consisted of women. I have argued that women's extensive presence in the fields, and their engagement in farm labour, constituted a perceptible and evident manifestation of the values of communality and the network of relationships that still linked the villagers together. With the intensification of commercialism and an escalating need to be part of a financial and labour market where local farming was not sufficient for sustenance, the village community – and even family units – were in some sense dispersing. Through their farm labour – though it was not seen as progressive and advanced – women contributed with their presence and preservation to a continuation of village and family based community.

Through women's continuous care for the fields, a sense of belonging could take shape where the villagers were reminded of how it used to be, and still was, to dwell in a rural farming village where previous generations had lived, cultivated the fields, and built up relations with other villagers and relatives (c.f. Young 2005:143-144). Women's 'inside' farm labour also reinforced the idea of a genuine and communal solidarity typical of the rural village. Such a notion existed in Lang Xanh in the form of memories and as a means for self-cultivation; while in a national discourse, this idea existed rather in the form of nostalgia and authenticity (c.f. Drummond & Thomas 2003, Schlecker 2005). From this perspective, women's cooperation with other female farmers signified a sincere and tradition-based rural life that could

also be associated with the romanticised perception of the unspoilt rural village (c.f. Strathern 1988:81-82, 87). This notion was locally cherished as a counterbalance to a 'modern' and 'efficient' urban life, where labour might be more lucrative, but where people had forgotten how to treat each other with 'emotion' (*tình cam*) and instead focused on individualistic and profit-oriented goals. Thus, the preserving capacity of women's farm work brought a context of continuity and unity to a changing world.

As a consequence of the incorporation of farming into 'inside', unsalaried housework, this type of labour was increasingly associated with women's preserving and sustaining house-based work and therefore, women still tended to, first and foremost, be associated with the more traditional female responsibilities of mothering, nurturing, and sustenance (c.f. Moore 1988:108-109). As Moore (1988:108-109) points out, it is easy to get stuck in gender stereotypes, where women are reduced to the performance of domestic duties for daily sustenance and where men are 'outside' earning money. In the case of Lang Xanh, women's farm work could not be diminished to an intra-household concern, even though their farming activities were referred to as both 'small' and 'inside'. On the contrary, through their engagement in farming, they constituted and preserved the Lang Xanh community on a day-to-day basis. From this perspective, women's performance of farm work not only positioned women in the sphere of unending 'inside' drudgery, but also served to preserve what was for many villagers a highly valued household and village-based community, that could only be maintained by active presence and not by monetary compensation.

As this thesis has argued, by devoting themselves to their farming duties, women contributed to the preservation of the family unit and the village community, at the same time as they – by constantly engaging in self-cultivation – manifested themselves, their families, and the village as decent and durable.

Hence, in many of the land-related situations that this study has concerned, men and women related to, and were differently affected by, the places they inhabited and acted in. This influenced their sense of identity and agency, and consequently their feeling of belonging to a particular place (c.f. McDowell 1996:38).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Drawing on Martin Heidegger's idea that the act of cultivating is one of the fundamental modes in which humans dwell in the world, Young (2005), as mentioned above, wants to revalue the – typically feminine – work of preservation. According to Heidegger, preserving, cultivating, and caring for the soil in the form of agriculture, are activities that create and gather our environment into meaningful places (Heidegger 1971:145-147, Young 2005:125). And as we have seen in Lang

Xanh, farm labour – mostly performed by women – linked together the dwellers, the homes, and the fields into an unbounded social and moral unity. In many respects, this also included the village as a community. The spatial manifestation of identity and belonging that, according to Young, is one of the basic qualities of a home and its preservation, I would claim the same for the fields and farm work as well. Incorporated gendered habits and practices were realised in the labour that the farmers performed in the fields, and through a continuity that linked the past with the present and the future, the dwellers became moored to their environment (c.f. Young 2005:139-140). Men and women's bodily performances of e.g. ancestor worship, house building, and farming turned what was understood as gendered characteristics into lived reality. When they acted as members of households, kin groups, and village community, women and men embodied existing understandings of gender capacities, i.e. they *were* the traits rather than representations of them. In this way, gender-structured practices like habits of inheritance, kinship, and labour division, were incorporated and actually *lived* through women and men's place-based practices. In these actual, placed practices, gendered persons come into being (c.f. e.g. Bourdieu 1977:87-95, Jackson 1989:128, Popenoe 2004:155-56). 'Male' and 'female' knowledge of e.g. ancestor worship and farming in these places generated certain understandings of what was expected and appropriate – and therefore meaningful – to do in that particular place. Through their developed skills and direct involvement with the land, a merging of the capacities and 'demands' of the land, and the gendered capabilities of the acting bodies took place (c.f. Ingold 2011:47, Tilly 1994:26).

This calibration of bodies and environment gave people who were familiar with a place a "muscular consciousness" (Ingold 2011:47), or a "knowledge in the hands" (Merleau-Ponty 1962:166), that made movements into incorporated habits of being in the world. The continuous reiteration of a body's labour, for example, makes the work appear effortless and 'natural'. The movements involved in the labour seem immanent to the body and this, in turn, makes the actor inhabit the place where the work is performed with the ease that comes with 'naturalness' (c.f. Ahmed 2006:56-59). This orientation of bodies towards activities and places is, however, not neutral; it makes some activities and places more available and possible than others. In other words, "what we 'do do' affects what we 'can do.'" (Ahmed 2006:59). And, as the farmers in Lang Xanh gave evidence to, it was a *gendered* muscular knowledge that made them interact with the land in ways particular to male and female actors. For example, when a group of women transplanted a rice field, this place was a female domain where men, if they were to engage in the same activity, could appear awkward and clumsy, and where the atmosphere of female companionship and relaxed socialising risked being disturbed. Ploughing, on the other hand, turned the fields into a male sphere, where individual men worked and women did not have a given place. And because these gendered activities were acted out in particular places,

notions of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' were realised in the ways in which men and women inhabited certain places. The ease with which a transplanting female body, for example, dwelled in a field prepared for this task, gave the femininity of the body an air of self-evidence. The male body appeared as 'naturally' uncomfortable and out of tune in the same environment.

Hence, women and men were oriented towards farmland and residential land in gender-informed ways. Women were oriented towards land mainly through the labour they performed in these places and, as we have seen, the quality and amount of their work were carefully monitored and evaluated by others. Women continuously risked being considered not to work enough. Men, on the other hand, were oriented towards land as 'directors' through their assumed ability to inherit, control, and 'manage' places. Men did not so much risk to be working too little, but to be working with the wrong things, and in this way endanger their positions as heads of households. Every performance of land-related labour, or refrainment thereof, realised the prestige, standing, and morals of each man and woman.

Young (2002) suggests that gender structures bring about constraints and opportunities that inform persons' actions and situate them in a relational way. Even though each person takes to their varying situations according to their own experiences, and shape their practices accordingly, there are certain gender patterns which bring implications that the individual cannot shape or control (Young 2002:419-420). By adopting a conception of gender structures in addition to the more phenomenological conception of lived and placed bodies, a bridge can be established between what is assumed to be relatively irrefutable and pre-reflective gender characteristics, and qualities that are restricting and sometimes even coercive in their preconceptions. This can help us get a broader perspective on how gendering form part of our daily practices. Ideologies and understandings concerning gender capacities and characteristics form structures that women and men relate to and, through their lived bodies, incorporate and make use of in varying degrees. This does not have to be perceived only as repetitive and passive compliance to repressive structures, but can also be actively used as the circumstances available for the actors to work with.

Agency, as Mahmood (2005:148, 157) claims, must not consist of resistance, but can also be the manner and means by which people take action and realise themselves as respectable persons. As this thesis has argued, within the sphere of farming, women in Lang Xanh found an accessible, recognised, and morally sanctioned place for 'self-fashioning'. This self-shaping took place in negotiation with the gender ideologies that were available to them, both on a collective and on a more individual level (Alsop et al. 2002:81, Mahmood 2001). For the female farmers, the cultivation of their high morals and assumed female capacity of selfless concern and diligence took

place every time they laboured the fields. In this way, the farming women instilled in themselves, and incorporated, respectability and virtue. The actual practicing of farm labour generated not only skilled actors, but also women with a cultivated morality. Thus, the bodily act of farm labour was attuned to recognised feminine virtuousness (c.f. Mahmood 2005:136).

A conception of the activities of bodies in places underscores the importance of the body as a physical and material entity, as well as a centre for experience and agency – a lived location for acting in, and experiencing, the world. The body in place is the vantage point from where we experience the world and where our consciousness appears in material as well as spatial form (Low 2003:10). If our subjective relation to the world is formed from how we, as bodily beings, orient ourselves to it, then the capacities which men and women are perceived to embody become crucial for how we dwell. A phenomenological approach to the gendered body means that the environment in which the body lives and acts cannot be omitted, or secluded, from the understanding of the meaning of gendering. All practices are intrinsically situated in particular places, and as such, actions become inseparable from the domain of spatiality. In this way, places are defined by the actions and tasks that they give room to (e.g. Ingold 2000, Moore 1996) and, conversely, accessibility and opportunity to act are dependent on each person's relation to a place (e.g. Ahmed 2006).

The knowledge people held and the practices they engaged in were, as far as farming was concerned, directed towards and actually situated in the fields and therefore we can say that Lang Xanh men and women formed a mutually constitutive relationship with the fields they cultivated and the residential land they inhabited (c.f. e.g. Tilley 1994:26-27, Ingold 2000). Moreover, the postures of male and female dwellers, the way they moved and worked on the fields, e.g., were creative of a world that in certain ways held complementing and contrasting possibilities for action and approach, depending on the gender of the labourers (c.f. Young 2005:30, Ingold 2000:354, 358-360, Bourdieu 1977:89-92). In other words, by embodying the movements, manners, and qualities of farming women and men, Lang Xanh inhabitants disposed themselves as recognised feminine or masculine dwellers in this place. However, as is hopefully evident by now, when men and women worked the fields – or involved themselves with residential land – they did not do this on equivalent, or neutral, terms. Their positions as gendered beings situated them differently, which in turn influenced men and women's possibilities to act on and relate to these places (c.f. Tilley 1994:26). From this perspective, any notion of gender-neutral dwellers appears rather impossible. Dwelling occurs all the time, it is how we live, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that male and female farmers, as gendered subjects in locations, to a considerably extent dwelled in gendered ways.

SAMMANFATTNING

Den här avhandlingens syfte är att utforska hur jordbrukare i en by i norra Vietnam genom sitt agerande och hanterande av jordbruks- och tomtmark skapade och utformade sig själva och andra som kvinnliga och manliga aktörer. Med utgångspunkt från dessa två typer av mark – jordbruks- och tomtmark – och de handlingar som utspelades där, är avsikten att undersöka hur platsbaserade handlingar utgjorde en del av en kontinuerlig genusprocess. Två analytiska ansatser dominerar undersökningen av genusprocesser: Den ena tar sin grund i ett fenomenologiskt inspirerat perspektiv där plats, kropp och handling utgör den helhet varigenom kvinnor och män uppfattar sina egna, andras och världens beskaffenheter och möjligheter. Det andra perspektivet är mera strukturellt och kombineras med det förstnämnda för att upptäcka och påvisa några av de förförståelser, och dominerande diskurser, som omger idéer om kvinnlighet och manlighet.

De ideologiska diskurser som omgett vietnamesiska kvinnor på landsbygden har varierat beroende på statens synsätt och behov av att lyfta fram olika egenskaper som önskvärda eller ej. Jordbrukare har omgetts av liknande, motsägelsefulla men dominerande, statligt anstiftade diskurser. De har framställts som alltifrån samhällets stöttepelare till outvecklade och bakåtsträvande. De statligt sanktionerade diskurserna i samklang med, och inte sällan också i överensstämmelse med, lokala uppfattningar om önskade och oönskade manliga och kvinnliga egenskaper, utgjorde

del av den verklighet som jordbrukande kvinnor och män omgavs av och var tvugna att förhålla sig till – såväl beträffande arbete som andra förhållningssätt till jordbruks- och tomtmark.

Centralt för studien är relationen mellan plats och agerande, d v s hur kroppar formas och uppfattas genom sina platsbaserade handlingar och hur detta också påverkar de betydelser en plats kan tillskrivas, samt hur manliga respektive kvinnliga jordbrukare får tillgång till dessa platser. Ingen av dessa två typer av mark var "neutrala" platser, tvärtom spelade det en avgörande roll om aktören var en man eller kvinna för vilka handlingar som utfördes, samt vilka betydelser handlingarna tillskrevs. Även tillgången till jordbruks- och tomtmark påverkades starkt av uppfattningar om genusegenskaper.

Byborna hade ett vad Ingold (2000:149) kallar "relationellt" förhållande till tomtmark. I jämförelse med jordbruksmark hade tomtmark, trots statligt ägande, fortsatt att hanteras på ett traditionellt vis. Bland annat styrdes tillgång till, samt kontroll och arv av tomtmark i mångt och mycket på traditionell väg. I enlighet med en patrilinjär och patrilokal struktur var det främst män som blev arvtagare till hus och tomt.

En anledning till att patrilinealitet har haft en så stor påverkan på arv och tillgång till tomtmark och hus är det regelbundna praktiserandet av förfädersdyrkan som fortfarande, trots revolution och jordreformer där släkttillhörighet och marktillgång sökt skiljas åt, upprätthålls i hemmen. Själva förberedelserna och utförandet av förfadersdyrkan gjordes ofta av den äldsta kvinnan i ett hushåll, men det var, i de allra flesta fall, genom att rikta sig till makens förfäder som kvinnan kunde utföra ritualen. Varje gång som hon ägnade sig åt förfadersdyrkan, påmindes hon om sin relation till platsen hon bebodde och till de förfäder som stod i relation till denna plats. På så vis återetablerades hennes position som den som inkorporerats från sin fars patrilinjära släkt och in i sin makes motsvarighet. I sin egenskap av kvinna kunde hon inte föra någon av dessa släkten vidare, men genom att aktivt delta i vårdandet och närandet av sin makes patrilinjära släktled skapade hon sig en plats, både i släktgruppen och i huset.

Tillgång till jordbruksmark hade, å andra sidan, genomgått en helt annan utveckling. När staten sammanförde all jordbruksmark i kollektivjordbruk och utverkade ensamrätt till markägande, för att senare dela ut brukningsrätter till folket efter att kollektiven avvecklats, skedde samtidigt ett lösgörande, eller avskiljande, mellan jordbrukare och enkilda fält. Den andliga koppling som tidigare fanns även till åkermark försvann när staten kontrollerade all mark. Till skillnad från tomtmark, som allokerats på obestämd tid, så fick jordbrukarna tjugoåriga brukningsrätter till

fält. I den allokering som skedde baserad på 1993 års landlag, var det arbete och inte släktskap eller kön som avgjorde om en person skulle få tillgång till åkermark eller ej. På så sätt intog staten den roll som män tidigare innehaft och män ställdes i samma beroendeposition som främst kvinnor tidigare besuttit.

En könsbaserad arbetsfördelning var en viktig och bidragande del i det dagliga skapandet av kvinnlighet och manlighet. Uppdelningen av arbetsuppgifter inom jordbruket var ofta tydliga, inte minst när det gällde våtrisodling. Många bybor ansåg att arbetsfördelningen mellan kvinnor och män var självklar och att den, under rådande förhållanden med mycket manuellt arbete och få tekninska hjälpmedel, inte kunde se ut på annat sätt utan att strida mot kvinnors och mäns "natur" och mot det arbete som risfälten krävde för att ge god skörd. Mäns hårdare och stelare kroppar och fumligare fingrar var inte lämpade för att vare sig transplantera ris eller skörda det mogna riset och knyta det till nekar. Detta var arbetsuppgifter som den mjuka, böjliga och fingerfärdiga kvinnokroppen utförde bäst. Män arbetade helst med jordbrukssysslor som kunde utföras stående och, i kontrast till kvinnor, oftast enskilt snarare än i grupp. Att arbeta hårt för (den patrilinjära) familjens bästa var en väl integrerad del av kvinnlighet i byn. Det var även ett sätt för enskilda kvinnor att – inom vedertagna diskurser gällande "god" kvinnlighet – profilera sig som moraliskt respektabla kvinnor (c.f. Mahmood 2005).

Män däremot, behövde inte bevisa sin ärbarhet och anständighet genom att arbeta hårt på fälten. De förväntades helst arbeta med något mer lukrativt och inkomstbringande än det småskaliga och hushållbaserade jordbruk som innevånarna i byn ägnade sig åt. Deras manlighet skyddades och stärktes snarare av att hålla sig borta från jordbruksarbete och låta kvinnorna i hushållet bidra med den mesta arbetskraften. Det var ett tecken på fattigdom om en man behövde ägna sig åt "kvinnliga" sysslor som ristransplantering och risskörd.

Det kan konstateras att risfälten under stora delar av året var en kvinnlig domän där kvinnor kunde visa och stärka sitt anseende som en hårt arbetande kvinna. Genom att gradvis ägna sig åt genusspecifika jordbrukssysslor utvecklade kvinnor och män kroppar som var lämpade till olika uppgifter och som tog sig an arbete och åkermark på olika vis. Deras relation till jordbruksarbete och vad de förväntades göra på risfälten blev en integrerad och praktiskt tillämpad del av att leva som kvinna respektive man i byn.

Eftersom män förväntades arbeta med annat än jordbruk och ofta behövde lämna byn för att hitta försörjning, var det kvinnor, tillsammans med barn och gamla, som spenderade mest tid i byn. Denna tendens till skingring av byn och dess familjer medförde en ökad medvetenhet om att bygemenskapen, som ännu var en viktig del

av identiteten hos många bybor, på sätt och vis var hotad att minska i betydelse. En viktig del av idén med bygemenskap var utbytet av jordbruksarbete mellan hushållen. Numera hände det relativt ofta att ett hushåll betalade för det extra arbete som behövdes under intensivare perioder istället för att ingå i utbytesrelationer med andra bybor. För de innevånare som ville värna om gemesamhetskänslan var det viktigt att inte monetär ersättning dominerade. Genom att ingå långsiktiga överenskommelser med andra jordbrukande kvinnor, där de hjälpte och utbytte tjänster med varandra, kunde bygemenskapen fortfarande upprätthållas och manifesteras på ett konkret vis. Egenskaper som solidaritet, omtanke och osjälviskhet, som förknippades med den rurala bygemenskapen, kunde på så sätt anses bevaras av kvinnornas arbetsorganisation. Städerna må vara rika på tillgångar, men byn var i gengälld rik på gemenskap, som flera bönder uttryckte det.

Utbytet av jordbrukssysslor var dessutom strakt präglat av genustillhörighet. Män och kvinnor bytte inte tjänster med varandra på samma sätt som kvinnor gjorde sinsemellan. Det var sällsynt att män och kvinnor arbetade med samma sysslor och sida vid sida, något som kvinnor gjorde ofta och som utgjorde en viktig del i den sociala gemenskapen som jordbrukande kvinnor ingick i. Denna uppdelning av sysslor och plats mellan kvinnor och män bidrog ytterligare till de pågående genusprocesserna.

En slutsats som kan dras är att kvinnor och män relaterar till jordbruksarbete samt till jordbruks- och tomtmark på genusspecifika vis. Till exempel tar män tomtmark i besittning i egenskap av representanter för den patrilinjära familjen. Som sådana har de möjlighet att knyta samman plats och förfäder och på så sätt skapa en harmonisk samexistens mellan tidigare, kommande och nu levande människor och platser. Kvinnor tar tomtmark i anspråk genom det arbete med att bevara och vårda den patrilinjära familjen som de kan bidra med. På åkermarken har kvinnor möjlighet att ta plats och bevisa sitt värde som respektabla kvinnor genom att arbeta hårt och osjälviskt. På så vis återskapar och etablerar jordbrukande kvinnor sin plats i den patrilinjära familjen. Detta samtidigt som de aktivt, med hjälp av de ideologier och diskurser om vedertagen kvinnlighet som fanns tillgängliga, kunde forma och framställa sig själva som dugliga och dygdiga kvinnor varje gång de arbetade på fälten (c.f. Mahmood 2005).

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