HERE WE ARE ALL BROTHERS:
GENDER RELATIONS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF
MASCULINE IDENTITIES IN A NƯNG FÀN SLỊNG
VILLAGE

by

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship surrounding questions of masculinity demonstrates that masculinity is not a natural, homogeneous category but a social construction that varies across space and time. This ethnography explores what constitutes masculinity among the Nùng Fản Sling (Nùng), a Tai-speaking ethnic minority living in Northeastern Vietnam, through an examination of cultural assumptions that premise social practices and relationships that construct and reproduce gendered identities. Data, generated by qualitative ethnographic research methods and interpreted through the interdependent analytic categories of culture, identity, and gender, reveal that Nùng masculinity cannot be characterized as dichotomously opposed to, nor as formed in isolation from femininity. Rather, masculinity is reproduced in a system of gendered relations structured around the patrilineage. The socialization of boys as permanent and girls as provisional members of patrilineages construct men as primal and women as marginal members of Nùng society. Nùng assumptions and practices, such as conceptions of love, flirting, and men’s and women’s sexuality reveal that male-female relationships are often marked by distance and contestation. Husband-wife relationships show that gendered practices and positions of married men and women are marked by practicality and masculine privilege. Men’s practices, positions, and relationships, including those of Nùng priests, illuminate Nùng masculinity as founded upon permanence and privilege within the patrilineage, rather than on characteristics exclusively associated with men. However, men’s patrilineal privilege is buttressed by assumptions that men have greater capacity than women for the same kinds of characteristics. Drawing on Nùng concepts of self and difference, Taoist conceptions of yin-yang, and animist beliefs I argue that the inequalities between men and women, in terms of human characteristics, are overlapping differences of degree. Drawing on local
Confucianist prescripts for ordering hierarchical social relationships I argue that the disparities between men and women in terms of power and privilege are reproduced by gendered positions within the patrilineage. Cultural assumptions about the nature of men and women, and gendered practices, positions, and relationships demonstrate that heightened spiritual, mental, and physical capacity taken together with patrilineal permanence constitute the hegemonic form of masculinity among the Nùng.

Keywords: masculinity; gender relations; culture; identity; Vietnam; Nung

Fan Sling

Subject Terms: Masculinity—Cross-cultural studies; Masculinity—Asia, Southeastern; Masculinity—Vietnam; Men—Vietnam—Identity; Gender identity—Vietnam; Man-Woman relationships—Vietnam
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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2004 I arrived in the Nùng Fản Sling\(^1\) village of Dụ Vãng,\(^2\) Lạng Sơn Province, Vietnam (see Map 1.1) intending to conduct ethnographic research into questions surrounding the construction and reproduction of ethnic identity and culture. During a previous research trip to Vietnam, in the year 2000, I became intrigued by the popular representations, descriptions, and fairly outrageous tales and claims made by members of the Vietnamese ethnic majority, the Kinh, about the country’s diverse ethnic minority populations. My curiosity had been piqued, and I determined to find out what ethnic minority people had to say for themselves about who they are and what they do.

My reasons for pursuing questions of identity among the Nùng Fản Sling in particular were fairly simple. First, there has been very little written about Nùng peoples in either Vietnamese or English ethnographic literature, and even less that specifically addresses the Nùng Fản Sling sub-group. Secondly, gaining permission to conduct research in Vietnam is dependent upon having a network of relationships with individuals working in research institutions and at all levels of government bureaucracy. My network of relationships, facilitated by Professor Michael Howard’s network of relationships, made Lạng Sơn Province the most feasible place in which I could obtain permission to conduct research among an ethnic minority group.

In 2003, I accompanied Professor Michael Howard to Lạng Sơn Province. During this trip we visited several Nùng Fản Sling villages to determine an

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\(^1\) Throughout this dissertation I often refer to Nùng Fản Sling simply as Nùng, as they themselves often do.

\(^2\) In the anthropological tradition of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, I refer to the village where I conducted research with the pseudonym “Dụ Vãng.” Furthermore, personal names of research participants are withheld, and I refer to the people who participated in my research with pseudonyms.
appropriate place for me to conduct my intended research. In several of the
villages it was apparent, by means of observation and conversation, that many of
the inhabitants were actively integrating into the society and culture of Vietnam’s
ethnic majority. The Nùng Fản Sling of Dụ Vãng are also being influenced by,
responding to, and interacting with the values, ideas, beliefs, and practices of
mainstream Kinh society, though to a much lesser degree than the inhabitants of
many other Nùng villages. Dụ Vãng is geographically further removed than other
Nùng villages from the ever expanding spheres of Kinh social, cultural, political,
and economic hegemony (see Wangsgard 2008). I recognize that there are
cultural assumptions and social practices that flow in and out of Dụ Vãng that do
not originate from a sealed or bounded social life in the village, and that also
transcend geographies of place (e.g. official government policies on gender
equality; state-run media projects to disseminate official ideology; popular
domestic, and international TV dramas; and villagers’ frequent interactions with
the members and societies of Vietnam’s dominant ethnic majority and other
ethnic minorities); and these variously interact with the assumptions and
practices of the inhabitants of the village. However, my primary research
interests initially revolved around Nùng Fản Sling identity and culture, rather than
attempting to trace “cultural flows” and interactions. The inhabitants of Dụ Vãng,
for the most part, identify very strongly with their “Nùng-ness.” All of the females
and a good portion of the males continue to wear traditional dress, speak
primarily Nùng Fản Sling in the village, subscribe and adhere to traditional
beliefs, and practice traditional customs. After meeting with Dụ Vãng’s headman
and other village notables to discuss my proposed research activities, it was
agreed that I would return the following year to take up residence with the
headman’s family and conduct research in the village for one year.

After receiving research sponsorship from Vietnam National University’s
Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Sciences in Hà Nội, I returned
to Vietnam in the summer of 2004. I submitted my research plan to Lạng Sơn
Province’s Department of Culture and Information for approval, and was granted
permission by the department to conduct my intended research. On the
appointed day, and accompanied by a representative from the Institute of Vietnamese Studies and Development Sciences (IVSDS), I left Hà Nội for Lạng Sơn. We first went to Lạng Sơn Province’s Department of Culture and Information so that I could be introduced to the director and discuss my intended research with him. After the director was satisfied that I would not get myself into trouble or mischief, the representative from the IVSDS was given an official letter of introduction to be presented to lower, local level officials. We were then assigned a representative from the provincial Department of Culture and Information, and the three of us headed for the People’s Committee offices in the district where Dụ Vãng is located for further introductions. We met briefly with the secretary of the district level People’s Committee, who directed us to the district’s Culture Office. We then met with the director of the district Culture Office, who showed us a map of the district and imparted to us some general information about the area. We were then introduced to the director’s assistant, who would accompany us to the commune level People’s Committee as the district representative, and away we went.

It was late afternoon when our group of four arrived at the commune level People’s Committee offices. The small, cramped main office was full of commune level officials just adjourned from a meeting, and thick with the smell of bodies, cigarette smoke, and liquor. The commune People’s Committee president, Mr. Định, eased himself out from behind the only desk in the office and navigated his way through the two sofas, the tea table, filing cabinets, bookshelves, and other people occupying the office’s central space. Mr. Định greeted the provincial and district level representatives, whom he was acquainted with, and asked us our business. The representative from the IVSDS introduced himself and handed Mr. Định my official letters of introduction as he gave a brief summary of what I was about. Mr. Định turned to me and asked if I could speak Vietnamese. When I responded intelligibly, his face brightened and we were all invited to crowd into the limited seating with the other officials present and have tea and rice liquor. I then began fielding questions about myself, my studies, my hometown, my marital status, my research plans, and the like. After several rounds of rice liquor
and tea, Mr. Định announced that it was getting late and I should come back in the morning when he could accompany me to Dụ Văng for introductions with the headman. With that, our group of four excused ourselves and headed back to the provincial seat, Lạng Sơn City. Throughout this day, and the next, as we moved down the steps of hierarchical bureaucracy the level of officious bureaucratic stuffiness was replaced by a sort of rough and tumble, but more relaxed hierarchy of deference and condescension. Perhaps it was the decrease in levels of officiousness and the gradual leaving behind of crowded, noisy and fast paced urban spaces, or perhaps it was the increase in the levels of rice liquor consumed, or some combination of these, but as we moved further into “the sticks” my comfort level increased.

As we left the commune People’s Committee office, the representative from the IVSDS quietly told me that I should put 100,000 Vietnamese Đông (VND, the currency of Vietnam)\(^3\) into an envelope and give it to the representative from the Department of Culture and Information (apparently, the district level representative, from whom a letter of introduction was not required nor provided, did not warrant a “gift of gratitude”). I was not surprised at his suggestion, as I was familiar with these “gifts of gratitude” which constitute a sort of unofficial yet official part of government officials’ remuneration, much like gratuities or “tips” in the West. However, I soon learned that I was not very savvy in the giving of these payments. We first dropped the district representative back at the district Culture Office, and then proceeded to the Department of Culture and Information. Upon our arrival, I thanked the provincial representative for her help and handed her the envelope. Looking and sounding embarrassed, she objected, saying, “no, no, this is my job, my responsibility.” I did not expect her to refuse my gift and I hesitated a moment. Then the representative from the IVSDS took the envelope from me and stuffed it into the provincial representative’s hands. She thanked us both and hurried into her office.

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\(^3\) At the time of my research, 1 U.S. dollar (USD) was equivalent to 15,000 Vietnamese Đông (VND).
The car then dropped me at my accommodations in Lạng Sơn City, and as the representative from the IVSDS and I said our farewells I handed him an envelope containing a gift of gratitude. He asked me what it was, and I said it was for him. He responded by saying, “no, no, this is my job, it’s what I do.” I told him he should take it anyway, but he declined again. I then asked him if I should give an “envelope” to the commune president when I met with him the following day. He told me that I should, but because the commune president is only a commune level official and obviously rough around the edges I should only give him 50,000 VND. I then asked him directly why he was encouraging me to give gifts of gratitude to others while he himself would not take the envelope I was offering him. He simply said he was doing his job.

Later that evening I was talking with my good friend Lê, a very bright and socially savvy Vietnamese woman, who I often consulted about all things Vietnamese. I told her about my awkward attempts to give gifts of gratitude, and she explained that even if someone refuses it is expected that the giver will continue to press the recipient until the gift is accepted. She then told me that the most subtle way to give a gift a gratitude (she used the more frank word hối lộ, which means “to bribe”) is to use the magic phrase, tôi biếu bạn đi uống nước, which literally means “I gift friend go drink liquid,” or “go have a drink on me.” Lê then advised me that it would be best if I did not go alone to my introduction with the village headman on the following day for reasons of practicality and appearance. Arriving at such an introduction with a compatriot renders one less vulnerable, in terms of having someone you know and trust to consult with during social negotiations; someone who can be relied on to speak on your behalf, which diminishes the risk of losing face by having to speak too directly to those you are negotiating with; and it shows that you have relationships with other people and connections with indeterminate social networks. Lê agreed to accompany me to the commune on the following day.

4 Of course, these consultations proved very helpful with understanding and navigating Vietnamese society, but often times did not hold in Nùng Fän Sling sociocultural contexts.
Field Journal Excerpt

The day got off to a great start when my alarm didn’t go off. Lê showed up at 7:30 a.m. and woke me up—I was supposed to be at the commune People’s Committee office at 8:00 a.m. Lê and I arrived at the office about 8:45 a.m. I apologized for being late and told Mr. Định that my alarm didn’t go off—he looked neither impressed nor convinced. The three of us left the office and drove to the dirt road that leads up to the village, which soon became a fairly steep single-track trail. Beautiful mountains and forests (pine and deciduous), though sparse. We arrived at Mr. Pào’s home (the village headman [trưởng bản], who also serves as the hamlet headman [trưởng thôn]) and sat down to tea. We were soon joined by Mr. Đức, who is the village secretary [bí thư bản]. Mr. Định made official introductions, and gave them a brief rundown of my research plan, emphasizing that I wanted to learn about “cultural nuggets” [đặc điểm văn hoá] like basketry [đan giỏ, đan rổ], weaving [dệt vải], folksongs [dân ca], and the lion dance [múa sư tử]. Several members of the provincial Department of Culture and Information have been to the village to conduct cultural research in the past, and their research has focused on recording and describing material culture, dances and songs, and the like. So I was not surprised when Mr. Định assumed that these were also my primary research interests. However, government researchers had never stayed in the village for more than a day at a time, so my intended research was new ground for everyone. As Mr. Định spoke, Pào and Đức cast a few wary glances towards me. I assume they were mostly uncertain of me rather than my research interests as described Mr. Định, as they are familiar with the kinds of research topics he outlined. Apparently, my initial visit to Dụ Vãng was a bit vague in their minds, and later in the day Pào’s wife, Thị, told me that when Michael and I proposed my research last year, no one seriously thought that a “modern American” would really come back and live in the village for a year. When Mr. Định had finished his formal introduction and summary of my research plans, he asked me if he had left anything out or if I wanted to add anything. I briefly reiterated some of what Mr. Định had told them, but emphasized my interest in learning about Nùng identity [bản sắc dân tộc Nùng]
and daily activities and life [cuộc sống và sinh hoạt bình thường hàng ngày] in Dụ Vãng, as well as the importance and meaning [sự quan trọng và ý nghĩa] of the “cultural nuggets” Mr. Định had mentioned. I recounted my visit to the village last year and asked their permission again to live and conduct research in Dụ Vãng, emphasizing that I did not want to inconvenience them. After my spiel, Pão and Đức assured me that they remembered my visit and our agreement. Pão told me that it would not be an inconvenience to have me stay with his family, and that if I want to learn about anything Nùng I had come to the right place because no one knows better than he and his brothers, and this is why government researchers had visited Dụ Vãng in the past. Đức told me that it was good that I had worked through the proper channels and had the proper introductions. As such, he could see no reason to refuse my request. After this exchange, Pão and Đức seemed to relax a bit and began addressing me directly instead of directing their comments and questions to the commune president—whether because formalities had concluded, or because they were reassured that we could intelligibly communicate with one another, or for some other reason, I am uncertain. Either way, I assume they felt more comfortable because instead of another round of tea we had a round of rice liquor, hot off the fire.

As noted above, when I began my research, I intended to explore the construction and reproduction of ethnic identity among the Nùng rather than specifically pursue the question of Nùng masculinity or examine gender relations. However, based on past ethnographic research experiences, I kept my eyes and ears open to unanticipated lines of inquiry. After I had settled into the village, I noticed that a favorite topic of conversation was me and the very strange way in which I went about being a man. I was given perspectives, advice, instructions, exhortations and reprimands about my own masculinity from males and females of all ages. These instructions, etc. were often given by way of contrast between the instructors’ perceptions of my behavior and his or her ideas about a proper man. The people I lived and interacted with, asked questions of, and observed would most often articulate cultural assumptions about masculinity when I would
transgress deeply held beliefs about masculine behavior. This is not to say that people’s beliefs are “either/or” propositions; Nùng culture allows for a range of masculine possibilities. It was when my ideas, practices, values, moods, temperaments, and social relationships fell outside this range that I would receive my most insightful and illuminating lessons in Nùng masculinity. As people in Dụ Vàng seemed very willing, and even determined to share their assumptions about male propriety with me, I decided to narrow my research topic to focus on masculine identities among the Nùng Fản Sling, and began an exploration of the research question that resulted in this ethnography: what constitutes masculinity among the Nùng Fản Sling, or, what does it mean to be a Nùng Fản Sling man?

GENERAL INTRODUCTIONS: PEOPLE AND PLACE

The Nùng

The Nùng Fản Sling are one of approximately twenty Central Tai-speaking sub-groups categorized under the general ethnonym “Nùng” in Vietnam (Howard 2002). As of 1999, the official number of Nùng people living in Vietnam was 856,412. Eighty-four percent of this Nùng population, or 721,040, dwell in the northeast of the country: Hà Giang, Cao Bằng, Lào Cai, Lạng Sơn, Tuyên Quang, Yên Bái, Thái Nguyên, Phú Thọ, Bắc Giang, and Quảng Ninh provinces (see Map 1.1). Among these provinces, Lạng Sơn has the highest Nùng population in the country, at 302,415. The neighboring province of Cao Bằng has the second largest Nùng population at 161,134 (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 1999). The ethnonym “Nùng” has been officially ascribed to these groups of people in Vietnam since the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 (Nguyen n.d.).

Ethnicity is by no means a fixed given. Ethnic identity is subject to the perspectives of the members of a given group of people, the perspectives of other proximate groups, the relationships between groups that shape these, and the power differentials reproduced in relationships between groups. This is the case with the Central Tai-speaking peoples of northern Vietnam who have been
officially recognized and categorized by the Vietnamese state, historians, ethnographers, and linguists as the Nùng (see Figure 1.1, and Map 1.2). That “Nùng” is an ethnonym officially recognized and ascribed to particular groups of people in Vietnam has as much to do with the politicking of nation-states and the establishment of national borders where none had existed previously as it has to do with local systems of identification and self-reference. To be sure, there are
Map 1.2 General Distribution of Ethnolinguistic Families in Southeast Asia

Sources: Directorate of Intelligence (1970), King and Wilder (2003), Shi et al (2005), and Wangsgard (2008)
historical, cultural, and linguistic connections between the various groups of people subsumed under the general ethnic category, “Nùng.” As well, there are historical, cultural, and linguistic connections between the Nùng and those people officially ascribed the ethnonym “Tày” in northern Vietnam, and with those people officially ascribed the ethnonym “Zhuang” in southern China (Barlow 2005; Bế 1992; Bế, Nguyễn, and Chu 1992; Lâm and Nguyễn 1978; Nguyen n.d.; Vương Toàn 2004).

There is general consensus among Chinese, Vietnamese, and Western archaeologists, ethnographers, historians, linguists, and population geneticists that the origins of the Nùng populations living in present-day Vietnam can be traced to southeastern Yunnan and southern Guangxi provinces, China (see Map 1.3). Most of the present-day Nùng populations in Vietnam migrated from Guangxi Province, China (presently the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region) beginning approximately 300 years ago. This migration was not characterized by a mass exodus, but took place as a series of movements over the space of 200 plus years as individual families and clans fled the political turmoil, violence, and blood shed that embroiled Guangxi in the Nineteenth-century, and went in search of new agricultural land (Barlow 2005; Bế 1992; Lâm and Nguyễn 1978; Nguyen n.d.). Working within a historical timeframe of 200 – 300 years BP, and taking the Sino-Vietnamese border as a given delimitative of not only sovereign states, but also disparate ethnic groups can mislead to the assumption that the Nùng are a foreign minority recently immigrated or displaced to a foreign land. Had an enduring political boundary not been established between China and Vietnam in the Eleventh-century, as well as other historical events not discussed here, the migrations of Vietnam’s Nùng populations might be considered minor familial movements within a region these people and their ancestors have inhabited since time immemorial (Barlow 2005; Chen et al 2006; Edmondson forthcoming; Shi et al 2005; Su et al 1999). But this is not the case. Historical and political processes have convened in a way that re-create the Nùng (as well as the Zhuang and Tày) as a disparate ethnic minority group in the imaginations of
Map 1.3 Provinces of China

Source: http://www.maplandia.com
individuals who bear the ethnonym, other minority and majority ethnic groups, government officials, and international literati.

The ethnonym “Nùng” derives from the clan name Nông (also transcribed as Nồng), one of the four most powerful clans of an ethnolinguistic group of Central Tai-speakers (see Figure 1.1), presently known as Zhuang in southern China, and Tày-Nùng in Vietnam, who have historically and prehistorically inhabited the present-day Sino-Vietnamese borderlands (Anderson 2007; Barlow 2005; Lu Mingtian 1985; Ma Y 1994; Yao et al 2002; Yu Tianzi et al 1988). The Zhuang and the Tày-Nùng, it is almost universally agreed, descended from a Tai-Kadai-speaking group first identified by Han Chinese observers as the Bai Yue. The Bai Yue, meaning 100 Yue, is a classical Chinese term used in reference to various peoples believed to belong loosely to one group, the Yue. The Han Shu, a classical Chinese text covering the history of the Western Han from 206 BCE to 25 CE, states, “From Jiaozhi [present-day Vietnam] to Guaiji [in present-day Zhejiang] is seven or eight thousand li [classical Chinese unit of distance]. The Bai Yue live everywhere.” (c.f. Barlow 2005:http://mcel.pacificu.edu/as/resources/zhuang/zhuang1.htm#anchor_chapter_47857; bracketed text is mine). The various groups of people labelled “Yue” by the Han, spread from northern Vietnam northward into present-day Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Jiangxi provinces, China (see Map 1.3). There is a tendency among Chinese scholars to hold the interpretations and analyses of classical texts in extremely high regard, even to the point of being infallible truths. Although there may have existed some commonalities among the Bai Yue, to rely upon classical appellations and categories such as “Yue” can mislead one to assume greater unity and similarities among loosely related, or even unrelated peoples than is warranted. However, archaeological evidence, including cliff paintings, burials, bronze and wooden artifacts, and written language does convincingly correlate with later historical evidence gleaned from classical Chinese histories that a Zhuang-Tày-Nùng culture complex (or, at least, a common progenitorial culture complex) has

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5 The Tày and the Nùng are often collectively referred to in the ethnographic literature as Tày-Nùng; I also follow this convention when collectively referring to these groups.
existed and evolved in the regions of southern China and northern Vietnam since at least China’s Bronze Age (2000 BCE – 700 BCE)\(^6\) (Barlow 2005; Chen Guoqiang et al 1988; Took 2005; Yu Tianjin et al 1988).

In this text I will use the well-established, and locally recognized and adopted ethnonyms “Nùng” and “Nùng Fản Slingen” when describing or referring to the inhabitants of Dụ Vãng. The term “Fản Slingen” is the Nùng equivalent for the Chinese term “Wancheng” (Vạn Thành in Vietnamese) (Lâm and Nguyễn 1978).

Within the borders of present-day Daxin county, Guangxi Province, China there existed from approximately 1369 – 1906 eight of the longest lived native chieftaincies, or tusi, in southwest China (see Map 1.4). These were Xialei, Anping, Taiping, Encheng, Quanming, Yangu, Mingying, and Wancheng, established in the second year of Ming imperial rule (1368 – 1644) (Took 2005). Referring to one’s self or one’s dialect as “Fản Slingen” indicates a “Wancheng person” or the “Wancheng language;” in other words, a Nùng person from Wancheng chieftaincy.

**Dụ Vãng**

The “legend” of the establishment of Dụ Vãng was told to me in a very practical, unelaborated way. It goes something like this: Five generations ago, three brothers and their wives migrated from China in search of new land to farm and to get away from the bad conditions there. They came to this place and established the village. This story was told to me from the perspectives of one man in his seventies and two men in their forties who had children of marriageable age. Thus, these men’s perspectives ignored the two generations of Dụ Vãng inhabitants that were younger than themselves in their retelling of the story (i.e. young married men and women in their mid twenties to early thirties, and their own children’s generation, many of whom were just reaching the age of

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\(^6\) For an in-depth and meticulously researched discussion of the identity of the Zhuang-Tày-Nùng progenitors, see Barlow’s *The Zhuang: A Longitudinal Study of Their History and Their Culture* (2005: http://mcel.pacificu.edu/as/resources/zhuang/index.html).
marriageability). It was later pointed out to me, in conversations with other Dụ Vãng inhabitants, that the village had actually been established seven
generations ago (roughly 200 years). The Nùng Fản Sling practice patrilineal exogamy, and all patrilineal relatives who are separated by seven generations or less are considered kin, and thus unmarriageable. I was told on several occasions that members of the youngest generation in Dụ Vãng (unmarried teenagers and children) would not have to look outside the village to find mates for their future children because the next, yet to be born generation will be the eighth generation born in Dụ Vãng.

Dụ Vãng is situated towards the upper end of a narrow mountain valley; one of many such valleys that criss-cross the Mẫu Sơn massif. The inhabitants of Dụ Vãng are primarily farmers, practicing wet-rice agriculture in the bottoms and on terraced slopes of the Dụ Vãng valley proper, as well as in numerous
intersecting draws and ravines that characterize the local topography. In the narrow valley bottoms and terraces, the residents of Dụ Vãng also cultivate maize, potatoes and sweet potatoes, a variety of green leafy vegetables, melons and squash (see Plates 1.1 – 1.13). Most households have gardens, where they grow plums, papaya, garlic, ginger, saffron, and sometimes pumpkins. They keep chickens, ducks and pigs for eggs and meat, and buffalo and cows for the purposes of plowing fields and threshing paddy rice. Several households also raise doves for meat. Dụ Vãng inhabitants also collect wild foods that are available in the area, such as honey, bee larvae, anise, a variety of grasshoppers, olives, berries, and certain leaves of edible plants.

Every household in Dụ Vãng practices extensive agriculture, animal husbandry, and some gathering, which provide the primary subsistence base for the villagers. However, many people pursue additional occupations to earn a supplementary cash income. The principal cash generating activity is selling excess agricultural produce and animals, as well as wild “cash crops” (e.g. anise) and animals (e.g. snakes). This selling takes place at a weekly market, or buyers of livestock and wholesale produce will sometimes come to the village in the appropriate harvest season. Besides these means of generating cash income, in which every household in Dụ Vãng participates to some degree or another, a few men work wage jobs. One man, Mr. Lợi, held a salaried government position in the commune level People’s Committee. Mr. Lợi’s son also worked a wage job for the state-owned power company in Lạng Sơn. Two households owned forests planted with coniferous trees (the result of a German development project) that they harvested and sold. One man, Du, worked in the mines of Đồng Mò, and was also applying to go to Malaysia as a migrant laborer to work in a bicycle tire factory. As well, the village of Dụ Vẳng boasts four practicing “priests” [cạ̌n sláy, ławọ sláy].7 Không, Pào, Linh, and Cảo, who travel and work throughout the district in which the village is located, in neighboring districts, as well as in Dụ

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7 The Nùng terms cạ̌n sláy and ławọ sláy can be variously translated as “priest,” “shaman,” “sorcerer,” or “diviner.” Nùng cạ̌n sláy/ławọ sláy do not fit neatly into any one of these English categories. I will refer to them as “priests” because of the gendered notions this term carries with it, and because all Nùng cạ̌n sláy/ławọ sláy are men.
Vãng (see Plates 1.14 – 1.18). These priests are compensated with money and meat by those requesting their services.

Dụ Vãng consists of sixty households [hồn]. A typical Nùng household consists of a husband and wife couple, their unmarried children, and a married son, his wife and children. Once the mother and father of a household die, the married son’s family who is living with them remain in the home, as do any other unmarried children. The patrilineal continuity of a household is of utmost importance.

Among the Nùng, descent is traced through the male line. Every household in the village, with the exception of three households whose patriarchs married into the village, share the same surname and can trace its genealogy to a common ancestor: the father of the three founding brothers, who is also the paramount ancestor-spirit of the village [thổ côông]. Among paternal consanguines, kinship is recognized for the space of seven generations. In other words, paternal relatives who share a common great-great-great-great-grandfather recognize each other as “brothers.” One of the most common phrases I heard during my research was “here we are all brothers.” It was not long before I realized that when a man or woman uttered this phrase he or she was not only making a symbolic statement of male solidarity, but was also referring to the fact that the men in the village (with the three exceptions) are agnatic relatives.

ETHNOGRAPHIC BEGINNINGS

Soon after I arrived in the village to begin my research, I received my first lesson in Nùng masculinity. Over the course of about a week I had accompanied the headman, Pão, to a majority of the households in the village to introduce myself, explain the reason for my being there and inform people of my research plans. My purpose in doing so was to begin establishing good relationships with

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8 I follow the Nùng usage of household, or hồn, which can be literally translated into English as “house” or “household.” The latter connotation of hồn refers to an extended family group living under one roof.
people, identify potential research participants and adhere to my code of ethical
custom.9 Pão did not think it necessary for me to explain my research plans. He
had sanctioned my being there and, according to him, that should be enough for
the residents of his village. Pão was also surprised at my willingness to divulge
so much personal information about myself with people I had never met before.
He asked me, “why are you so honest/sincere [thật thât]?” I took it as a
compliment and explained that in order to be allowed to conduct research I had
to subscribe to a code of ethical behavior set out by my university, which includes
being forthright and straightforward about my purposes and intentions. Rumors of
my honesty or sincerity spread rapidly throughout the village, the hamlet, and
even neighboring villages and hamlets, as did any and all news about this
strange foreigner.

Toward the end of the week, Kiên, a man I had met earlier and to whom I
explained my research plans, approached me with a proposal. He told me that he
would sit down and talk with me about any cultural information I wanted to know
if I would help him bring in his rice harvest. This seemed like a very reasonable
bargain to me. When I informed Pão and his family, my hosts in the village, that I
would be helping Kiên with his harvest they were uncertain as to why I would do
such a thing. I told them that Kiên had agreed to talk to me about Nùng culture.
The family’s two teenage children, Hùng and Thảo, advised me that I should wait
until he had actually sat down to talk with me before I helped with his harvest
because by that time the harvest may very well be over and then I would not
have to help him.

The next morning Kiên stopped by the home of my host family and told me
to meet him at his house in a few minutes for tea and breakfast, and then we
would proceed to the fields. After he had left, my host family again tried to
dissuade me from going, telling me that the harvest is difficult physical work, that
the weather is bad and I would be more comfortable at home. I assured them
that I am not a stranger to physical labor, and besides, I would get bored just

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sitting at home all day. It eventually became clear that I was missing their point. I helped Kiên bring in his harvest, but each time I approached him and requested that he sit down and impart cultural knowledge to me he would put me off, telling me “another time.” After several of my unsuccessful attempts, Thị, Pão’s wife, taught me a popular local proverb, which I frequently heard in the village in both Vietnamese and Nùng throughout the remainder of my fieldwork. The proverb, in Nùng, goes like this, “cân thì thật kín chúc, cân ac kín khâu” or in Vietnamese, “người thật thà ăn cháo, người ác ăn cơm”. This means, “honest people eat gruel, wicked people eat rice.”

After this episode I saw a pattern developing with other men in the village. Men would make requests of me, whether it was help with physical labor or a material item or gift in exchange for their help with my research. I would provide the requested item or perform the requested labor in expectation of incurring obligation on the part of the person I made the agreement with instead of demanding they fulfill their part of the agreement before I made good on my end. This was in accord with my experiences of Vietnamese social life, and because I did not want to feel that I was coercing people into participating. Based on my assumptions of proper research conduct, a coercive relationship between researcher and research participant would be unethical. Based on Nùng assumptions of proper conduct, one of the most effective ways to enlist the help of others is to gain some point of leverage in order to pressure them into your cause.

Two months after I arrived in Dụ Vãng I had met with disappointment and frustration in my attempts at having lengthy, focused, and in-depth interviews with men about Nùng ethnicity and identity; the things I wanted to hash out. The people in the village who were most sympathetic to my position were married women. The reason they told me that they were sympathetic is because they too
are outsiders in the village, as the Nùng practice exogamy. The men, on the other hand, are all paternal relatives, as was often pointed out to me in Vietnamese and Nùng through the respective sayings “ở đây chúng ta là anh em hết”, or “đụ này hau thồn pêŋ pị noong”: “here we are all brothers.” On numerous occasions, the women of my host family—Thị, the headman’s wife, and Yến, the widow of the headman’s deceased brother—would take me aside and instruct me in proper male behavior, as I had obviously not yet figured it out.

One evening I was sitting around the cooking fire with the women of my host family. They began telling me that I must start being more ạc, or wicked, because I am much too thì thât, or honest, for my own good. The term thì thât literally means honest or sincere. However, it also carries strong notions of naivety, dimwittedness, weakness and being easily taken advantage of. The term ạc literally means wicked, cruel or brutal. However, as I soon learned, it also carries strong notions of intelligence, cleverness, strength and the ability to promote and achieve one’s own interests. The term caãi (often expressed to me by its Vietnamese equivalent, khôn), which literally means clever, crafty or shrewd, was often used in lieu of ạc when specifically describing a person’s cognitive or cerebral processes. Based on my own cultural assumptions and values, and also based on extensive interactions with the Vietnamese ethnic majority, to call someone sincere or honest is a compliment and to call someone wicked or cruel is a criticism. This is not necessarily the case in Đụ Vãng. Yến said to me:

You are a PhD student from America, you speak Vietnamese better than I do and remember our language more quickly than Kinh people who have lived near us all of their lives, so I know that you must be khôn [crafty, clever, shrewd]. You really need to start doing more ạc [start behaving more intelligently, more wickedly] or people will think you are stupid and

10 The Nùng are exogamous in the sense that they marry outside of their patrilineage surname, but very often marry within their own clan. Historically, the majority of common Nùng people married within their own clans, the most frequent exceptions being powerful and elite individuals who would sometimes marry outside of their clan in order to forge, or reinforce political alliances (Barlow 2005). Although clans still serve, to some degree, as symbolic markers of identity among many of the Nùng people I know, contemporarily they do not have any real structuring influence on the organization of everyday sociopolitical life.
will take advantage of you at every opportunity. People are already saying that you must be very stupid. If you continue to be so thì thât even the children will curse you to your face. People here only like to do their own work, nobody wants to do the work of others. You have given these men things so that they will help you learn our customs, but if you do not act wickedly towards them they will not fear/respect [fúc hâu] you and will not help you. You have big arms and big legs, you have a crafty mouth, you need to use them wickedly/intelligently so that others will fear/respect you.

Thị added by quoting another popular Nùng proverb, but in Vietnamese, “khó cho họ, dễ cho mình” [difficult for others, easy for self]. She went on to say, “What you do is the opposite, difficult for self, easy for others.” Then Thủy, Yên’s eldest daughter and an atypically outspoken teenage girl, who was sitting with us, said to me in Vietnamese, “chú làm ngược đời, có thể chú ngu thật.” She used the phrase “ngược đời” which means to oppose life, to go against the natural order of life to one’s own detriment. The rest of her statement, “có thể chú ngu thật” means, “perhaps you are truly stupid.”

CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS: AN ORIENTATION

In order to generate understanding about Nùng Fản Sling masculinity I have taken up three, closely intertwined and interdependent puzzles: culture, identity, and gender. I conceive of ethnography as a process of theory building, rather than one of theory testing. Thus, my frameworks of analysis and interpretation only emerged after a lengthy period of engrossment with my fieldnotes, recorded interviews and conversations, photographs, and memories, of which both data and analysis will be elaborated throughout the chapters that follow. In order to reflect the process of building analyses from data, and generating theoretical interpretation based on those data-enmeshed analyses, I refrain from a more fully elaborated theoretical interpretation until the final chapter. However, here I provide an orientation to my analytical frameworks, categories, and processes.

The analytic categories “culture,” “identity,” and “gender,” or more accurately the experiences, assumptions, ideas, representations, practices,
relationships, interactions and other social things these concepts reference are constitutive of masculinities. I conceive of “culture” as the tacit assumptions people hold about the world and the way the world should work, and which assumptions premise social practice. People draw on these assumptions in order to make sense of themselves, and interpret social life and the worlds they inhabit. I conceive of “identity” as experiences, interpretations, and representations of the self (Ewing 1990; Harris 1989; Kohut 1977; Strauss 1997), which are always situated in relationships with others and drawn from the assumptions one’s self holds about the world and how to go about being human. I use the term “gender” to reference configurations of masculine and feminine practices (Connell 2005)—premised by cultural assumptions about men and women—that reproduce and are reproduced by a system of gendered social relations. Such a gender system can be conceived of as “a framework of meaning, containing relations within which the sex of a person is made socially relevant” (Holter 2005:20). Identity, which is always gendered, “is not fixed in advance of social interaction, but is constructed in interaction” (Connell 2005:35). Masculine identities are constructed and reproduced in and by systems of gendered relationships, in which feminine identities are also constructed and reproduced. Gendered identities, whether masculine or feminine, are not individual constructs, occurring in isolation, or simply arising in isolated individuals, which then come into contact with one another. Identity and gender are social constructs and are only reproduced in and by social interactions, practices, and relationships—all of which are premised by cultural assumptions.

There is no term equivalent for “masculinity,” “femininity,” or even “gender” in the Nùng language. The Nùng people I know do not distinguish between masculinity and maleness. Most Nùng personal terms of address specify a person’s sex/gender, and simultaneously indicate a person’s relative position within the Nùng kinship-based system of relationships (see Table 8.2 in Chapter Eight). Masculinity can be conceived among the Nùng as assumptions about the proper way of being a male, as defined by men’s social practices and relationships, and the degree to which one embodies valued human
characteristics. I will interchangeably use “masculine identities” and “masculinities” to refer to the same concept: male selves and the sociocultural meanings and conditions that attend to being male.

Informed by the above analytic categories and frameworks—culture, identity, and gender—I ask the following questions to further illuminate gender, in general, and masculinity, in particular, among the Nùng Fản Sling: What are the cultural assumptions that premise gendered social practices and relations? Upon which assumptions, beliefs, practices and relationships do people draw to construct their gendered identities, interpret their experiences as gendered selves, and represent themselves as men and women? In what social practices and relationships do males and females engage, and how? How are cultural assumptions about males and females, and gendered identities reproduced in these social practices and relationships? What cultural assumptions and social practices reproduce gendered difference, and how? My conceptualization of gender as cultural assumptions that premise, and are in turn shaped by configurations of masculine and feminine practices that reproduce and are reproduced in a system of gendered social relations demands that I examine these social relationships. Thus, I frame my analyses and interpretations in terms of “gender” and “identity” as general concepts, and in terms of gendered practices and relationships as concrete social practices, but with an eye toward masculinities, or male selves.

In order to understand Nùng gender and masculine identities in their local manifestations, experiences, and representations, ethnography necessitates tapping into cultural flows—cultural flows as the dialectic of tacit assumptions about the world and their empirical manifestations in talk, symbols, relationships, and concrete practices—around the focal points of gender and masculinity. I then identified points of articulation among the various spheres in which these focal points were manifest, i.e., “tracing the co-presence of persons, texts, images...arguments”, and practices across different spheres, realms or contexts of human social life (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003:166). The different spheres of human social life that drew my attention as especially rich in manifestations of
Nùng assumptions about gender and masculinity were interpersonal relationships and the social institutions that shaped them, rituals, holidays, and other more quotidian deeds and tasks.

During and/or after my observations of, and participation in these different realms of social life, I would inquire about them in order to elicit narratives from and engage in dialogue with research participants to try and understand the cultural assumptions that premised these social practices and relationships and the meanings they hold for those engaged in them. I habitually carried a small notebook, pen, and digital voice recorder everywhere I went, recording any and all observations, experiences, and conversations that struck me as having anything to do with gender, or any other significance. If I had a prearranged appointment to meet and talk with a research participant I would record our conversation directly into one of my sturdier notebooks, and if permitted, audio-record the conversation with the digital voice recorder. There were also times when I would be drawn into the work-a-day life of harvesting rice, planting and harvesting potatoes, fertilizing the watermelon fields, threshing rice, chasing errant buffalo, or cooking a batch of rice liquor. At other times I would become immersed in some social activity such as a funeral, a wedding, negotiating room and board, attending a festival, or celebrating the New Year, and accordingly my attention would often be monopolized by the experience itself. During these times I would continue to inquire about things I did not understand, or conversation would turn to a topic I was keen to understanding better, such as flirting, lovers, marriage proposals, or husband and wife relationships. At these times I would turn to the work of recording when possible, or otherwise committing to memory things that struck me as significant, and I would often pursue gendered aspects of the conversation to help me flesh out my mental and written notes.

Whenever I had a quiet moment, I would record all of the information from my small field log into a sturdier notebook; often elaborating, expanding, and reflecting on my field log recordings, observations, experiences, memories, the directions in which my research was moving, as well as what still needed doing. I would do this at least once a day, but more often several times a day. In fact, due
to frequent interruptions from visitors, who, according to etiquette and social norms, require reception and attendance, it was necessary that I attend to my work of recordings (which was not viewed as “work” at all by the inhabitants of Đụ Vãng) at multiple points during any given day. The ebb and flow of social life in Đụ Vãng, which consisted of more flow than ebb, typically only gave me brief periods of time to write during the day. I often saved lengthier fieldnote entries for the evening, but even then time was limited because it is usually “lights out” by 10:00 p.m., as a farmer’s work day starts very early.

Throughout my fieldwork, I would often review my notes and recordings, looking for themes and playing with categories. Through this iterative process I continually constructed conceptual frameworks, interpretations, and abstractions around empirically grounded observations, experiences, and written and audio recordings. In other words, my abstractions only took shape in a dialectic relationship with the concrete—I heard gendered identities, positions, and relationships discussed and argued by men, women, and children, and saw these play out in agricultural labor, at the dinner table, at funerals, during grave cleaning holiday, at spontaneous social gatherings, during lion dance practices, and so forth. And though not all representations of gendered identities, masculine or feminine, were the same (and here I include concrete practices as representations of gender), there were patterns, or there were identifiable cultural constraints that limit what would otherwise be an indeterminate range of possible representations and interpretations.

RESEARCH METHODS

Here I address the “what” and “why” in regards to my research methods. The “how,” “when,” “where,” and “whom” are made explicit in Chapters Three, Four, Five, Six, and Seven. In these chapters, I recount my observations of, my experiences of participating in, and the inquisitive dialogues and naturally occurring conversations I had with research participants about gendered social life in Đụ Vãng.
The research methods I employed during my fieldwork were first and foremost informed by ethnography. The aims of ethnography are to understand the lived experiences and meanings of a particular social phenomenon or circumstance from the perspectives of those who experience it, and how they make sense of their lived realities. Ethnography requires a grounding in and empirical encounters with a particular sociocultural context, and the perspectives of individuals who experience social reality within that context. Research questions that seek an in-depth understanding of a particular sociocultural context in which individuals engage in particular social behaviors, interactions, and practices are best illuminated by research methods that enable the researcher to gain first-hand observations and experiences of behaviors, practices, and interactions in that sociocultural context (Emerson et al 1995; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). I conceive of masculinity as constituted and reproduced in configurations of gendered social practices, underlain by assumptions about males and females which individuals draw upon to interpret and represent experiences of their gendered selves. Ethnographic methods provided me direct engagement with people’s social practices and interactions, and their interpretations and representations of themselves, informed by the cultural assumptions that circulate among the Nùng Fản Sling of Dụ Vẳng. My research question, “what does it mean to be a Nùng Fản Sling man?”, is best approached ethnographically.

Specifically, the ethnographic research methods I used were participant-observation, open-ended interviews and fairly naturally occurring conversations, which I characterize as “naturalistic inquisitive dialogue,” and photography.

**Participant-Observation**

The primary method in which ethnography is rooted is participant-observation. The practices involved in this research method are made fairly evident by its term of reference: participating in the daily rounds of social life within the research setting, while at the same time observing the social life in which the ethnographer is participating. Through this process, the researcher
establishes relationships with people in the research setting. “The ethnographer participates in the daily routines of this setting, develops ongoing relations with the people in it, and observes all the while what is going on...the ethnographer writes down in regular, systematic ways what she observes and learns while participating in the daily rounds of life of others” (Emerson et al 1995:1). Erving Goffman further describes the method of participant-observation as “immersion,” which involves “subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation” (1989:125). This research method generates a variety of valuable data appropriate to answering questions about tacit cultural assumptions, concrete social practices, and processes of meaning construction, or how culturally situated interpretations and representations are made.

I inserted myself into the social life of Dụ Vãng as fully as an outsider could. I lived, slept, worked, ate, played, cooked, worshipped, grieved, conspired, debated, gossiped, celebrated, and negotiated with, among, and alongside Dụ Vãng’s inhabitants (see Plate 1.19). The first kinds of data generated by this social immersion, which can never be complete, were my own initial reactions to and impressions of an unfamiliar social life. My outsider status and lack of enculturation in the context of Dụ Vãng made me very aware of assumptions and practices that a person raised in this society would take for granted, thus highlighting the tacit assumptions that people hold about the world and the way the world should work. “Some kinds of cultural meanings may only be accurately understood and reported by one who has learned them without realizing it, but much of the cultural onion may be as easily or even more easily picked apart by a careful analyst who is not of the culture” (Wolf 1992:5). Through direct and neophytic observation of behaviors and interactions with others in Dụ Vãng I had the opportunity to become aware of a range of activities, behaviors, and beliefs that, in my opinion, remain unconscious (or at least unreflected upon) to those who were raised and socialized in the village (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). During numerous conversations in which I probed people’s beliefs and inquired
after their practices, respondents would often tell me “I don’t know why I do it that way, that’s just how its done here.” I am of the perspective that social practices (including behaviors, relationships, interactions, and so forth) are informed by tacit cultural assumptions. Thus, an understanding of a particular social practice must also be informed by an understanding of the taken-for-granted beliefs on which the practice is premised. Furthermore, because I conceive of gender as configurations of social practices, then it was paramount that I acquaint myself with cultural assumptions in order to understand gender and attempt an explanation of it within the context of Dụ Vãng.

Daily observation of and participation in social life, and particularly gendered social life, allowed me to be with research participants and witness how they responded to events and other people as these events and interactions occurred. Additionally, I was able to experience for myself these events and interactions, and the social circumstances that gave rise to them. I began paying close attention to the kinds of interactions and activities in which men and women were habitually involved, and the different things they talked about. But I also gave close heed to how men and women involved themselves and others in activities and interactions, and how they talked about relationships and activities. Through this deliberate process of observing and participating in gendered social life in Dụ Vãng I gained a heightened sensitivity for the concerns and perspectives of gendered individuals, and how they understand and experience themselves and their world in their own terms and for their own purposes. Privileging the things that people in the research setting experience and talk about as important or significant in terms of “maleness” and “femaleness” gave me insights into cultural assumptions and beliefs about males and females, and how these assumptions inform culturally situated interpretations and representations of gendered selves. Observing and participating in gendered social practices with a studied diligence drew my attention to manifestations of tacit assumptions in concrete social practices, and how these practices reinforce taken-for-granted beliefs about men and women. The social practices and relationships in which people engaged, and the ways in which people socially
involved themselves in these show how people draw on cultural assumptions to inform social practices, and through social practices reproduce themselves as gendered.

Finally, through the act of participating in the daily social life of Dụ Vằng it was inevitable that I establish personal relationships with other people in the village, and especially the people in whose household I lived, which happened to be very close quarters. Close personal relationships with research participants, rather than contaminating factors to be mitigated against, can be very rich sources of learning and observation. These relationships:

- do not so much disrupt or alter ongoing patterns of social interaction as reveal the terms and bases on which people form social ties in the first place...first-hand relations with those studied may provide clues to understanding the more subtle, implicit underlying assumptions that are often not readily accessible through observation or interview methods alone. (Emerson et al 1995:3)

Paying close attention and remaining sensitive to how people interact with one another is essential in ethnographic research. Additionally, an even more immediate source of understanding was remaining diligently attentive to how I was treated by others and how others responded to me as a male. This provided me with first-hand experience of “the terms and bases on which people form social ties” (ibid). As noted above, and will be further elaborated later, I was often seen by inhabitants of Dụ Vằng as “inappropriately male.” I often felt like I was treated like a child by many of the people from whom I received sociocultural lessons in gender. These times became valuable opportunities to learn how the Nùng Fân Sling of Dụ Vằng might go about socializing people, and particularly how they might socialize a male child, or raise a boy to be a man. These lessons provided me with clues and insights into the ways that people draw on deeply held beliefs about males and females to understand and interpret gender, gendered experiences, carry out gendered relationships, and basically conduct themselves as men and women.
**Naturalistic Inquisitive Dialogue**

Embedded within the research method of participant-observation are methods of inquiry that seek to create knowledge and understanding through the act of verbal discourse. During my field research I would often seek to understand my observations of social interactions, activities, behaviors, relationships, and so forth by asking research participants about these. Similarly, during or after my participation in some social activity, in the broadest sense of the term, I would ask others about the activity. Such inquiries would result in a sort of dialogical reflection on the activity with other participants by engaging them in discussions about the activity. The majority of these discussions took the form of naturally occurring conversations. On only seven occasions did I actually sit down with research participants in a semi-formal, open-ended interview setting: a social encounter that was initiated by me, arranged in advance, and engaged for the explicit and sole purpose of posing questions around a particular subject or subjects and receiving answers. Although these interview situations were useful for getting information about specific topics introduced by me, I found the more naturally occurring discussions and conversations to be the most fruitful. During these conversations I would make inquiries but also respond to others’ inquiries, allowing the research participants to talk about the things they consider important, and deferring to their trajectory of talk in order to learn about social life through the perspectives, experiences, frames of reference and language of those living it. I characterize this method as *naturalistic inquisitive dialogue* that becomes a “meaning-making partnership” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006:128), where either the researcher or research participant may introduce a particular topic, and then learn and create knowledge about it through dialogue.

Through this process of naturalistic inquisitive dialogue, research participants were free to reflect on their experiences, interpret and reinterpret these by drawing on the cultural resources available to them (e.g. stories and narrative forms, symbolisms, beliefs, widely held assumptions, language, taken-for-granted meanings, idioms, status quos, etc.), and make representations of their selves. Although sociocultural researchers can never access other people’s
experience as experience, through inquisitive dialogue we can access the way that people understand and make experience meaningful via their interpretations and representations of experience. Because research participants drew on the cultural resources and assumptions that circulate in Dụ Vãng, they were not only narrating themselves but also giving positioned insights and making positioned representations of the larger sociocultural context in which research participants experience their selves and others.

Furthermore, I also examined the language resources and lexical content available to people for expressing themselves and their understandings of the world. The ways that people deploy language resources highlight the cultural assumptions that circulate in a given sociocultural context, which language resources constrain and make possible ways of thinking about, interpreting and representing human experience. The things people talk about as well as the language, terms and frames of reference, and narrative styles people use to talk about themselves and others, their relationships, and experiences reveal intersections of personal experience and cultural context. I looked for and identified patterns that emerged from people’s narrated descriptions and explanations of social life recounted to me by people who experience themselves and others in Dụ Vãng, which has proved useful for shedding light on how the cultural shapes identities in this sociocultural context.

Language

Many Nùng dialects are mutually intelligible, with the primary differences occurring in tones (intonation), and initial and final consonants. There are dialects, such as Nùng Făn Slingen, Nùng An, and Nùng Lòi, that are considered mutually unintelligible by many Nùng people, researchers, and linguists (personal communication with Professor Vương Toàn, August 2004). The mutual unintelligibilities are due not only to consonant and tonal differences, but also to lexical variants. As well, some Nùng dialects, such as Nùng Cháo and Nùng Inh are considered by Nùng speakers and linguists to be more similar to Tày than they are to other dialects spoken by other Nùng sub-groups. I studied Nùng
language with Professor Vương Toàn, a linguist at Hà Nội National University’s Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences. Professor Vương Toàn is ethnically Nùng Cháo, and though he instructed me in a range of Nùng dialects his instruction tended toward his native dialect of Nùng Cháo. The Nùng Cháo dialect is mutually intelligible with Nùng Fản Sling, but is closer to Tày in final and initial consonants and intonation. Thus, when I first began my research in Dụ Vãng I was repeatedly told that I spoke Tày (often informally referred to by non-Tày, Tai-speaking people as Thổ). I have always been amazed at the incredible linguistic diversity that exists throughout Vietnam, even within a single ethnic sub-group. In the lowlands, one only needs to move twenty kilometers in any direction to encounter the variety of distinct Kinh, or Vietnamese dialects. In the highlands this distinctiveness seems even more profound. For example, there is a Nùng Fản Sling hamlet adjacent to the hamlet where I lived and worked, which is only an hour’s hike away (a hamlet [thôn] is the administrative unit between village [bản làng] and commune [xã], and typically consists of two to three villages). 11 There have been numerous relationships established between these two hamlets through the exchange of women as wives, and people often travel between the two hamlets to attend weddings, funerals, birthdays, and various other ritual and festive occasions. Because the Nùng Fản Sling practice patrilineal exogamy, with women being responsible for the bulk of childcare and thus heavily involved in the language acquisition of children, one might assume a greater degree of dialectal invariance among Nùng Fản Sling villages. Yet there was noticeable difference between the verbal intonation of people born and raised in one hamlet and people born and raised in the other. On several occasions I heard children and adults from Dụ Vãng amuse themselves by mimicking the speech of people from the other hamlet.

The inhabitants of Dụ Vãng rarely referred to the language spoken in Dụ Vãng as “Nùng Fản Sling language;” typically only when addressing outsiders. People would sometimes refer to their language as “Nùng language” in accordance with official nomenclature. But in everyday speech the language

11 See Appendix 1 for an explanation of Vietnamese administrative units.
spoken in Dụ Vãng was almost always referred to as “our language,” or “khaảng hau” [speak/speech self/we-inclusive]. And when referencing a mutually intelligible Central Tai language people would use the term Thổ.

Throughout this ethnography, I will be referencing both Nùng and Vietnamese language and terms. I do so in an attempt to highlight the concepts and categories of meanings that Dụ Vãng’s inhabitants referenced in their interpretations and representations of themselves and their social worlds, and how these terms and concepts were deployed in social interaction. The majority of Dụ Vãng’s residents are either very proficient or fluent in Vietnamese. Approximately 40% of elderly men and 5% of elderly women age sixty years and older, approximately 85% of adult men and 60% of adult women between the ages of thirty and sixty years, and very close to 100% of males and females between the ages of six and thirty have received some public education in the country’s official language, Vietnamese (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 1999a, 1999b). Many of Dụ Vãng’s residents interact with varying degrees of frequency with members of the Kinh ethnic majority, and also consume Vietnamese mass-media. Furthermore, if a commune level official was in attendance at a village or hamlet meeting then the meeting would be conducted in Vietnamese, even though all of the commune officials can speak Tày-Nùng; in fact, it is their first language.

Most research participants were very comfortable in either Nùng or Vietnamese. Although Nùng tended to be the dominant language spoken in the village, most people would frequently and seamlessly incorporate Vietnamese in their everyday speech. Because my Vietnamese is much more polished than my Nùng, some people (especially those who were less patient with my Nùng language acquisition) would either default to Vietnamese, or use a greater number of Vietnamese words in combination with Nùng when speaking with me than they would with native Nùng speakers. My comprehension of Nùng developed more quickly than my speaking ability, and I would also default to Vietnamese when speaking with people who became visibly impatient with my halting Nùng speech. In order to characterize my own Nùng language skills, I will
press into service the words of Thị: “Now people are afraid to talk bad about you in front of your face because you know how to hear their words.”

**Photographs**

During my field research I took a substantial number of photographs. I took these photographs with the intent to visually document social life, though not in the sense that I was attempting to capture snapshots of an objective social reality, accurately and positively represented by photographs. However, I did not take photographs in order to examine my own position, or to take the “how” and “what” of the photographs as a subject of study in and of itself. Neither have I used the photographs as explicit and specific data to be analyzed.

The first purpose for which I eventually used the photographs was a tool for recall. Looking through my photographs often brings memories flooding back, and very vivid memories that include sights, sounds, smells, tactile senses, and a range of emotions. This has aided me in my attempts to convey a sense of my own social experiences of Dụ Vãng to those who may be unfamiliar with the setting. I also present photographs throughout the text, not so much as supporting evidence of the descriptive texts, but to enhance and further add texture and color to the descriptive text; to give a sort of visual description in the form of visual sketches, admittedly positioned and partial and never immutable or objective. Photographs can often impose a still-life quality on the fluidity of social life. However, I do not think this warrants the exclusion of photographs, as they help to convey, and vividly so, a sense of people and place.

**METHODOLOGICAL AND RELATIONAL CHALLENGES**

I encountered several methodological challenges during the course of my research. Methodologically speaking, and strictly so, I could generalize most of these challenges under an umbrella category of “sources and kinds of information.” Socially and personally speaking, however, I would be more
inclined to categorize many of these same challenges as “interpersonal” or “relational.”

The first of these challenges is how the kinds of data generated can be influenced by what, according to research participants, counts as research. My research interests mostly revolve around the intangible aspects of culture—assumptions, beliefs, values, experiences, representations—and how these interact with (i.e., how they are manifest in and through, and in turn shape) social practices. I often found that my research interests conflicted with research participants’ own perceptions of what cultural research should entail.

The inhabitants of Dụ Vãng had encountered cultural research before. The research they had previously encountered, however, consisted mostly of government researchers collecting tangible, as well as intangible cultural artifacts, such as different items of material culture and the filming, photographing, or otherwise recording of songs, dances, and other like performances. These activities, considered to be the “official” kind of cultural research, served as people’s reference points when talking or thinking about cultural research. Thus, my endeavors to engage people in dialogue about themselves, their experiences, their reflections, their routine as well as special activities, and recording these along with my own experiences and observations of daily social life struck people as odd. I was often criticized for not having learned anything cultural, being told such things as, “You’ve been here how many months already, and what have you learned about Nùng culture? All you do is go around and visit, and ask, and talk, or stay at home and write, this is not research, this is just playing.” People’s notions of what counts as cultural research is, of course, directly tied to their notions of what constitutes culture. People’s conceptions had been shaped by the state’s “official notions” of culture as material products or performances, which notions are disseminated through state-sponsored rhetoric about ethnic minority culture.12

Secondly, there exists in Dụ Vãng an ethos of brotherly solidarity and equality. However, there did exist deep-felt jealousies, rivalries, and rifts in the

12 For a more in-depth discussion of this issue see Wangsgard (2008).
village as well. The fact that I was living with the village headman, Pão, and his family added fuel to some of these fires. In order to get ahead in Vietnam’s education system, you have to be very generous in the giving of gifts of gratitude. I have been told on numerous occasions, by both Kinh and minority people drawing on their personal experiences, that in order to progress through Vietnam’s public education system, regardless of individual merit, most families have to give gifts of gratitude to, or directly bribe educators and administrators, and/or students must attend (or at least pay for) the private, after-hours tutoring sessions offered by public educators for a fee. These gifts of gratitude will only increase as you move upward in the education system, such as being admitted to college or university. Furthermore, for Vietnamese citizens to obtain the permissions and documents required to travel abroad typically requires giving gifts of gratitude to officials encountered at each step in the process. Logically, then, it is assumed that such gifts must also be made to the officials in the country of destination as well. In short, having attained my academic standing of an American Ph.D. candidate conducting research overseas, it was assumed that I had to pay a king’s ransom in the form of gifts of gratitude and outright bribes to Western educators, and Vietnamese and Western officials. I was perceived as being unfathomably wealthy. Pão’s teenage son, Hùng, succinctly summed up the general consensus about my economic status: “Ninety percent of the households in the village are very jealous that you are staying in our household. Not because they are all fond of you, its because they all think you sweat money.”

Because it was commonly known that I negotiated services (e.g. physical labor, or taking personal photographs) or small gifts (e.g. lightweight headlamps, or jackets) in exchange for helping me with my research, and because I was seen as a cornucopian resource, Pão made efforts to ensure that any and all benefits of participating in my research would accrue to him and his closest relatives, as well as a few, more distant relatives who he favored. This meant that Pão and his inner circle endeavored to keep me safely tucked into their fold, which meant restricting my sources of information. The key figures of this inner
circle consisted of Păo, the headman, Sơn, the village policeman and Păo’s second cousin (or “blood brother” in terms of Nùng kinship because they have the same great-grandfather), and Đức, the village secretary and Păo’s fourth cousin (or “cousin brother” because they have different great-grandfathers). Păo and Sơn were the most adamant about keeping me reined in with regards to my sources of information, while Đức seemed to do so only while in the company of the other two, or at Păo’s explicit behest. Although this triumvirate continually assured me that they were happy to participate in my research, signed informed consent documents, permitted me to move about and interact relatively uninhibited with other inhabitants of Dụ Văng, in practice they proved to be the most recalcitrant participants; Păo and Sơn more so than Đức. I was repeatedly told by Păo:

No one in the village knows anything about Nùng culture better than we do, not even the old timers…sometime I’ll sit down for a day or two and answer all of your questions, about whatever you want to know…When I have done this for the researchers from the Department of Culture they paid me 500,000 đồng…If you need to know something only ask me, do not go and ask the old priest. There is no one more able than me in the village, so you do not need to go asking anyone else.

These “talk sessions,” however, never materialized. Although a good portion of my data was generated in social interactions that involved Păo and Sơn, none of the information I received from either of them was generated in the context or for the sole purpose of “sitting down and answering questions;” in other words, in formal interview settings. Rather, it was generated as I accompanied them to various work, social, and ritual activities and engaged them in casual conversation and inquiry during these times.

Of course, I did go and talk to others in the village, often under the pretext of “going visiting,” which is a common social practice in Dụ Văng, and in actuality that is what I was doing: visiting people and talking with them, often times in response to an invitation. When I did venture outside of Păo’s inner circle to

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13 I say relatively because these interactions were curtailed through frequent admonishments, rather than direct restraint, about who I should talk to and spend time with, and who I should not.
socialize, engage in work activities, talk and ask questions too frequently or for any significant amount of time it put a palpable strain on our relationship. I thus found myself attempting to walk a very fine line between broadening my sources of information and keeping my host content, and I was not always successful.

Beyond merely controlling my research activities for economic reasons, which also has obvious political implications, there were other political processes being played out in the attempts to closely manage the types and sources of information available to me. This is very much in accord with Vietnam’s long tradition of heavy-handed official management of information. As “government officials” of sorts\(^\text{14}\) the village triumvirate seemed to feel a responsibility to manage the kinds of information available to me. I was told on several occasions by Păo, Sơn, Đức, and a couple other men who aspired to power in the village that they bore a huge burden in taking on responsibility for me, and if not for their protection I would surely have my throat cut and my body pitched into some deep ravine in the mountains.\(^\text{15}\) It became apparent to me that this responsibility extended beyond the management of my physical well-being to the kinds of information I was privy to.

As mentioned above, almost every man I knew in the village espoused the ideal of brotherly equality and solidarity, and the men I interacted with most frequently were eager to point out concrete examples where they felt this ideal was evident. However, I felt that there was a real effort to keep certain social realities from my purview, most of which surrounded rivalries and rifts between “brothers.” The brief story I recounted above about my host family trying to dissuade me from helping Kiên bring in his harvest was not only a lesson in masculine negotiation. It was also my first lesson regarding who the village triumvirate believed I should not be interacting with, as Kiên was a fairly

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\(^\text{14}\) I say “of sorts” because with the exception of one Dụ Văng inhabitant, Mr. Lợi, who was a commune level official rather than a village level official, none of the village officials were Party members, and, therefore, not cadres.

\(^\text{15}\) Interestingly, the only people who actually threatened to cut my throat while I slept, pitch my body in a deep, mountain ravine, and tell the higher authorities that I went to the city and simply never returned were the very men who lamented being burdened with the responsibility of protecting me from this fate.
outspoken critic of the supposed social condition of brotherly equality and solidarity in the village. Because there was a concerted effort to keep these things from me I did not stick my nose too deeply into these issues, though a few people did volunteer perspectives, hints, and short stories that ran contrary to the widely held ideal of solidarity and equality. Thus, keeping a tight rein on who I spoke with at length or in depth was one strategy of exposing me to only those opinions and views that the village triumvirate felt appropriate. But the attempts to keep certain information and perspectives from me also helps to shed light on people’s more or less shared assumptions about what is important, or how the social world should work. When the social world does not work how its supposed to, most people were reluctant about airing their dirty laundry in the presence of an outsider.

Besides being perceived as a political-economic resource to control and exploit, and a pair of strange eyes that required blinders, I was also an object of prestige, and a symbol of Pão’s power, authority, and ever expanding social networks. As well, if any other men from the village encountered me outside the village, at a weekly market for example, they were very keen to have me join them in order to display me as a symbol of “well-connectedness.” Whenever a government official of any standing visited the village, only a few of which visits had anything to do with me, Pão was always keen to make sure that I would be present. During these visits, Pão would allude to the extent of his social networks and the high esteem in which the Department of Culture and Information held him and his village, evidenced by my presence. Interestingly, when men came to visit who were not government officials, or who were but had close personal relationships with Pão, he had the habit of commanding me to accomplish some trivial or menial task, such as sending me to fetch and boil water for tea, or sending me to the kitchen to prepare rice, which tasks, in the context of everyday village life, were typically reserved for women and children. He would comment to his visitor(s) that he had an American with a Masters degree living in his home who had to listen to his words. Perhaps these displays of authority were as much for my benefit as they were for Pão’s guests.
Another methodological issue took on a concrete reality for me after a “recording session” with Yến. It was a cold and rainy day, and we had been sitting around the cooking fire in the kitchen talking about men, lost love, and life in general. The afternoon was getting on and we both had other chores to attend to so we concluded our conversation, but before I left I played back some of the recording for Yến to hear. She looked a little surprised and concerned, and responded to what she heard by saying, “We were just talking miscellaneous/haphazard, I was not talking well.” She then expressed her concern that others would listen to the recording and criticize her for talking “miscellaneously/randomly” [linh tinh]. I had been using a digital recorder, and not only did I keep all of my recordings protected with a password, I kept the memory cards under lock and key. I explained this to her, showing her on the recorder how I could “lock her words” and assured her that I would not allow anyone else to listen to the recording. She still looked concerned. She said to me, “Next time I’ll write a script, one for me to read and one for you to read, we will record that.” I had told her before that “people over there” would enjoy her words that I planned to write in my dissertation, but this was not her concern. Rather, she was worried about her “face” in her most immediate spheres of social interaction: Dụ Vàng and surrounding villages.

This not only presented me with a methodological dilemma, but a personal relationship dilemma as well. I genuinely like the people I most often sought interaction with in Dụ Vàng, and I wanted, and did establish genuine friendships with several research participants. When I was seen as an interested friend, guards would be let down and people would talk in a relaxed, familiar, conversational way, with no real thought, I assume, to how their words would appear, be used, or represented in a written document. From a methodological

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16 That I was going to tell others about my experiences in Dụ Vàng and the people there was taken-for-granted without me ever having to mention it. People would often ask, “What will you tell people ‘over there’ about us and Dụ Vàng?” A common pastime in Dụ Vàng, as well as anywhere else in the world, is talking about other people. I was always amazed at how fast and far information traveled in the mountains of Lạng Sơn. I could drive two hours by motorbike and encounter people I had never before laid eyes upon, or even heard about, yet they knew me by name. Regardless, I told all research participants that I would write some of their words and tell people about Dụ Vàng and my experiences there in my dissertation.
point-of-view this is desirable because you get unrehearsed, uncensored (or less-censored), naturally occurring data—its more “genuine” or “authentic.” When I was obviously wearing my “researcher hat”—overtly taking copious notes while asking people to revisit in minute detail the particulars of what I had seen, experienced, or been told, or asking for initial details and explanations of some event or activity—people sometimes became more guarded, more careful and less elaborate in their explanations, especially concerning those things considered sacrosanct, taboo, or socially sensitive. So, do I risk betraying friendships by keeping and recounting information and stories that are generated during what are, more or less, conversations between friends, whether I happen to be making an audio recording, taking notes, or mentally tucking away key phrases, explanations, interactions, expressions, or gestures in order to produce the “thick description” demanded of ethnography (Geertz 1973)? Or do I settle for thin, cursory, and heavily censored data by continually premising all of my social interactions and observations by drawing people’s attention to my role of researcher? There is no easy, clear-cut answer to these questions. I do not feel that I am betraying friendships or trusts by recounting things the way I saw, heard, experienced, and was told about them. Furthermore, everyone in Dụ Vǎng was very aware of my research role and my work of visiting, asking, talking, and writing—I would often sit in Păo’s open courtyard or in his garden while I wrote, and on several occasions this activity drew a considerable audience, who would make comments and assessments about such “supposed work.” Several research participants asked me to keep some information confidential within the village: “…don’t tell anyone in the village…”, or “…don’t tell so and so…” These secrets I faithfully kept in the village, but told these particular research participants that I might tell these stories to people “over there,” and this did not seem to concern them, as Thị once told me: “Tell them whatever lies you want, whatever makes a good story.” A very few secrets I was asked to reveal to no one, and those I will keep.

One of the most difficult methodological/relational challenges that I navigated in the course of my fieldwork was my interactions with married women.
(Other than my interactions with Pão’s teenage daughter, Thảo, his two teenage nieces, Thủy and Như, and his 11 year old daughter, Éng, my interactions with other young women, adolescent and pre-adolescent girls was fairly limited.) In order to gain a more holistic understanding of what constitutes masculinity among the Nùng, and because my ethnographically grounded theoretical orientations frame my interpretations of masculinity as a sociocultural construct reproduced in and by gendered social relations, I was interested in what women had to say about the subject. This required that I spend time in the company of women. In the sociocultural context of Dụ Vãng there are, of course, cultural assumptions that shape men’s understandings of and interactions with women. For example, throughout the course of my research, I was repeatedly told that women have diminished capacities for health and strength, relative to men, and carry a weakening influence with them because they have weak “numbers” [slộ], which roughly corresponds to the Western idea of fate or destiny. The more time a man spends in the company of women the more he is at risk of absorbing these weakening influences, which will have undesirable consequences for a man’s spiritual and physical health. Based on this and other related assumptions of masculine propriety that I will detail later, many men could not understand my endeavors to spend time with women. Men’s opinions of my willingness to socially engage with women ranged from pitiful to scandalous, even after I explained that my research demanded that I inquire after women’s perspectives as well as men’s—as though such a bizarre explanation would undo deeply held beliefs around male and female propriety.

During the latter part of my fieldwork I began to more actively seek out my research participants, both men and women, in order to “tie up loose ends” and fill in gaps to my understandings. I perceived of my relationships and interactions

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17 I want to clarify that my interactions with all research participants were platonic. I rarely had one-on-one interactions with women. Almost without fail, during interviews and conversations with women there would be multiple women and children present. If no other adults were around, then there would usually be at least one grown child present. On the very rare occasion when there was no one else immediately present while I talked one-on-one with a woman, the doors of the house would remain open so that we were visible to all who passed by.
with women as consisting of nothing untoward (based on my own cultural assumptions). My very unfamiliar behavior had been politely tolerated for about the first six months of my research. However, as I ramped up my last efforts to generate data, which meant more actively and frequently seeking out female research participants, I began to experience considerable strain in some of my important relationships with men, not the least of which was my relationship with Păo, the headman and my host. The strain on my relationships with other men finally prevailed, and approximately for the last two months of my field research I significantly curtailed my social interactions with female research participants.

I felt that some people in Dṳ̄ Vǎng genuinely liked me, while most people politely tolerated me, and a few explicitly disliked me. I think I can safely say that everyone in the village thought I was quite odd. I was given the nickname “Đa Vìt paąc” by the men who were not fond of me—it literally means “crazy David,” and not crazy in any endearing sense of the English term. Although some men seemed to enjoy my company and actively sought me out, generally speaking, men were less patient with my frequent inquiries (and perhaps irritated that their sometimes obvious impatience did not deter my questions), and much less patient with my Nùng language acquisition than were women. The women I interacted with most found me to be a novelty, and most thought it very amusing that I would sit and talk with them at length; some even told me they looked forward to our talks. Before I left Dṳ̄ Vǎng, at least ten different people, more women than men, told me such things as, “When you leave we will be very sad/bored because there will not be anything new and fun/entertaining to talk about.”

**REPRESENTATION**

Ethnography is at once a research practice, a methodology, and a mode of cultural analysis that is most often conveyed by textual representation. In ethnographic texts, representation and reality are confounded in one another. The imagined and the real, or abstract concept and actual social practice inform
and illuminate one another, resulting in a synthetic combination of the abstract and the concrete. My research is ethnographic in that it is empirically grounded in some of the prevailing occupations of the times and places in which I worked. The concrete, the empirical set my methodology in motion. But ethnography demands more than an attempt at raw empiricism (Leach 1961). It is also, and necessarily dialectical in that theory, or my conceptual frameworks influence what I pay attention to and how I understand the existential processes of everyday life. I start on the ground seeing and listening and my conceptual frameworks influence what I pay attention to and how. But, as ethnography is a rendering of the dialectic relationship of theory and everyday life, the things I see and hear (the empirical) feed back into my theory and reshape or reconstruct it. As well, my shifting theory may also reorient or redirect my gaze toward different parts of the empirical and the relationships between these parts.

Feminism (Shostak 1981; Strathern 1987; Wolf 1992) and, later, postmodernism (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988) have demonstrated that an ethnographer can never make claims to resolute, conclusive interpretations or representations of culture. Neither can research participants (i.e., the natives). Here we must be wary of the postmodern pitfalls of maintaining ethnographic privilege and shoring up our own authority by stripping the natives of theirs (see Mascia-Lees et al 1989). Although members of a given society draw on shared assumptions to inform their knowledge claims about the world, these claims are never uniform. However, people’s claims most often fall within a range of possibilities that is constrained by shared assumptions about the world. When claims and behaviors fall outside this range they are usually deemed deviant, even when this “deviance” is similarly patterned and reproduced in various individuals.

For example, in Dụ Vãng there was an older man who was generally recognized as crazy. The reasons for his perceived aberrant behavior, however, were not uniformly expressed by the various people who shared with me their views about this man. Reasons for his craziness ranged from allowing himself to be led away by a ghost to go play; that he was a drunk and heavily addicted to
booze; that he had no sons to help him work his fields (resulting in extreme poverty), care for him in his old age or tend to the needs of his ghost once he dies, which caused him extreme mental and emotional strain to the point that he lost his mind. The reasons varied from one narrator to another, and when there were multiple narrators present the reasons were variously debated and sometimes combined. The point is that within this cultural context none of the reasons given for this man’s madness were considered outlandish, even by people who held competing perspectives, because all of the explanations fell within a range of possibilities informed by more or less shared cultural assumptions. Although ethnographers can never make resolute and conclusive claims about a culture, we can outline cultural constraints that limit what would otherwise be an indeterminate range of possible interpretations. Laura Ahearn refers to this as a “practice theory of meaning constraint,” and convincingly demonstrates that, “We must acknowledge the inevitability of a certain degree of interpretive indeterminacy while also recognizing that indeterminacy is not limitless” (2001:56).

I claim no authority to speak on behalf of the Nùng Fản Slìng, collectively or individually. What I do claim is an ethnographically informed understanding and perspective (both partial and positioned) of a Nùng Fản Slìng system of gendered relations, and how masculine identities are constructed in, by and through a dialectic of cultural assumptions about gender and concrete, gendered social practices embedded in the afore mentioned gender system. I recognize that it could be argued that my claim to non-authority is a subtle ploy to lull critical minds into inattention as I quietly reinstate my authority through backdoor tactics. So, let me elaborate on what I mean. I will make a representation of Nùng Fản Slìng cultural assumptions about gender, or what can be called Nùng Fản Slìng gender theories, as they were outlined and explained to me by research participants. I will also make a representation of my observations of and participation in gendered social practices that were premised by cultural assumptions about gender. The analyses I make about Nùng Fản Slìng cultural assumptions, and the social practices premised by them, are my own. I think that
the majority of the people who participated in my field research will variably agree with my recounts of Nùng Fản Sling gender theories and gendered practices, as they are the very people who shared their ideas and perspectives of gender with me, and whose social interactions I observed, participated in, and inquired about.

My own theoretical perspectives and analyses are a different matter. During my field research, I regularly shared my analyses of the Nùng Fản Sling gender system with research participants. Very often, people would respond to my take on issues of gender (or ghosts, or politics, or education, for that matter) with, “maybe that is how it is done ‘over there,’ but this is how we do it here.” This is consistent with my concept of culture, that is the tacit assumptions and deeply held beliefs about the way the world works, or should work, and taken as the natural order of the world.

Again, I am not attempting to speak for the Nùng Fản Sling. I spoke with, observed, and interacted with many people who self-identify, and are identified by others as Nùng Fản Sling, and this is my recounting and analysis of some of the things we talked about, some of the things I observed, and some of the social interactions in which I was involved.

ORGANIZATION AND OVERVIEW

In Chapter Two, I provide an archaeology of my analytical and interpretive frameworks—in the sense that I attempt to transparently uncover the origins of my own thinking around my categories of analysis—and situate them within broader conceptual debates about culture, identity and gender. In other words, I review the literature that has influenced and shaped my treatment of the general, analytic abstractions of “culture,” “identity,” and “gender.” These analytic concepts serve as broad starting points for my emergent, explanatory framework of Nùng Fản Sling gender relations and gendered identities, which I frame in terms of and ground in dialogue with local cultural assumptions underlying identity and gender throughout the chapters that follow.
Chapters Three, Four, Five, Six, and Seven are ethnographic chapters, where I present my data. These chapters are not attempts at “pure” description, but are bits and pieces of ethnographically generated data that are thematically organized, and illuminated by and illuminating of my terms of analysis. I treat masculinity in terms of gender differences, as well as similarities within a system of gendered relations that includes both male and female selves. This treatment requires attendance to men and women’s assumptions that premise their gendered practices and representations of masculinity and femininity. In other words, I take masculine identities as produced and shaped in and by social practices and relationships, which are premised on cultural assumptions about gender that circulate in the context of Dụ Vãng.

In Chapter Three I give a brief examination of how boys and girls are socialized to inhabit differently gendered positions as men and women. I argue that the socialization of boys and girls is premised on the cultural assumption that males are permanent members of the patrilineage, while girls are provisional members; resulting in male primacy and female marginality.

In Chapter Four I contextually situate the cultural construction and social reproduction of gendered identities in Dụ Vãng. To accomplish this I make a descriptive analysis of men and women’s relationships and respective positions within the gender system by looking at conceptions of love, flirting practices, and social norms of proper relationships between lovers.

In Chapter Five I continue to contextualize gendered positions and relationships. Specifically, I examine the Nùng Fản Sling institution of marriage and relationships between husbands and wives, as well as the cultural assumptions about men and women and the gendered social practices embedded in husband-wife relationships. In this chapter I also give special attention to the positions of women within the Nùng Fản Sling system of gender relations. As well, I examine the processes through which marriages are dissolved in order to further illustrate men and women’s gendered positions within Nùng Fản Sling society. I conclude Chapter Five by looking at issues of
sexuality and affection, which provides glimpses into Nùng Fản Sling cultural assumptions about the nature of men and women.

In Chapters Six and Seven I outline contours of what is considered to be the province of men in the Nùng system of gender, or what practices, ideals, capacities, characteristics, and so forth are assumed to be practiced, espoused, possessed, embodied, valued, and signified by men. By this I am not trying to identify a Nùng masculine essence, nor a discrete gender category that precludes or expels an equally discrete femininity. Masculinity among the Nùng is constituted by many things, none of which are immutable, uniform, nor embodied entirely and completely by any one male. However, there does seem to be a dominant form of masculinity, or hegemonic masculine ideal (Connell 2005) that exists in Đụ Vãng, and which is distinguished from femininity, though not dichotomously. This dominant form of masculinity is my focus.

In Chapter Six I demonstrate how masculinity is reproduced in and by men’s social practices, positions, and relationships through an examination of men’s work as gendered social work. I demonstrate how men’s and women’s social positions enable the practice of masculine networking and reproduce the cultural ideals of brotherly equality and solidarity upon which men’s social networks are founded.

In Chapter Seven I describe social events in which femininity is excluded and masculinity celebrated. The beliefs and practices surrounding and embedded in these social events make manifest widely held cultural assumptions about what constitutes masculinity among the Nùng Fản Sling. I follow these descriptions with an examination of the beliefs and practices of Nùng Fản Sling priests to substantiate my claims of dominant masculine ideals in Đụ Vãng.

In Chapter Eight I conclude my ethnography by forwarding a “locally engaged theory” (Tsing 1993:32) of gendered identity, in which I take into account a particular sociocultural context and the cultural assumptions about men and women that circulate and premise gendered social practices and relationships within that context. As mentioned above, I use the analytic abstractions of “culture,” “gender,” and “identity” as general categories of
analysis, but then bring these into dialogue with local cultural assumptions about
gender and the self, and the social practices through which these assumptions
are made manifest, reinforced and reproduced. Following a trajectory of locally
engaged theory, I depart from Western concepts and categories of “identity” and
“gender” in order to explicate a Nùng Fản Sling gender system in general, and
masculine identities in particular. To accomplish this I incorporate Nùng Fản
Sling concepts of “self” and “difference” as deployed and represented in linguistic
interactions in order to shed light on how identities are constructed and
reproduced in the local context where I conducted my research. As well, local
conceptions of “self” and “difference” demonstrate how gender and identity are
mutually implicated in the context of Dụ Vãng. To further an understanding of
gender as an aspect of identity I then draw on local cultural assumptions that
encompass demotic Taoist concepts of yin-yang, animist beliefs around spiritual
potency and influence by association, and Confucian-type prescripts for ordering
social relationships. These cultural assumptions and the practices premised by
them are introduced and elaborated in the ethnographic chapters, and build
towards my theoretical interpretations in the final chapter.

In contrast to the brief and general accounts published in the scant
Vietnamese and English literature about the Nùng (Abadie 2001; Bế, Nguyể́n,
and Chu 1992; Howard 2002; Lâm and Nguyể́n 1978; Lebar, Hickey, and
Musgrave 1964; Nguyể́n n.d.; Saul and Gregerson 1980; Schrock et al 1972; Ủy
ban nhân dân tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1999; Vương Toán 2004) this study provides a
qualitative and in-depth look at one of Vietnam’s largest, and relatively little
known ethnic minority groups. Additionally, the present study engages with and
contributes to the vibrant dialogue that has been taking place among
sociocultural researchers around the topic of masculinity, or men as gendered,
which blossomed in the 1990s and continues to grow. More than merely adding
bulk to the ethnographic inventory, this ethnography offers new and novel ways
for thinking about masculine identities. Lastly, despite the large quantities of fairly
recent work published on men and masculinities, most of the empirical research
has been carried out among Western populations, and there remains a paucity of
research on Asian men in general, and even less work on Southeast Asian men, in particular, as marked by gender.
PLATES

Plate 1.1 Looking up the valley towards Dụ Văng [Wangsgard]

Plate 1.2 Further up the valley [Wangsgard]
Plate 1.3 Looking down towards Dụ Vãng from an adjacent hilltop [Wangsgard]

Plate 1.4 Entering Dụ Vãng on the village's main thoroughfare [Wangsgard]
Plate 1.5 Midway along Dự Vãng’s main thoroughfare [Wangsgard]

Plate 1.6 The path leaving Dự Vãng towards the mountains and forests [Wangsgard]

Plate 1.7 Overlooking rooftops in Dự Vãng [Wangsgard]
Plate 1.8 Looking towards Pão’s home from an adjacent hill [Wangsgard]

Plate 1.9 Agricultural fields of Dụ Vằng [Wangsgard]
Plate 1.10 Agricultural fields in valley bottoms and on surrounding hillsides [Wangsgard]

Plate 1.11 Wet-rice agriculture in Đụ Vằng’s valley bottoms [Wangsgard]
Plate 1.12 Following Pǎo’s son, Hùng, up a ravine towards the high mountains in search of errant buffalo [Wangsgard]

Plate 1.13 High mountains surrounding Dự Văng serve as pasture for cattle [Wangsgard]
Plate 1.14 Rugged mountain terrain surrounding Dụ Vãng; sparsely inhabited by members of the Yao ethnic group [Wangsgard]

Plates 1.15 and 1.16 Không (left) and Pào (right) wearing one of Dụ Vãng's shared priests' robes and hats [Wangsgard]
Plates 1.17 and 1.18 Linh (left) and Cảo (right) wearing the same priests’ robe and hat as above [Wangsgard]

Plate 1.19 Thi, who took this photograph, aptly named it “Đoàn Lợn,” or “Litter of Pigs.” From left to right: the author, Êng, Thào, and Út [Thi]
2. CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND GENDER: A REVIEW

Although culture is not the sole concept that organizes and animates my analytical frameworks, it is the primary one that actuates and informs my interpretations of human social life. I theorize gender and identity in terms of the cultural, and premise these analytic categories on my concept of culture, which I outline below. Following my discussion of the culture concept, I survey different theoretical approaches to the study of identity and gender as separate fields, which, however, implicate one another and are always culturally shaped.

Identity and gender are confounded in one another; gender is shaped by and shapes identity. Identity and gender are experienced, reproduced, and manifest as constituents of a synthetic—albeit inconsistent, shifting, and evolving—whole. Here I use "synthetic" in the sense of a gestalt, or a configuration of elements so integrated that its properties cannot be derived from a simple summation of its parts—keeping in mind that I am not implying the notions of consistent integration and fixed unity that often accompany the terms "synthetic" and "gestalt." To tease gender out of identity is only possible in the abstract, but I find the abstractions of "gender" and "identity" to be useful analytical categories with which to theorize their mutual embeddedness to a better understanding of differently configured human selves.

In my own treatment of identity, I glean fragments from social theory and philosophy, psychoanalysis and psychology, and anthropological theories of "the self." In general, I conceive of identity as people’s ongoing experiences and representations of themselves (as well as others), which experiences and the interpretations and representations thereof are shaped by the more or less shared cultural assumptions that circulate in a given social context in which “the self” is experienced, interpreted, and represented.
Following my discussion of identity, I specifically take up the issue of
gender as an analytical dimension of identity. Here I incorporate the basic tenets
of social constructionism, as well as drawing on various schools of feminist
thought and insights from critical masculinity and men's studies to inform my
conceptualizations about gender and masculinity as abstract categories. From
this general jumping-off point, I theorize gender systems as frameworks of
meaningful relationships in which a person's biological sex is made socially
relevant (Holter 2005:20), and theorize masculinity and femininity as
configurations of cultural assumptions and social practices that are reproduced in
a system of gendered relations (Connell 2005).

CULTURE

The culture concept, widely recognized as the *sine qua non* of
anthropology, has proven to be a very slippery and highly contested
term/concept throughout the history of the discipline. It has been argued that the
erlier versions of the culture concept, such as those found in Edward Tylor's
*Primitive Culture* (1920 [1871]) and Clyde Kluckhohn's (1949) *Mirror for Man*, are
too theoretically diffuse and evasive to have much analytical or explicatory power
in conveying social realities. Clifford Geertz has argued that the kind of
conceptual eclecticism in these early versions of culture "is self-defeating not
because there is only one direction in which it is useful to move, but because
there are so many: it is necessary to choose" (1973:5).

More recently, the trend has been to argue that the concept of culture is
too decidedly fixed and fixing. Anthropologists, such as Lila Abu-Lughod (1991,
John Comaroff (2003), and Renato Rosaldo (1989), among others, have argued
that the anthropological concept of culture, built upon notions of coherence,
timelessness, and bounded discreteness creates a fundamental distinction
between self and other, and reproduces this distinction as essentialized
difference. Although many of these authors recognize that the culture concept
allows for multiple, rather than simple binary differences, they argue that the
tendency of cultural theories to overemphasize coherence, boundedness, and
timelessness continue to freeze non-Western peoples in place and time;
essentializing difference as cultural rather than racial or natural.

Anthropologists arguing for non-essentializing theories and concepts, do
not discount “difference” or the notion of “difference.” These authors actually
advocate a recognition of more difference; not in essentialist terms, but a
recognition and study of how differences shift, intersect, interact and get
negotiated. For example, Abu-Lughod stresses that what she wants to see in
ethnography are “individual differences and the contestatory nature of discourses
and social life within all communities” (2000:263). To these ends, anthropologists
such as those cited above, have suggested a de-emphasis on, and even an
abandonment of “culture” as a useful analytical concept for the human condition.
Comaroff and Comaroff (2003:152), for a further example, have argued that
because our “subjects” are no longer inhabiting discrete, bounded, coherent
social worlds or cultures (I doubt this has ever been the case throughout the
duration of human existence) in the context of globalization—the transnational
flow of ideas, commodities, resources, images, people—we lack a persuasive
lexicon (e.g. community, society, culture, etc.) with which to adequately talk
about the contemporary human world.

As a corrective to a culture concept “shadowed by coherence,
timelessness, and discreteness” (Abu-Lughod 1991:147), which, it is argued, has
served as “the prime anthropological tool for making ‘other’” (ibid), which making has
“incarcerated, or confined…[natives] to, and by, their places” (Appadurai
1988:37), there has been a move towards concepts and theories of “discourse.”
For me, attempts to resolve the culture concept by replacing it with “discourse”
not only reproduce many parallel problems, but also work to obfuscate these
problems.

It seems to me that one of the motivations for the abandonment of the
culture concept has to do with the term’s etymological baggage. That is, culture
has been used to frame human societies and cultures as bounded, fully
integrated, autonomous, functional, and static systems. But simply because “discourse” is a fairly new concept in anthropology, at least in the sense of its contemporary forms and uses, does not relieve this term of the burden of etymology. Take for example these common English definitions of “discourse”:

- To exercise reason; to employ the mind in judging and inferring; to reason.
- The power of the mind to reason or infer by running, as it were, from one fact or reason to another, and deriving a conclusion; range of reasoning faculty.
- Consecutive speech, either written or unwritten, on a given line of thought; speech; treatise; dissertation; sermon, etc.


- extended verbal expression in speech or writing
- an address of a religious nature (usually delivered during a church service)


- Verbal expression in speech or writing.
- Verbal exchange; conversation.
- A formal, lengthy discussion of a subject, either written or spoken.
- *Archaic* The process or power of reasoning.


Of course, those who prefer the concept of discourse over the concept of culture would be quick to point out that they do not *conceive* of “discourse” in the above ways. While “culture,” Abu-Lughod (1991) and Appadurai (1988) argue, is incapable of being *conceived* of or deployed in a manner that does not fix, freeze, incarcerate, and essentialize. This signals that the issue of “culture” or “discourse” is more of a conceptual problem than a terminological one. Interestingly, any definition of “discourse” is often elided in anthropological
literature, or the concept gets discussed in terms of what it does not do and what it does not reference, and less often and more vaguely in terms of what it actually does do or references. So how, exactly, is discourse conceived of in anthropology? In Abu-Lughod’s formulation, discourse does not assume the same incapacity “for movement, travel, and geographical interaction” as the culture concept, as well as those who are incarcerated by it (1991:146). She argues that the concept of discourse, used in concert with practice, enables analyses of social life that do not presume “the degree of coherence that the culture concept has come to carry” (ibid:147). Continuing in this elusive vein, Abu-Lughod does not define “practice,” but rather identifies the problems around which it is built: “contradiction, misunderstanding, and misrecognition, and favors strategies, interests, and improvisations over the more static and homogenizing cultural tropes of rules, models, and texts” (ibid).

Abu-Lughod discourses about what the concepts of “practice” and “discourse” relate to and make possible, without much discussion around how and why the concepts she favors enable these possibilities:

In its Foucauldian derivation…[discourse] relates to notions of discursive formations, apparatuses, and technologies, [and] is meant to refuse the distinction between ideas and practices or text and world that the culture concept too readily encourages. In its more sociolinguistic sense, it draws attention to the social uses by individuals of verbal resources. In either case, it allows for the possibility of recognizing within a social group the play of multiple, shifting, and competing statements with practical effects. Both practice and discourse are useful because they work against the assumption of boundedness…of the culture concept. (1991:147-148)

In Abu-Lughod’s discourse, she initially posits “practice” and “discourse” as distinct terms and concepts. Based on her discussion, we can assume that she deploys the concept of discourse in two ways: in its Foucauldian sense, and in its sociolinguistic sense. However, she also works to integrate these two senses of the term in claiming that either case enables the same possibilities. Thus we can infer that she means the verbal and written resources—discursive formations, apparatuses, and technologies—that social actors use to communicate ideas,
and the actual communicating of ideas, taken together constitute “discourse.” I won’t try to identify what exactly she means by practice, as she first alludes to a distinction between discourse and practice, and then, as cited above, argues that “discourse” refuses “the distinction between ideas and practices or text and world.”

Bruce Horner argues that theories of discourse make the “distinction between… the supposed object of analysis and the terms of analysis representing that object” disappear; “our discourse about [an object of analysis] would seem to shape what it becomes for us” (1999:21). For Horner, like Abu-Lughod, theories of discourse refuse the distinction between practice and ideas, text and world, and actively work to conflate them, to erase the distinction, to turn discourse into reality, and reality into discourse.

How different is this concept and treatment of discourse from, say, Alfred Kroeber’s earlier concept and treatment of culture, which holds that ideas, beliefs, practices, materials, and objects are all equally part of culture; “We may forget about this distinction” (1948:295-296)? And, like proponents of discourse theories, after paying equal homage to ideology and materiality, Kroeber then gives priority and preeminence to the immaterial, to ideas (and we can infer that this includes the dialogical exchange and negotiation of ideas, as ideas are not rocks hermetically sealed inside peoples’ heads): “What counts is not the physical ax or coat or wheat but the idea of them, their place in life” (ibid:295).

Other authors, concerned with power and legitimization, have also drawn on Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse as laid out in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972). Iara Lessa summarizes Foucault’s conception of discourse as “systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of action, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (2006:285). Thus, in her analysis of poor single mothers in Canada, their discourses, and the discourses of an agency that serves them, Lessa also assumes an earasure of the divide between reality and representation, and that discourse encompasses practice. But in her own discourse, she removes “practice” from the concept of discourse, stating, “*Discourses* figure prominently
in their practices: most of their work of support, empowerment, and advocacy is done through language” (ibid:288; my emphasis). Practice, it would seem, is made distinct from discourse, then reinstated as the act of discoursing. Or, perhaps, Lessa is making the term “discourse” reference a variety of things but fails to distinguish her referents.

Linda Alcoff discourses about anthropological representation, in terms of power and legitimization, as “discursive practice” (1991:6). She too deploys “discourse” in its Foucauldian sense, which consists of ideas, attitudes, political agendas, courses of action, beliefs, and practices, but then feels it necessary to distinguish between discourse as texts, ideas, and beliefs, and discourse as action and practice, i.e., “discursive practice.” Based on her entire discussion, we can take Alcoff’s concept of discursive practice to mean: proceeding to a conclusion or claim through a dialogue of reason. The dialogue can be carried out via spoken, textual or visual mediums, and the reason or rationale of the dialogue is premised on certain assumptions, meanings, ideas, values, and frameworks of understanding. And these assumptions, meanings, ideas, values, and frameworks of understanding are exchanged, negotiated, and interact (some get oppressed, while some get privileged) by means of the dialogue. Thus discourse and practice are made distinct by the term “discursive practice,” but then practice is re-enfolded into discourse as the act of discoursing.

In Clifford’s (1983) discourse about discourse, he invokes, though not explicitly, the sociolinguistic sense of the term, and frames discourse as:

a mode of communication where the presence of the speaking subject and of the immediate situation of communication are intrinsic. Discourse is marked by pronouns ...which signal the present instance of discourse rather than something beyond it. Discourse does not transcend the specific occasion in which a subject appropriates the resources of language in order to communicate dialogically... discourse cannot be interpreted in the open-ended, potentially public way that a text is ‘read.’ To understand discourse you ‘had to have been there,’ in the presence of the discoursing subject. For discourse to become text it must become ‘autonomous,’...The text, unlike discourse, can travel. (1983:131)
For Clifford, as opposed to Abu-Lughod’s deployment of the concept, discourse is exemplary of the fundamental distinction between text and world, interpretation and interlocution. Furthermore, for Clifford, discourse cannot travel, as it can for Abu-Lughod, because it is bound by the interlocutors of its immediate occasion, and by the occasion itself. “A discursive model of ethnographic practice brings into prominence the intersubjectivity of all speech, along with its immediate performative context…every instance of discourse is immediately linked to a specific, shared situation. No discursive meaning, then, without interlocution and context” (ibid:133).

Theories of discourse are so bogged down in a conceptual morass of theoretical vagaries and diffusions that the impediments to productive discourse match or exceed those of the earlier culture concept’s undecided eclecticism. Like Tylor’s (1920 [1871]) early definition of culture, everything can be identified as discourse, and discourse can be made to reference everything. Analyses of discursive constitution (most often) assume that reality is constituted only in discourse and thus ignores things that are also constituted in material realities (though it tries to envelop them, its failure to do so is indicated by the need to classify such things as practice as discursive) like material inequality, physical violence, corporations, sexual intercourse, government ministries, kicking the neighbor’s dog, etc.

In “Ethnography on an Awkward Scale,” Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2003) discourse of ethnographic methodology is, in many instances, insightful. However, I find these authors’ substitution, and in some instances synonymous use of the culture concept with “discourse” to be problematic. Comaroff and Comaroff’s concern is the way supralocal, translocal, and local discourses travel, interact, and shape one another, and how we should go about ethnographically studying this: both the larger forces constituted in national, transnational and global discourses, and the felt manifestations of these in the particularities of concrete localized places, or local discourses, and how these local discourses then reshape the larger discourses. For Comaroff and Comaroff, in order to avoid “parochializing and, worse yet, exoticizing…the worlds we study” (ibid:151),
ethnography should not be the study of culture, because culture is no longer adequate to the task of talking about the contemporary human world, but should be the study of discourses that are “simultaneously supralocal, translocal, and local, simultaneously planetary and refracted through the shards of vernacular cultural practices, profoundly parochial” (ibid). Thus, discourse is made to reference global abstractions that are expansively planetary, and is also made to reference local discourses, variously referred to by such terms as “vernacular cultural practices” that are restrictively local.

To emphasize their point that discourse travels, temporally and spatially, Comaroff and Comaroff (2003) conceive of discourse as “discursive flows”: “a flow of narratives, incidents, activities, dramas, material exchanges, conversations, and representations” (ibid:165). To further emphasize the totality of these discursive flows, they “reiterate that this includes not ‘just’ talk or texts but practices as well, not ‘just’ the meaningful but also the material” (ibid:166). But they also make discourse reference modes of communication and actual dialogical interchange, in the common sense of the term, as well as the sociolinguistic sense of the term as social uses of verbal and textual resources, and imagery: “popular discourses across the planet posit that the world is undergoing changes of major proportions” (ibid:156).

What often becomes befuddling in Comaroff and Comaroff’s discourse is when they employ a combination of these multiple concepts in a particular instance of discourse; by direct use of the term “discourse” to reference one of its conceptualizations in combination with indirect use by referencing another definition of the term. For example, they argue that one ethnographic methodological operation entails tracing discursive flows over time, or:

to establish what, precisely, is new about [a discursive flow] and what is not...what is unique and what is merely a local instance of a wider phenomenon...[by] eliciting a local genealogy of cultural precursors and...running it up against a comparative archaeology of similar signs and practices to ascertain where else, and in what circumstances, parallel discourses might be found. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003:170)
In other words, they are looking for discourses (contemporary cultural phenomena and forms that are not necessarily rooted in place) that are parallel to “cultural precursors” (past cultural phenomena and forms that also travel). In comparing discourses and culture, then we must assume that these are commensurable, and in Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2003) discussion, the two are made synonymous.

In much of Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2003) discourse, they seem to be taking a framework of cultural diffusionism, dressing it up in language that is currently the vogue in anthropology, and allowing for change and non-uniformity. “Discursive flows, although having focal centers, are inherently open, flexible in scope, and shifting in both their content and their constituents” (ibid:165). They forward further ethnographic methodological operations of identifying a discursive flow’s “animating vernaculars” and following “the traces of that discursive flow, of it various signs and images, tracking the migration of the latter from their densest intersection to wherever else they may lead” (ibid:168). Locating the concentrated cultural core, or, in their words, the focal center of a discursive flow, and then following it as it radiates outward towards the more diffuse cultural peripheries, spatially and temporally, again, echoes cultural diffusionism.

Throughout Comaroff and Comaroff’s (2003) discourse, they interchangeably employ such terms as “animating vernacular” (ibid:168), “local discourse” (ibid:173), and “vernacular discourse” (ibid:174) to indicate local flavor, or how the “densest intersections” or “focal centers” of discursive flows get “refracted through the shards of vernacular cultural practices” (ibid:151). But, from the outset, Comaroff and Comaroff’s discourse is premised on the inadequacy of concepts such as “culture” in an analysis of the human world, so anytime the cultural is invoked in reference to the local it gets clouded by vague synonyms. Fancy, anthropologically correct language aside, each of these concepts could be replaced with “local culture” or even “native culture,” as the concepts these terms are being made to reference are the same. Let me take one of these terms/concepts to illustrate my point: “vernacular discourse.” Vernacular refers to something that is expressed or written in the native or
indigenous language of a place. And discourse, as discussed above, refers to talk, text, practices, beliefs, meaning, material objects, human reality in its entirety. How, then, is a term/concept such as “vernacular discourse” an improvement over a term/concept such as “native culture”? How is it any less incarcerating, essentializing, and all the other self-righteous terms used to indicate anthropological heresy with which the culture concept is charged?

The crux of this problem rests on how the ethnographer conceptualizes and deploys his or her concepts and terms. If carefully explicated and consistently deployed (and consistency does not necessarily evoke a sense of timelessness, fixedness, uniformity, or boundedness) the culture concept can be used as a referent for shifting, unfixable, negotiated, dialogical social flows, or social contexts. Even in this increasingly globalized, interconnected world the culture concept has a lot of tread left on it. Transnational ideas and practices, called “discourses,” though they may circulate globally, arise from somewhere, and every somewhere is culturally shaped. These translocal abstractions and practices do not get unquestioningly consumed at their original face value (if there ever was a uniformly agreed upon “face value” in the cultural contexts from whence they sprang) in every locale with which they come into contact and interact; though they may impact upon and interact with local cultural assumptions, they are still interpreted through local cultural assumptions. For example, a Korean soap opera may depict relationships in which popular Korean assumptions about romantic love are played out. It could be argued that popular Korean notions of romantic love have been influenced by Western cultural assumptions (i.e., discourses) of romantic love, but this does not mean that Korean notions of romantic love mirror those that might be found in the West. This Korean soap opera may be viewed by a young Nùng Fấn Sling woman and have an affect on her notions of romantic love, but she will not simply adopt Korean cultural assumptions of romantic love; she will interpret and evaluate these depictions of romantic love by drawing on her own assumptions about the world. Thus, romantic love could be framed as a translocal discourse, or discursive flow, or an animating vernacular discourse, or what have you. But the
particular and different ways in which that thing we call romantic love is thought about, talked about, experienced, and so forth highlights the cultural. Perhaps a term like “cultural flow” is more apropos, signaling that ideas and practices are cultural in their origins, and though they may circumvest the globe, they can only be engaged culturally.

The various and ambiguous uses of the discourse concept, for me, does not signal an improvement over the culture concept, or any kind of theoretical robustness. The unproblematic, undefined way in which the concept is frequently deployed draws attention away from what exactly it is the author is talking about. Perhaps the reason this term seems to get so generously sprinkled in the talk and text of many contemporary writers/speakers is that they are unclear what it is they are actually referencing. To define discourse is to define reality itself, and reality as a totality evades definition. This is not to say that there are no valid uses of the term “discourse,” but discourse is inadequate in and of itself for discussing, analyzing, or theorizing social realities and the human condition.

I prefer to use the culture concept, rather than the discourse concept. In my own conceptualization and deployment of the culture concept, I do not treat culture as a set of codes or rules or roles that members of a society must adhere to or enact in order to be accepted by that society (Geertz 1973). Culture, unlike the Devil, does not make people do things; it is not a power that causes things to happen—people act, culture does not. Culture is the tacit assumptions that people hold about the world, the way the world is, or the way the world should be, and which assumptions inform and premise action and how action gets interpreted. It is these assumptions that we humans draw on, however tacitly, to make the world meaningful. These assumptions are not random or isolated, neither are they codified, fixed, algorithms. Cultural assumptions can be conceived of as webs of interconnected meanings that do not simply occur naturally, but that we humans construct and reconstruct in order to make sense of our lives, make sense of the world, to explain why things happen, determine what is important, and how to go about problem solving.
As culture is a public phenomenon, it is useful to think of culture as context. Culture as context is an amalgamation of more or less shared assumptions, in which actions and events take place, are socially and individually experienced, discussed, negotiated, understood and made meaningful. These tacit and more or less shared assumptions about the world that surround a situation or event and affect the meaning of the situation or event, or shape how it gets interpreted, are not fixed or timeless, simply learned then transmitted from one generation to the next, existing unchanged in individual heads. Rather, these assumptions are animated by and evolve in the imaginative and material universe of a society’s members. We humans are creative critters, and as new practices, experiences, relationships, events and situations are encountered in human life then new interpretations arise, and our assumptions about the world may get reconfigured. But new assumptions do not just appear out of nowhere, we do not just whip them up from scratch, we work from and with what we already have; they are created from and with the assumptions we already hold.

IDENTITY

Anthropologists dealing with identity often take this concept for granted to mean a human being’s awareness of one’s self, or one’s person, though a few have gone beyond issues of terminology and plumbed the theoretical implications involved in conceptualizing humans as “individuals,” “selves,” or “persons” (e.g. Ewing 1990; Harris 1989). The theoretical treatment of “identity” within and without the discipline of anthropology has ranged from concepts of cohesive, fully integrated, autonomous selves to concepts of selves so fragmented that they have no sense of self as a historical product nor a future agent. Despite these differences, theoretical treatments of identity tend to share in common a concept of the “self” as supraordinate, however variously conceived this supraordinate self may be. By a supraordinate concept of the “self” I mean the assumption that identity is constituted by such ingredients, emergent from such intersections, or ruptured into such fragments as gender, class, race, age,
ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and so on. This commonality aside, much of the
disagreement between anthropologists, as well as between anthropologists and
psychoanalysts, over the concept of self arises from the fact that they are often
using the same term to reference different things. In concert with evaluating
theories of identity, I will also be attempting to outline which concept of self the
different authors are referencing.

Defining the Self

The most common and general concept of self, which tends to be invoked
in everyday discourse, refers to the human biological organism with all of its
accompanying psychological functioning and social attributes. This general
concept of self can be seen, for example, in *Self* magazine, which offers advice
with regards to caring for and improving the physical body, managing social
relationships, and furthering one’s own economic interests (Ewing 1990). In
Grace G. Harris’ (1989) “Concepts of Individual, Self, and Person in Description
and Analysis,” she argues that scholars concerned with issues of identity, and
anthropologists in particular, often conflate different conceptualizations of human
beings into the undifferentiated concept and term, “self.” She goes on to state
that researchers need to clearly distinguish between three primary
conceptualizations of human beings as:

1. living entities among many such entities in the universe,
2. human beings who are centers of being or experience,
3. human beings who are members of society.

That is, we need to distinguish, for any local system, among biologistic,
psychologistic, and sociologistic concepts…(Harris 1989:599).

Harris’ first conceptualization is referenced by the term, “individual.” This concept
refers to human beings as a single member of humanity, or other smaller
aggregates of humans. Such a conceptualization takes society as a collectivity.
The culture of a society is seen as the result of common biophysical and
ecological exigencies encountered by a collective of individuals. In other words,
The culture is seen as a resource for meeting the biological and social needs of a collective of individuals in a particular ecology.

The second conceptualization Harris identifies is the concept of “self.” This concept is commonly employed by psychoanalysts, and is seen to consist of two aspects, or a duality of self. One aspect is the self as subject, or the existential “I.” In this aspect, the self is “author of behaviors known to their author as…[his or her] own and so distinguished from the behaviors of any other someone”, which Harris equates with “self-identity” (1989:601). The second aspect is self as object, or the categorical “me.” In this aspect, some features of the self as object “are brought within its own purview by the normal human capacity for noticing one’s noticing…with a set of beliefs about itself…as a unique unity”, which produces self-awareness and “personal identity” (ibid). Taken together, this duality of self forms the locus of individual experience, with selves incorporating “goals, ideals, problems, ideas, concepts, and beliefs” within a given sociocultural context, which defines “the contexts for the self’s growth, development, expression, and reading by others” (ibid:608).

Harris’ concept of self as a locus of experience closely parallels the concept of “self” employed in self psychology as formulated by Heinz Kohut (1977)—though she does not acknowledge him in her text or references—the major exception being that Harris considers cultural diversity in her formulation. Kohut argues that every healthy, normally functioning human develops a cohesive, integrated, and independent self that becomes “crystallized in the interplay of inherited and environmental factors” and is constituted in:

The patterns of ambitions, skills, and goals; the tensions between them; the programme of action they create; and the activities that strive towards the realization of this programme are all experienced as continuous in time and space—they are the self, an independent centre of initiative, an independent recipient of impressions. (Kohut and Wolf 1978:414)

Anthropologists often criticize universalist claims from psychology as being ethnocentric, or at least only applicable in the West. Unsurprisingly, Kohut’s concept of a unitary, bounded, autonomous, and universal self as the
center of initiative has elicited a strong response from anthropologists grounded in a relativist paradigm and studying the self cross-culturally. I will return to this shortly.

Harris’ (1989) third conceptualization of human beings references the concept of “person.” Being a “person” refers to a human being as a member of a society. Harris argues that this is the concept that anthropologists most often conflate with “self.” The concept of personhood, however, goes beyond being a center of experience. To be a person is to recognize the self, and to be recognized by other selves as a social agent; a self “who authors conduct construed as action” (ibid:602). For Harris, to conceptualize and study human beings as persons, i.e. social agents, directs the researcher’s gaze towards systems of social relationships and their cultural forms. Although public symbols, shared concepts, and relationships undoubtedly contribute to the shaping of private experience, Harris is skeptical as to whether anthropologists can access experience as experience.

Anthropologists, Harris argues, have the means for discovering the cultural materials and social processes from which selves are constructed. Additionally, we have the means for learning publicly shared cultural concepts of the self in different societies. In fact, she feels it necessary to do so: “Without some version of the assumption that the human world is populated by more-or-less persisting selves, mutual accountability would be impossible. In other words, no concept of the person could exist in the absence of a culturally shared concept of the self” (1989:602). But unless our selves have been formed by incorporating the “goals, ideals, problems, ideas, concepts, and beliefs” within a given sociocultural context, which defines “the contexts for the self’s growth, development, expression, and reading by others,” then we cannot know what it is to be a self in that particular society. For Harris, systems of social relationships and their attendant cultural forms are the province of sociocultural anthropology, and therefore, “persons” should be the human subject matter with which sociocultural anthropology concerns itself.
A concept very similar to Harris’ “person” was formulated several decades earlier by ego psychologists, the concept of “self-representation” (Hartmann 1958, 1964; Sandler and Rosenblatt 1962). Self-representations are constituents of the ego (translated by psychologists working in the Freudian tradition as “self”), and formed by interactions and identifications with others who figure prominently in the self’s social sphere over the course of the self’s development. Self-representations can either be expressively intentional, cognized acts, or tacit acts of which the actor, or “representer” is not conscious. Katherine P. Ewing argues that, “Since anthropologists are talking about symbols, otherwise known as ‘collective representations,’ the culturally shaped ‘self’ that is the object of anthropological study can…most clearly be understood…[as] self-representation” (1990:255).

**Cohesive Approaches**

As I noted above, anthropologists, reacting to a universal model of a cohesive, autonomous self, produced a number of works demonstrating that selves are variously shaped, experienced, and represented from one sociocultural context to another (e.g. Geertz 1984; Rosaldo 1983, 1984; Shweder and Bourne 1984; Spiro 1993). Keeping in mind the above mentioned tendency to conflate the concept of self, in the Kohutian sense, with what are called “self-representations” by Ewing (1990), and “persons” by Harris (1989), anthropologists who study identity in terms of a supraordinate self often explore cultural and historical constructions of selves. The resulting analyses are often premised on a particular society’s cultural assumptions of what it is to be a person, or on a culture’s quintessential concept of self (Ewing 1990; Geertz 1984). Once the anthropologist has identified the particular culture’s core concept of “self” or “person,” it can then be set in contrast against the Kohutian model, which contrast renders Kohut’s model as only explanatory of the Western concept of self. Clifford Geertz, for example, arguing that the concept of self as an integrated, bounded, autonomous whole is a product of Western spatial categories and individualism, states:
The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures. (1984:126)

The concept of self laid out by Kohut as an integrated, autonomous center of initiative is criticized for being cross-culturally universalizing, but is left in place, as can be seen in the above example, as the Western concept of self. Anthropologists studying the self within a framework of relativism, though they have demonstrated that there are many fewer universals than is often assumed by psychology and psychoanalysis, continue in this same universalizing trend, albeit in particularist fashion, by identifying the “other culture’s” concept of self, and comparing and contrasting it with the Western concept of self. I characterize these as “cohesive approaches” to the study of identity; cohesive in the sense that cultures are assumed to produce a single, bounded concept of self.

Anthropologists have convincingly argued that identity, or a culture’s core concepts of the “self” are culturally organized. Given this, it does not require an arcane act of discourse deconstruction to recognize that different theorists’ conceptualizations of identity are firmly grounded in their conceptualizations of culture. Thus, “culture” conceived as an integrated, coherent singularity that can be characterized by key concepts, symbols, and organizing principles premises and produces a characteristic concept of self organized around the culture’s key concepts, symbols and principals. In this formulation, if we tease apart the different contents of the often conflated supraordinate self, an individual’s experience of self is based on a culturally organized concept of person, which concept can be identified and neatly characterized. But what most astute ethnographers will recognize in the course of field research is that people not only give inconsistent accounts of their culture, but also of themselves.
**Fragmented Approaches**

Responding to the above mentioned inconsistency, some anthropologists have argued that cultural inconsistencies, and the negotiations that must necessarily arise from such, are the proper object of anthropological study. A strong proponent of this position, Vincent Crapanzano (1981), drawing on the work of Hegel (1966), Lacan (1977), Mead (1934), and Sartre (1956), argues that selves (in the conflated sense of “self”) are dialectically constituted, and thus constantly in flux vis-à-vis relationships with, and the perspectives and self-representations of others, with whom the self interacts; making even the experience of self, also, the subject of continual change. The self (as both representations and center of experience and initiative) is reduced to dialogical negotiation, which, if stripped away, would leave people as mere ideas of potential modes of action (Ewing 1990; Schafer 1976).

Some anthropologists have taken this theoretical trajectory even further. Arguing the inability of anthropologists to make true, faithful, or even approximate representations of sociocultural reality, or that ethnography only reifies through representational tropes a non-existent sociocultural reality, some anthropologists resist and refute attempts to depict other selves. For example, Stephen A. Tyler states that, “A post-modern ethnography is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect” (1986:125) (for further examples see Clifford and Marcus 1986). The task that is left to anthropology is a recounting of “fragmentary, self-conscious recordings of the dialogue between informant and ethnographer,” leaving the bulk of interpretive responsibility up to the reader (Ewing 1990:263). In my following discussion, I will refer to these theoretical treatments as “fragmented approaches.”

Taking up this issue of fragmented representations in the form of theories, and in the form of conscious selves, Frederic Jameson (1991) argues that the
fragmentation of the self found in postmodern theory and in the dominant form of consciousness has resulted from psychological effects of cultural production in Twentieth-century late capitalism. Namely, the dislocation of local populations and individuals by processes of global production, standardization of human environments, and the inundation of human consciousness by the mass media. Jameson characterizes postmodern culture, and postmodern selves that are reflections of that culture, by its inability to “represent the historical past; it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past” (ibid:25).

For Jameson, the fragmentation found in postmodern theory reflects the mental content of the theorists; a fragmented world produces fragmented psyches that produce fragmented works. Jameson does not characterize himself as a postmodern theorist, but as a theorist of the postmodern, and thus his explanations do not necessarily issue from a fragmented psyche, but do reflect a fragmented world (1991:15). In other words, he somehow transcends or has remained immune to the psychologically fragmenting forces of late capitalist cultural production, of which other theorists, and the majority of human populations for that matter, are reflections. Jameson does not reject universalizing explanations, and, as can be implied by his own claims of escaping fragmentation, does not discount the existence of “cohesive selves” in pre-late capitalism.

Like other scholars asking questions of identity, Jameson’s treatment of identity is inextricably linked to his conceptualization of culture. Jameson employs a humanist concept of culture, referring to such cultural productions as architecture, film, theory, novels, painting, and so forth. Based on his concept of culture as such, postmodern culture for Jameson is “a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers” (1991:26), in which genuine historical consciousness has been dimmed or altogether lost, and thus produces a “postmodern schizo-fragmentation” of selves (ibid:372), who are unable to “organize...past and future into coherent experiences” (ibid:25). Jameson argues that postmodern selves are constituted by radically disconnected mental content—any coherent organization of which being random—and lack a cognitive center of initiative and interpretation.
that is anything more than randomly integrated, resulting in subjects who are “heaps of fragments” (ibid).

According to Jameson (1991), there has been a shift in the form of false consciousness, to use Marxian categories as Jameson himself often does. Claudia Strauss explains this movement as a shift from:

an older vertical containment to a newer horizontal containment. In the situation of vertical containment, consciousness formed by one’s lived daily experience is implicit and hard to express, buried beneath the well-learned formulations taken from dominant ideologies…[According to Jameson] that older form of false consciousness (explicit lies covering implicit truth) has been replaced by horizontal containment. In this form of false consciousness, lies and truth are internalized in separate cognitive compartments and neither is buried or hard to express, but the discrepant pieces cannot be brought face-to-face so that the truth can defeat the lies because there is no unified subject in whose awareness these multiple representations could meet. (1997:367)

This shift, for Jameson, not only signals the loss of collective memory and sense of the past, or historicity, but also the abolishment of individual lived experience of historical change.

The Nùng Fản Sling with whom I conducted my research have a strong sense of historical continuity, a present sense of the past. Present practices, beliefs, objects, and symbols are seen to have come from somewhere, they have recognizable antecedents, and people often commented on these when talking about change and continuity in such things as: socioeconomics—a particular funeral ritual that required a large expenditure of resources was rarely practiced in the past, but resources are more readily available now so the ritual is being performed much more frequently; material culture—styles of dress had changed over the past five years because of the availability of cheap market cloth, “we used to wear indigo cloth, now we wear checkered cloth;” social practices—parents asking for their children’s input when arranging marriages because young men and women have become more willful, and a child’s refusal of a marriage arrangement could potentially cause grief and shame for an entire community.
This sense of historicity goes beyond simple recognition of change and continuity. A connectedness of past, present, and future constitutes a deeply held belief about the world, or cultural assumption among the inhabitants of Dụ Văng. And it is these assumptions that people draw upon to interpret and represent experiences of the self. Among the Nùng, ancestors, or at least their ghosts, are very real, social actors in everyday life. In Harris’ (1989) formulation, these ghosts would be defined as “people,” as they are social agents, or authors of action that have social consequences recognized by other selves. People often identified ancestors’ ghosts as direct causal links in regards to fortune or misfortune. For instance, if a person fell ill they would seek out a priest skilled in the practice of spirit divination. The priest would consult the ancestors’ ghosts to determine the cause (very often some behavior or doing that transgressed long-standing cultural conventions, and which displeased the ancestors) and cure (often an appropriate offering to the offended ancestor). The past is consulted in order to understand, interpret, or diagnose a present situation. Based on this consultation with the past, a future course of action is envisioned, then experienced as a “present” in its undertaking, which eventually becomes a “past” that can be recollected in ongoing interpretations of other experience and the continued construction of the self. I think that theorizing the identities of those who participated in my research as fragmented by an inability to “organize past and future into coherent experiences” would be widely off the mark.

Sherry Ortner also holds that late capitalism, if not previous “moments” as well, has produced fragmented identities, or “victims of postmodernist disruption and flattening” (1991:5). However, Ortner takes issue with Jameson’s assumption that psychological fragmentation is evenly distributed in the United States, if not other parts of the world. Ortner takes a Foucauldian approach to interrogate fragmented identities as effects of power. She states that:

the decentering and flattening of subjectivity [read as the horizontal containment form of false consciousness in Jameson’s and Strauss’s treatments], and the disruption of both pastness and futureness, are specifically effects of power. Fragmented identities are not equally distributed over the social landscape, even in late capitalism, nor is the
inability to formulate and enact one’s own projects, to narrate oneself as both a product of a coherent past and an agent of an imaginable future. (Ortner 1991:5)

For Ortner, it is the marginalized classes that are most susceptible to a “rupturing of narrativity” (1991:6). Ortner also conceptualizes culture as cultural productions, and rests her argument on an analysis of Elliot Liebow’s Tally’s Corner (1967) and her own readings of Grimm’s fairy tales. She claims that fragmented identities are concentrated among poor African Americans, and women (for which she does not specify a location, but given her sources of evidence one can assume she is referring to the West).

One of the common problems with Jameson’s and Ortner’s analyses, as well as other studies of fragmented selves is that their evidentiary materials are exclusively drawn from cultural productions, or public culture in the humanist sense, such as various literary productions, works of art, and theoretical representations. These treatments render selves as mere reflections of the sociocultural environments that humans “inhabit, or habitually move through” (Jameson 1991:373). Strauss aptly summarizes this shortcoming: “At present, we have too many discussions of postmodern subjectivities that do not come within handshaking distance of any putatively postmodern people…if our only source of information about selves is the social context and cultural productions themselves” we can only speculate as to how selves are constructed in relation to, or as reflections of these (1997:370).

Postmodernist approaches that theorize identity as dialogical negotiation analyze everything as linguistic interchange or symbolic representation, in which the interlocutors and signifieds disappear. Homi Bhabha, for example, claims “there is no knowledge—political or otherwise—outside representation” (1994:23). Those who push this envelop further imagine a world of schizophrenics experiencing and representing themselves as discordant cognitions, images, and emotions with no sense of continuity from one moment to the next. What these theories do not offer is how experiencing social agents,
i.e. actual people, are shaped by supposed fragmented social worlds and cultural productions, let alone by realities of ethnicity, language, gender, and so forth.

An earlier approach to what postmodern theorists (and theorists of the postmodern) call fragmented or fractured identities was formulated by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903). Taking the experiences and epistemologies shaped by the different cultural and identity positions of African Americans (i.e., actual people) as his sources of evidence, Du Bois developed his concept of “double consciousness.” For Du Bois, the African American “ever feels his two-ness…two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (ibid:5). However, this experience of multiple consciousness does not result in a fragmentation of identities among marginalized groups for Du Bois, as it would in Ortner’s formulation. Rather, it results in a heightened insight, described as “second sight,” into the sociocultural context (in Du Bois’ case, early Twentieth-century American society) in which marginal and mainstream positions are constructed.

Postcolonial theorists following Du Bois’ (1903) lead have given different interpretations from Ortner’s fragmented identities among marginalized groups. These theorists argue that a condition of double, or multiple consciousness gives the subaltern (in the postcolonial sense of the term) “a transcendent position allowing one to see and understand positions of inclusion and exclusion” (Ladson-Billings 2000:260). Gloria Ladson-Billings further argues that the notion of multiple consciousness does not only apply to “African Americans but to any people who are constructed outside of the dominant paradigm” (ibid). For theorists working within this framework it is identification with “racialized labels,” or alterity itself that provides a point of integration for subaltern subjects. These authors do not see the category of “subaltern,” or even categories within this broader category as homogeneous, but that the experience of being constructed as “other” relative to the dominant culture’s “metaphor of the self,” generate common problems and experiences for marginalized people, which produce recognitions of commonality, and continuity (King 1988; Snipp 1996; Wynter 1990). Thus, the condition of alterity does not fracture the subaltern subject into “either/or” epistemologies, consisting of unconnected “multiple and equally partial
standpoints,” but transcends these, giving the subaltern a privileged purview of the “margins and mainstreams” (Ladson-Billings 2000:260-262).

Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) also draws on the notion of multiple consciousness in her concept of “borderlands.” However, for Anzaldúa, life experienced in borderlands results in a fracturing of identity, rather than a transcendent perspective born of integration of “multiple and equally partial standpoints.” Taking her-“self” as her object of analysis, she theorizes her own identity as fractured by her gender, class, race, language, sexuality, and life experiences in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. In an attempt to depict her own fractured self, Anzaldúa writes:

My “home” tongues are the languages I speak with my sister and brothers, with my friends. They are being closest to my heart. From school, the media and job situations, I’ve picked up standard and working class English. From Mamagrande Locha and from reading Spanish and Mexican literature, I’ve picked up Standard Spanish and Standard Mexican Spanish. From los recien llegados, Mexican immigrants and braceros, I learned Northern Mexican dialect. (1987:55-56)

The ways in which Anzaldúa, as well as other Chicana writers (see Alarcon 1990; Castillo 1995) experience, imagine, construct and represent their own selves, whether marginal but “possessed [of a] heightened moral validity” (Lewis 1993:281), fragmented by the processes of marginalization or alterity, or otherwise, shapes the way they analyze identity as a general concept, and a particular process in a particular context(s). I operate in southern, central, northern, and “hillbilly” Vietnamese, in back-water Utabhn English, as well as high brow academic speak, and Tày-Nùng. Thus I could theorize myself as fragmented by the diverse social-cultural-linguistic worlds that I habitually move through. The Nùng men with whom I conducted my research, can be absolutely dominant and “mainstream” in some contexts, and just as subordinate and marginal in others. I can theorize myself as a denizen of the imperial West with all of its attendant hegemonies and unequal global relationships of power. In the village where I worked, my own experiences of self and self-representations, including my own masculinity, were marginal. During my fieldwork, I was
instructed by the village headman to live as a member of his household, making me subordinate, however temporarily, to his will. The point is that I could imagine and construct my own marginality, as well as my own political-economic and cultural dominance along a variety of axes. And the fact is, most humans often do experience, construct, and represent themselves along various axes, at the points of different intersections of parts of the self, and from one context to another.

A weakness of many postcolonial treatments of identity is that they do not account for subject positions constituted in and by both domination and marginality, but theorize any and all subjectivities that are constructed outside a given dominant paradigm as only constituted by marginalization, subordination, and suppression. (Some feminists of color have given consideration to this issue, and I will briefly discuss their work in the following section.) “Multiple consciousness,” while describing selves constituted by coexisting epistemologies that result in “wide-angle” vision rather than fracture, does not account for inconsistencies in representations (and presumably experiences) of the “self,” which inconsistencies cut across lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, and so on.

Scholars like Alarcon (1990), Anzaldua (1987), and Castillo (1995), whether consciously corrective of the above approaches or not, do take into account the inconsistencies personified by the authors themselves (i.e., their “selves” as experience and representation) reproduced in the intersections of race, class, and gender as they transition (but never comfortably or completely) from one social-cultural-linguistic-political context to the next. However, these writers also disregard the wholeness and continuity that most people claim they experience, and that they represent to some degree or another.

In her article, “Partly Fragmented, Partly Integrated,” Claudia Strauss (1997) undertakes a project of looking for the kind of postmodern fragmented selves described by such authors as Jameson (1991) and Ortner (1991). Taking late Twentieth-century U.S. Americans as her subjects, but also hypothesizing a general applicability of her model, Strauss concludes that people do “internalize
diverse public discourses, which they sometimes compartmentalize as if they had been ‘assigned to different floors and different office buildings’” (1997:395). However, she argues that Jamesonian models, based on public cultural productions, miss the human reality of “selves” that are constituted in and by integration coexisting with fragmentation. This partial coherence arises from the fact that humans are emotional beings, we have the inescapable ability to “feel,” which “feelings have not been obliterated under late capitalism,” and that “personal style is not a property of some bygone bourgeois individual” (ibid:395-396).

According to this model, some cognitive fragmentation is to be expected because there is no central sorter in anybody’s head that files information logically. Instead, new experiences and ideas are internalized in connection only with information that is similar in learning context...[However, humans] are still emotional beings, concerned about safety, status, and love...Repeated events that arouse these strong emotions create schemas that are likely to be used to interpret ambiguous new experiences more often than schemas that carry less emotional force. (ibid:396)

Although Strauss (1997) dismisses the existence of a “central sorter in anybody’s head,” her model still assumes something of a cognitive center of initiative and interpretation constituted by an emotional core formed by repeated events in similar contexts, which results in a “personal style” through which new experiences are processed and understood. Strauss further argues that differences of class, ethnicity, gender, age, and so forth, do not disrupt this partial coherence. Thus, her findings suggest that Ortner’s (1991) model of fragmentation concentrated among marginalized groups does not hold.

Strauss (1997) attempts to reconcile postmodernist models of fragmented selves with the integrated and coherent self-representations she encountered ethnographically. In her final analysis, she expects partial fragmentation and partial integration, framing humans as fractured into disparate but integrated clusters of fragments. For me, this model is inadequate for explaining inconsistent representations of selves (and presumably experiences of self reflected by self-representations) as integrated, historically produced, wholes.
Strauss’ argument that people lack a central sorter, yet habitually draw on familiar interpretive schemas for understanding new experiences, manifest in a particular personal style seems to be internally incommensurable. Even if we were to take her to mean that we have multiple cognitive centers, constituted by different emotional cores, which she sometimes seems to imply by her analogy of “different floors and different office buildings” as well as her reference to multiple interpretive schemas, her data still evinces, at least in my reading of it, that people experience, and narrate themselves as coherent, though shifting, wholes.

From my own reading of Strauss (1997), some of the problems that arise with her formulation is that she has ethnographically encountered realities that postmodernism is unable to explain, but she continues to employ postmodernist frameworks, though only halfheartedly, and their attendant expectations of fragmented selves. Strauss’ open-ended interviews, which she recounts at length, reveal selves who are more coherent and integrated (though a different sort of coherence and integration than the singular depictions of cohesive approaches that postmodernists argue against) than postmodernist vocabularies of fragmentation allow for. Postmodernist vocabularies are intended to refuse fixity, reification or definition, to rupture taken-for-granted categories. But instead of exploding categories that fix, freeze, and reify, setting them free to run wild in their natural state of bricolage, they in turn imprison the self (and the sociocultural world, for that matter) in categories that only allow incoherence, pastiche, conditionality, and contingency that can never be adequately conveyed. When anything other than hodgepodge is encountered, the only way postmodernisms can deal with it is to turn it into hodgepodge.

The challenge, then, is rejecting a universalized, cohesive self, recognizing that selves are most certainly culturally shaped, while avoiding the pitfalls of essentializing the concept of self for a particular culture (that we see in the cohesive approaches). At the same time, inconsistent self-representations need to be reconciled with the consistent, integrated whole selves which most people claim to experience. But this needs to framed in a way that does not unavoidably spiral into some surreal world of schizo-fragmentation of selves.
(which, for me, could not be inhabited by anyone but psychotics), or of seeing the sociocultural world, and selves that are reflections of it, as constituted only by constantly changing dialogical contingency.

**Selves as Shifting, Synthetic Wholes**

I have found many parallels to my own thinking around issues of identity in Katherine P. Ewing’s (1990) “The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self, and the Experience of Inconsistency.” In Ewing’s treatment of identity, she rejects the Kohutian concept of self as a cohesive, unitary center of experience. Although Ewing recognizes that selves are culturally organized, she refuses the assumption that cultures only offer a singular, key concept of the “self.” Rather, she argues that “in all cultures people can be observed to project multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly…[which multiple self-representations] are based on selected cultural concepts of person and selected ‘chains’ of personal memories” (ibid:251, 253).

Drawing on G.H. Mead’s (1934) notion of “memories organized on the string of the self,” Ewing argues that “there is no overarching, cohesive self” on which to string memories (1990:259, 268). Rather, every individual embodies multiple selves, each “with its own history and memories” coexisting independently, emerging in response to specific situations, and being “replaced by another self-representation when the context changes” (ibid:253). For Ewing, although actors or selves are able to make rapid shifts between different self-representations, and rapid shifts between interpretive frames, actors only keep one frame of reference, the one most appropriate to a present situation or context, in mind at any one time.

when individuals are successful at making these rapid, contextually appropriate shifts in orientation, they experience a feeling of wholeness and continuity, because they are able to maintain an orientation that is coherent at any particular moment…I would thus argue that, as long as an individual is able to maintain contextually appropriate self-representations in interaction with others, he or she may experience a sense of continuity
despite the existence of multiple, unintegrated or partially integrated self-representations. (Ewing 1990:273)

Thus, the coexistence of inconsistencies most often goes unnoticed, making even a high degree of inconsistency in interpretations and representations tolerable to a single self, and no threat to a self’s experience as a timeless whole. However, for Ewing the experience of continuity and wholeness is merely illusory. Although Ewing sees internal consistency and coherence within specific experiences and representations of a self, she argues that there is mutual inconsistency between specific, context dependent selves embodied by any given individual. The continuity and wholeness that people experience is an illusion, which arises because people do not recognize the inconsistencies, changes, or shifts in their self-representations from one context, situation or moment to the next. What an observer may witness is the result of this process of one self replacing another, or “shifts in self-presentation of which the participants in an interaction are unaware” (Ewing 1990:258).

I argue that the experience of wholeness and continuity of self is more than illusion. Identity, as self experience, interpretation and representation, is like culture in the sense that it is often inconsistent, constructed from a wide range of possible interpretations, subject to negotiation, and always evolving. However, individual experience, memories of experience, interpretations of experience, and the representations thereof, though numerous, diverse, and dynamic, are not limitless, neither are they autogenetic. Ewing’s (1990) notion that the experience of wholeness and continuity is only an illusion underlaid by the reality of “multiple, unintegrated, mutually inconsistent” selves seems to run contrary to her premise that the ongoing reconstitution of selves is accomplished by “assimilat[ing] ongoing experience to established representations of self and other,” or constructing new selves “from their available set of self-representations” (ibid:273, 258). Assimilation of a thing into an established other thing implies some kind of continuity, integration, or synthesizing whole, albeit dynamic and shifting.
Furthermore, inconsistencies, or shifts in selves and their representations are not always and only tacit, or unrecognized. During my fieldwork, people often recognized and reflected upon their changing identities when narrating themselves. One man had a tattoo on his arm that read “sóng gió,” which literally means “wind and waves,” but refers to a life filled with great challenge, many ups and downs, and instability. When I asked the man about his tattoo he told me that he believed in, and lived his life as “wind and waves” when he was younger, but due to ensuing life experiences and circumstances he no longer thought or lived this way. People also frequently transitioned between social-cultural-political-linguistic contexts, as did their representations of self. Nùng Fản Sling women selling at the markets outside the village operate in Vietnamese, rather than Nùng, which necessitates referencing different categories, assumptions, and symbols. I also observed that these women negotiated sales based on the ideas and practices I encountered in mainstream Kinh society. The representations of self (e.g. practices, temperaments, interactions) of these same women when engaged in economic exchange within Dụ Vãng looked quite different. However, the women I knew and observed in these situations still maintained a recognizable “personal style.” Several men from Dụ Vãng participated in the official governance of the village, hamlet, and commune. I was given opportunities to accompany some these men to official commune level meetings, as well as village and hamlet level meetings. Again, different languages were employed, different categories were referenced, and different interactions were engaged as appropriate to the specific context. However, the men, like the women, still maintained recognizable “personal styles” from one context to the next. During conversations, some of these men and women would consciously reflect, without any prompting from me, on their “different ways of doing” from one context to another.

People often recognize that they are not timeless, unchanging wholes, but that their whole selves are made up of changing times, circumstances, contexts, experiences, behaviors and beliefs. The Nùng Fản Sling people I know always find themselves on shifting ground, as subordinate or dominate, patron or client,
supplicator or grantor, mediator or mediated. And though they “appropriately” represented themselves as such at any one time, I doubt that they experienced themselves, even in the particular moment, as entirely constituted by one or the other of these different facets of their identities.

Selves are experienced in particular sociocultural contexts, and though these contexts do not produce homogeneous experiences, they do produce a range of shared assumptions that people reference to interpret and represent experience. Experiences and representations of selves are context dependent, but selves are not only defined by or constituted in contingency. Although people often presented multiple, inconsistent, and even conflicting images of themselves from one place, time, or situation to the next, these self-representations were premised on cultural assumptions, which assumptions do not always result in unitary, uncontested, mutually consistent experiences and interpretations of the world.

For example, when asking one man what it is to be a good man, I was told that a good man is honest, gentle, hardworking, and considerate of his wife and children. On other occasions, this same man told me that a good man is crafty, wicked, able to get others to accomplish things for him, often making things easy for himself but difficult for others, and does not stand to listen to a woman’s words. A woman, commenting on the behavior of female adolescents, explained to me that one of the benefits of sending girls to public school is that they have to sit next to and interact with boys, that their understanding of the world is expanding, and thus they are no longer too shy or ashamed to interact with boys in public. On a different occasion, this same woman spoke very negatively of her niece, calling her a “bad girl” because she dared to sit and chat with some boys in public. A priest once lamented the difficulties of being a priest, that he had to live by very strict principles, that he was harried on all sides by people seeking him out for spiritual mediation, or to officiate at different rituals, and his constant duties were exhausting him of time and energy. At another time, this same priest described his work in more carefree terms, stating: “I go and do a little priest
work and for that I’m given roasted pork, a little money, get respected and get to 
*choi bòi* [drink and party] for three days.”

During the course of my fieldwork, people did not draw on a key concept of “self” or “person” with which to construct representations of themselves and others. Nor did people make consistent, unchanging representations of selves and others. Rather, representations of selves and others shifted from one context, situation, time, or conversational topic to the next. However, these representations, taken by themselves, were not random or incoherent.

So the question remains, if our selves are inconsistent, sometimes rapidly shifting from one utterance to the next, how can we claim coherence or wholeness? Why are we not all fragmented schizophrenics?

Selves are contextually experienced and represented from one situation to the next. People draw on cultural assumptions to interpret this experience. From these culturally informed interpretations people construct self-representations. Because self-representations are made in specific contexts, and because only specific experiences are represented, or specific pieces of a whole are drawn on that are appropriate to a specific situation, the coexistence of inconsistencies sometimes do go unnoticed. For Ewing, these inconsistencies result in multiple selves, and their non-recognition results in the illusion of wholeness. Given the “temporal flow of experience” (Ewing 1990:258), and that cultural assumptions allow for a range of possible interpretations of experience (as well as memories of experience), self-representations are multiple and ongoing. Also given the vast array of individual experiences and memories, and the range of possible interpretations of these, no supraordinate, cohesive, fully integrated self can be experienced or represented at once in its entirety. People tend to be whole people, but are continually accumulating contextual experiences, which are also contextually interpreted and represented. These contextual experiences are not simply additive to an *a priori* core self, but are dialectically assimilated into an ever changing, synthetic whole.

I conceive of identity as one’s experiences, understandings and sense of self that are shaped by cultural assumptions and manifest in social interaction.
Identities shift and evolve through the course of life and from one situation and context to another, responding to internal stimuli, such as emotions and memories, and external stimuli, such as who the self is relating to, when and where. As we encounter different people, in different places, and at different times we have different experiences and relationships, and these are interpreted and represented in terms of contextually dependent frames of reference, and assimilated into the multiple and diverse experiences and representations of the whole self. But particular experiences, interpretations and representations thereof only have meaning with particular people, in particular places and at particular times. Experiences that are had in particular contexts, are experienced, interpreted and represented in frames of reference appropriate to that context. That people do not draw on every experience, interpretation, representation and frame of reference that they have assimilated into their repertoires of self does not necessarily mean that people are fractured, or that the self-experience of wholeness and continuity is illusory. In a given context, certain parts of the self necessarily lay idle as they would find no purchase, or have no meaning there. Because an entire identity or self cannot be brought to bear in any one context or situation no one observer or interlocutor can encounter, experience or interact with the identity of another in its entirety; we can only be privy to particular parts of other shifting, continually synthesizing selves. Perhaps identities are only fragmented in the sense that anthropologists (or anyone else, for that matter) can only have partial (fractured?) glimpses and encounters with others’ identities, rather than by an apparent process of mutually inconsistent selves replacing one another.

GENDER

In gender studies, gender difference is often framed in terms of inequality, which has most commonly been approached using feminist frameworks that problematize and theorize women’s subjectivities. Men and masculinity are often treated as a homogeneous whole, as a natural object, and conflated with
patriarchy, rather than taking masculinity as a sociocultural construct reproduced within a patriarchal system of gendered relations. If a greater understanding of gender relations (and I argue that gender cannot be usefully understood outside of gendered relationships in which it is constructed) is to be achieved then men and masculinities need to be problematized. Gender difference is not simply reproduced in and by female subjectivities, or by femininities coming into contact with the object of masculinity or the universal male. Gender difference is reproduced in and by gendered social relationships, which are premised on cultural assumptions and socially and bodily experienced. Therefore, I am ethnographically—in the sense that ethnography is dialectically constituted by theoretical abstractions arising from and grounded in some sociocultural reality—examining masculine identities (as well as their attending cultural assumptions and concrete social practices) that are reproduced in and by, and in turn contribute to the reproduction of a particular sociocultural context of gendered relationships. Thus, I am not only interested in masculinities *per se*, but in gendered social relationships.

**Sex Role Theory**

Modern Euro-American social theory, as well as the sociocultural contexts from which these arise, often treats men and women as the bearers of polarized character types. Masculinity only exists in relative opposition to it’s polar opposite: femininity (Connell 2005). Even in many contemporary theories of gender there is an implicit biologic that gender polarization is essential and natural, being produced by differently sexed bodies.

In regards to social theory, Freud was the first to attempt to formulate a theory of gender difference (Connell 2005). Freud defined the essence of masculinity as activity, as opposed to feminine passivity (Freud 1953). Carl Jung, one of Freud’s early followers, latched onto this essentialist dichotomy and continued to develop and elaborate a theory of masculine/feminine polarity as a universal structure of the human psyche. Jung argued that a person’s gendered identity is not only shaped by individual life history, but by archetypal images of
men and women. He saw these archetypes as being universally inherited, timeless truths rooted in the human psyche (Jung 1953).

In the 1930s, the heyday of functionalist theory, the concept of the “social role” was gaining popularity in the social sciences. Within a framework of functionalism the concept of the social role was used to explain the differentiation of functions in a social group. Attempting to move beyond Jungian accounts of gender as a universal structure rooted in the human brain, researchers concerned with sex difference applied the role concept to explain the different social functions of men and women, and the term “sex role” was born. Within this framework, gender is most commonly conceived of as “enacting a general set of expectations which are attached to one’s sex—the ‘sex role’” (Connell 2005:22).

One of the most sophisticated applications of sex role theory was made by the renowned structural-functionalist theorist, Talcott Parsons (Parsons and Bales 1956). Taking the family as a social group he conceives of gender as complementary sex roles: the masculine as instrumental; the feminine as expressive. Inherent in functionalist theory is the assumption that social structures, institutions and roles operate in concordance to the end result of a smoothly functioning, stable social group. This also holds true for sex role analysis: men and women internalize the social expectations and norms, transmitted through the agencies of socialization, which are attached to their sex. The two sex roles operate in a reciprocal and complementary way resulting in a functional gender order—women fulfilling an expressive role, and men an instrumental role (Connell 2005).

The problems with this approach are many. Here I only briefly address those I consider to be the most germane to the discussion at hand. Male and female sex roles are attached to biological sex. Thus, gender is reduced to two discrete, naturally occurring, homogeneous categories—man and woman. The smooth operation of a functionalist gender order demands a give and take reciprocity between these two discrete, homogeneous groups, which implies a dichotomous polarity, albeit a complementary one. We can begin to see the difficulties of applying sex role theory and its accompanying assumption of an
oppositional dichotomous balance to “a situation where male and female relations are managed in a way as flexible and fluid as they are in Southeast Asia” (Wazir Jahan Karim 1995:26).

Many researchers have claimed that Southeast Asian gender systems reproduce gender equality, symmetry, complementarity, and the “lack of exaggerated opposition of male and female ideologies” (Errington 1990:1; Esterik 1996; King and Wilder 2003). Anthropologists researching gender issues in Southeast Asia have recognized that “often the attributes of ‘maleness’, on the one hand, and ‘femaleness’, on the other, may not coincide exactly to form discrete and exclusive categories, rather they may overlap and constitute differences of degree” (King and Wilder 2003:262).

Claims of gender equality, or gender symmetry in Southeast Asia are usually accompanied by a caveat that this equality or symmetry does not encompass all spheres of social life (King and Wilder 2003:265). Michael Peletz, working with a group of Malays, observed “a social and cultural environment that places relatively little emphasis on gender or gender difference(s)” (1996:232). But he qualifies this statement with the caveat, “there are various contexts in which villagers assert that males and females differ in certain fundamental respects and are of dissimilar status” (ibid:233). In this same vein, Ingrid Rudie, who has conducted research in another Malay society, argues that there is “a fair balance between male and female in the restricted public field of the local community” but that this balance is countered by a heavily male-dominated political sphere at higher levels (1994:83). For me, claiming gender equality or symmetry in a sociocultural context that privileges men in the domain of politics (i.e., the act of governing, administering or controlling) does not add up.

I argue that a gender system that lacks oppositional, polarized, dichotomous gender categories of “man” and “woman,” and assumes gender difference as a non-discrete, fluid difference of degree rather than type does not necessarily reproduce gender equality. Browsing the literature on Southeast Asian gender studies, the proliferation of sex role theory language quickly becomes apparent. I believe the application of a theoretical framework that
conceives of gender as the enactment of discrete, categorical norms, expectations, and characteristics attached to a person’s sex, and further assumes gender complementarity and reciprocal polarity is what leads many researchers working in Southeast Asia to claim gender equality in the face of glaring exceptions. In other words, the application of sex role theory may erroneously lead gender analysts to the conclusion that in sociocultural contexts where a polarized, dichotomous gender system is absent then gender equality obtains, at least in most spheres of social life.

Among the Nùng, women and men are most definitely recognized as different. However, women and men are not understood to possess qualitatively different characteristics. Gender difference is not understood as an oppositional dichotomy. Men and women both put value on the same kinds of personal or individual characteristics and attributes, such as craftiness, physical ability to labor, ability to establish, maintain and mobilize social networks, spiritual potency, etc. Gender difference in terms of human characteristics is not conceived of as the absence or presence of certain characteristics, but an individual’s capacity for these characteristics. Nùng cultural assumptions of gender hold that women, in general, have a diminished capacity for desirable or valued human traits and characteristics. The lack of an oppositional, polarized gender dichotomy that corresponds to discrete, exclusive gender categories does not necessarily reproduce a system of gender equality; in fact, there is a marked lack of gender equality among the Nùng.

**Feminism**

In any investigation of gender, gender relations or gender difference, what often becomes readily apparent is an imbalance of power, or gender inequality. Due to this realization, contemporary Western social theorists who take up questions of gender often approach the topic through feminist frameworks. In theorizing gender inequality that favors men, feminist theories tend to emphasize the historical and sociocultural processes of feminine gender formation, while men and masculinities are often treated as a homogeneous whole, as a natural
object. However, if a greater understanding of gender, gender relations and gender difference is to be achieved, the category of “men” needs to be questioned, and theorized as a sociocultural construct.

One basic tenet of all feminist theory is that it seeks “to understand the causes, means, and results of gendered inequality” with the goal of improving women’s conditions (Gardiner 2005:35). Different feminisms have taken different approaches to envisioning gender equality, and whether explicitly recognized or not, these approaches are enmeshed with how the various theories view men and masculinity. A comprehensive review of feminism(s) is far too ambitious for, and beyond the scope of this dissertation. Therefore, here I will only attempt a cursory overview of general feminist trends and approaches to the realization of the overarching goal that unites feminisms.

The earliest feminist theories were mostly defensive, as women sought full membership in society and inclusion in and access to the rights and privileges enjoyed by men (Gardiner 2005). Early feminist writers, responding to the misogyny of a patriarchal society, attacked popular Western assumptions that men held a monopoly on reason and an elevated humanity that transcended the banalities of the carnal body (e.g. Beauvoir 1968; Pizan 1982). These approaches frequently oscillated between critiquing men—highlighting the evils and injustices that men commit, and arguing that men, too, are subject to bodily and sexual infirmities, thus seeking equality by lowering idealistic images of men—and arguing that women were on equal footing with men, spiritually, morally, and intellectually.

Twentieth-century liberal feminists have continued in this earlier tradition. These theorists argue that women need to be allowed the same freedoms (sexual and otherwise), occupational choices, status, entitlements, and power as men (e.g. Friedan 1963). In other words, women are made equal to men, or at least the cultural ideals of what men should be. This approach, like those of early feminism, however, does not problematize men as a sociocultural category, but rather endorses men (or the masculine ideal) as the standard to which humanity should aspire.
More recent versions of liberal feminism have sought to overcome these earlier aspirations to standards defined by men by deflating dualistic gender categories. Theorists such as Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) and Judith Gardiner (2002b) argue that such a deflation can be achieved “by viewing gender as developmental across the life course, so that, for example, masculinity might be defined by boys’ development from childishness to maturity rather than by opposition to a denigrated femininity” (Gardiner 2005:38). Psychologist Eleanor Maccoby argues that “sex-linked behavior turns out to be a pervasive function of the social context,” rather than a function of individual personality (1998:9). She defines a social context in which boys and girls are raised segregated by their biological sex, and upon reaching adulthood, are thrown together in sexual relationships and work situations. She argues that gender inequality could be mitigated by adopting childrearing practices that promote more freedom of choice for boys and girls in play, as well as behavior throughout the life cycle, that cross traditional gender lines, making available a variety of both masculine and feminine behaviors and attributes for both males and females.

Cultural feminists, viewing gender difference as different modes of being associated with “men’s culture” and “women’s culture,” also tend to draw heavily on developmental psychology. Some argue that gender is produced in individual psychologies as a result of mother-dominated child rearing practices. Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976) claims that the matrifocal experience of early childhood development can account for the prevalence of dominant and misogynistic men. She argues that all infants fear their mothers’ power to provide or withhold life. Through the process of transference, men shift these fears and loathings onto other women. Nancy Chodorow (1978) also argues that gender difference between men and women is rooted in mother-dominated child rearing. Because fathers are frequently absent from the day-to-day routine of child rearing, boys do not have a same-sex parent to imitate or identify with. Whereas girls form a feminine identity through direct imitation of their same-sex parent, masculinity is formed in boys by not identifying with their mothers, but by contrast and separation from them. Chodorow argues that this results in men who are
independent, autonomous, and emotionally aloof. As boys construct their selves in opposition to the feminine, or as what not to be, rather than by identification with fathers, who are unavailable, detached, and absent, masculinity revolves around not being feminine. “[U]ntil masculine identity does not depend on men’s proving [that they are not feminine], their doing will be a reaction to insecurity rather than a creative exercise of their humanity” (Chodorow 1978:44).

For Chodorow (1978) gender inequality would vanish if fathers and mothers would participate equally in raising children. She further argues that this would alleviate the unfair burden that women bear in child care, provide men with satisfying intimate experiences with children, women, and other men (the assumed absence of which, for Chodorow, limits the quality of men’s lives), and produce personalities based on egalitarianism.

“Liberal feminist” and “cultural feminist” approaches to gender inequality share some general commonalities. They envision gender equality by making men more similar to women, which requires dramatic transformations of men and masculinity. At the same time they validate cultural ideals of feminine characteristics, leaving women unchanged but changing social structures so that women’s traditional characteristics are as equally valued, empowered, entitled, and ascribed status as men’s traditional characteristics. These approaches, however, run into the problem of assuming that ideal feminine and masculine subjectivities and characteristics are coherent, homogeneous and evenly distributed among the female and male members of a given society. As Gardiner herself points out, “Theories of gender complementarity based on the psychological asymmetries of child rearing are subject to the criticisms that they underestimate the effects of social dominance, historical and cultural differences” (2005:42), often ignoring differences of race, class, age, sexuality, ethnicity, nationalism, and so on. Furthermore, these approaches do not consider unequal relationships of power between different men, the unequal relationships between different women, or instances where male subjectivities are subordinate to particular female subject positions.
Feminists of color have been more attuned to how the above differences intersect with gendered identities. Patricia Hill Collins views “gender within a logic of intersectionality [which] redefines it as a constellation of ideas and social practices that are historically situated within and that mutually construct multiple systems of oppression” (1999:263). Many black feminists seek balance in theorizing their own oppression at the hands of black men with sympathy towards the difficulties these men face in achieving forms of masculinity endorsed by the dominant society. Michelle Wallace (1990) posits that white supremacy deprives African American men of their sense of manhood. Within the black power movement (1966-1977) “manhood was [seen as] essential to revolution”, a taking back of what had been stolen, making men’s domination of women a requirement for liberation (ibid:17). Likewise, bell hooks (1984) argues that the black man’s inability to achieve dominant cultural images of white masculinity (with regards to prestige, socioeconomic status, and the like) hurts him, and he in turn sometimes hurts others:

because he does not have the privilege or power society has taught him “real men” should possess. Alienated, frustrated, pissed off, he may attack, abuse, and oppress an individual woman or women, but he is not reaping positive benefits from his support and perpetuation of sexist ideology…[he is] not exercising privilege. (hooks 1984:73)

Black feminists go beyond the binary categories of masculine and feminine, or relationships between men and women in African American communities in order to investigate gender inequality. These theorists also look to larger and intersecting systems of oppression, such as relationships between African American communities and individuals with the dominant culture of white society, and rather than setting themselves in antagonistic opposition to men, invite them “to join in both theorizing and community building” (Gardiner 2005:44). However, the oppression of and violence committed towards African American women by some African American men is unlikely solely due to experiences of racism, as some white men, who have not been subjected to racist discrimination or oppression, also oppress and act violently toward women.
Nonetheless, these theories do provide ways for thinking about gender as constituted in multiple intersecting axes. For example, masculine identities among the Nùng are constructed within a Nùng system of gendered relations, in which women are oppressed in various forms. But identities are also constructed within systems of unequal inter-ethnic social relations between Nùng communities and dominant Kinh society.

The work of African American feminists, such as that found in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982), have drawn attention to issues of difference among women. Feminist scholars in general have responded very favorably to these insights, and, in attempts to move beyond some of the pitfalls of second-wave white feminism, have incorporated discourses of difference in their analyses. Feminist anthropologists have also drawn on these insights in their cross-cultural investigations and representations of women’s identities, experiences, and subjectivities to argue against essential gender and gendered categories.

Lila Abu-Lughod explores how feminist “anthropological practice unsettles the boundary between self and other” (1991:137), a separation that inevitably carries with it a sense of hierarchy. She argues that feminist anthropology is “differently structured in the way [it] organize[s] knowledge and draws boundaries” (Strathern 1987:289 c.f. Abu-Lughod 1991:138). The nature of the investigator’s relationship to her subject matter is shaped by a common feminist opposition to men and patriarchy and produces a discourse of many voices. The feminist self is constructed in opposition to oppression by the Other (i.e., men). Male anthropologists, she argues, also constitute the self in relation to an Other, but this Other is subordinate rather than dominate, and they do not construct the self as attacking the Other. Feminist anthropologists begin the process of self-construction in opposition to others, but “from different sides of a power divide” (ibid:139).

Abu-Lughod (1991) echoes the vast majority of feminist scholars, stating that the feminist project is one of helping women become selves and subjects rather than objects and man’s other. In addition, Abu-Lughod claims that
feminists also recognize the problem of “difference,” in that there is no such thing as the “essential woman.” She argues that feminist theory, which also deals with categories of selves and others, recognizes the dangers of treating selves and others as given, natural, essentialisms. Feminist theory reminds us that “the self is always a construction, never a natural or found entity...[and] the process of creating a self in opposition to an other” always ignores other forms and intersecting systems of difference, e.g. gender, race, class, sexuality, age, etc. (ibid:140). This is insightful, however, in her argument she conflates men and patriarchy, positioning herself in opposition to the unproblematic, essentialized category of “men,” i.e. a natural or found entity, which, as she herself argues, ignores other forms and intersecting systems of difference. She critiques men as behaving and writing as if the masculine self is coherent, natural, discrete and that they speak from an objective void of neutrality. But in her own feminist discourse she constructs men as a discrete category, a naturally occurring essentialism, reinstating yet another simplistic binary of victims and oppressors.

Anna Tsing (1993) argues along similar lines. She, too, addresses second-wave feminist theory that assumes one global, historically homogeneous kind of woman, arguing that this theory assumes female marginalization is parallel to the marginalization of the colonized, the non-white, the poor; leaving the intersection of gender with class and race invisible. In contrast and in response to such theoretical assumptions, many feminists now specify particular forms of female marginality, taking into their analyses the conditions of particular women’s lives—women as immigrants, minorities, wealthy, poor, etc. Gender asymmetries are no longer taken as parallel to asymmetries of race, class, ethnicity, or nationality, but there is a recognition that these asymmetries are constructed in gendered ways.

Tsing (1993) claims that she writes against ideas of stability, coherence and homogeneity of women’s experiences, acceptance, and dominance in order to disrupt boundaries and open up new spaces of understanding. However, she then confines men and their desire to a unitary, homogeneous category. Tsing (1993:221-223) recounts a story about a Japanese officer taking a Meratus
housekeeper/mistress, who he then fell in love with and wanted to marry. Tsing interprets this story as a universal male attempt, played out in a particular context of Bornean barracks, to realize an exotic fantasy. She writes of men as a universal, unmarked category differentiated by a superficial veneer of cultural differences and imposes her interpretations of what the Japanese officer was doing without developing any discussion of Japanese gendered assumptions and practices, or any critical reflection of her own position vis-à-vis this story.

Abu-Lughod (1991) argues that non-feminist anthropologists are seen as studying “society,” in the general, holistic sense, even when studying gender. While feminists are seen as only studying marked social forms, such as “women.” Likewise, Tsing writes, “Unlike either a man or a scholar, a woman is not empowered to tell about an entire culture or a political system; she cannot represent (portray or act for) the whole…She can talk to other women because she is a woman.” (1993:224). But when men undertake a study of men or masculinity as marked social forms and glean insights from feminist theory, many feminists decry appropriation or a re-centering of the male subject, and imply that the male anthropologist should go on being a proper, essentialized man, studying society in the general, holistic and neutral sense. If not, then who would provide the fodder for the furnaces of victimization that many feminists so guardedly stoke?

What all of the above approaches do convincingly illustrate is that any attempt at or vision of an improvement of women’s conditions demands change in social structures and individual agencies, a simultaneous transformation of ideologies and institutions, tacit cultural assumptions and concrete social practices, which are embedded and played out in things such as “the family”, religions, economies, politics, and so forth. The most notable achievement of Twentieth-century feminism, as well as the most useful for the study at hand, is the conceptualization of gender as a sociocultural construct. In other words, the recognition that masculinity and femininity are not natural objects or essential characteristics innate in bodies that have similar reproductive equipment.
Post Approaches

In the late 1980s and early 1990s gender theorists, both feminists and pro-feminist men, began questioning the categories of “men” and “masculinity.” “Men” as an object of study approached via feminist frameworks caused much tumult and anxiety in many feminist circles. The anxieties and critiques surrounding the critical study of men, or “masculinity studies” centered on the fear of “reproduc[ing] the centrality of ‘man' against which women's studies as a broad, interdisciplinary field had long defined itself” (Wiegman 2002:36). These fears came into sharp focus in Tania Modleski’s (1991) *Feminism Without Women*. Modleski argues that feminist scholars engaging in critical masculinity studies, and, even worse, giving men a voice to speak from within feminist paradigms signaled the demise of the feminist project and the rise “of a male feminist perspective that excludes women” (1991:14). For Modleski, any feminist project, theoretical or political, that does not take women as subject and object, knower and known, has succumbed to the project of political conservatives that valorizes and disenfranchises feminism. These fears are not unwarranted, as the production of knowledge, both academic and political, has historically been male-dominated. But to leave “men” as an unproblematic category, ignoring that “masculinity is not patriarchy but rather part of the discourse of a gender order that has been constructed within a patriarchal society” (Louie 2002:5) can only hinder understanding or transformation of any gender order. I cannot see how “anti-masculinity studies” feminists can reconcile their own anti-essentialist projects of difference with the deliberate exclusion of men, as object or subject; leaving “men” as a universal, unmarked social category.

Modleski (1991) further identifies the rise of masculinity studies in feminist quarters as a response to, or way to recuperate feminism from theoretical shifts towards poststructuralism, with it’s “antihumanist approaches to identity, experience, and subjectivity” (Wiegman 2002:37). Poststructuralist feminisms and queer theories seek to minimize, collapse, proliferate, or altogether abolish
the dichotomous male-female categories of gender. These approaches share a similar goal of opening up virtually endless possibilities with regards to gendered (or non-gendered) identities and sexualities, and conceive of a broad spectrum of positive personal characteristics, presently confined to the discrete and binary categories of women and men, as equally available to humans without reference to anatomical sex (Butler 1990). This is a lofty goal, and the present study provides some cautions to this vision of gender equality. As I will demonstrate, the absence of a gender system constituted in and by discrete, binary gender categories defined in opposition to one another, and the presence of cultural assumptions that positive, desirable and valuable personal characteristics can be embodied by any human, regardless of anatomy, does not necessarily result in gender equality, a proliferation of gender possibilities, or a non-gendered society.

Judith Butler conceives of gender as “a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real” (1990:x). In other words, gender is artificial and Butler’s goal is to make others see its artificiality. To this end she proposes a denaturalization and resignification of bodily categories that refuse polarization. To achieve such, she forwards “a set of parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts that disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame” of current gender categories attached to biological sex (1990:xii). Modleski (1991) (referring to the work of Judith Butler (1990), Donna Haraway (1991), and Denise Riley (1988)), however, laments that “every use of the term ‘woman,’ however ‘provisionally’ it is adopted, is disallowed” (ibid:14). For her, this theoretical shift not only makes it “easy to see how a ‘man’ can be a ‘woman’” (ibid:15), which threatens to dispossess women of the feminist project, but further undermines the feminist political project by removing the sign “woman,” upon which “a [feminist] sense of solidarity, commonality, and community” has been built (ibid:17).

Poststructuralist feminism and queer theory treat the body as a neutral and passive landscape upon which the cultural and the social are inscribed. These theories make “bodies the objects of symbolic practice and power but not
participants” (Connell 2005:60). Bodily experiences often arise from social interaction, and a body’s response to the experience will have a directing influence on future bodily and social conduct, practice, and experience. Thus, bodily practices and experiences are caught up with sociocultural processes of gendered identity construction; bodies are not neutral or passive landscapes on which the sociocultural is imprinted, nor or they simply biological facts to which sociocultural scripts are ascribed. The body responds to cultural assumptions and social practices, asserting its own agency by submitting, reconfiguring or resisting. Unfortunately, the embodiment of gender is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is a rich field of inquiry that needs further research.

In the “post” tradition of refusing essentialisms, and highlighting fluidity, multiplicity, and contingency, postcolonial theory “attempts to offer an alternative reading of agency and subjectivity and, at the same time, tackles the issue of representation and power in the periphery” (Morrell and Swart 2005:93). With the exception of Gayatri Spivak’s widely recognized concern for the cultural positions and representations of women in the postcolonial world, postcolonial theory (and here I do not refer to studies of the postcolonial approached via a framework of “postcolonial criticism,” briefly represented above in the work of African American feminist writers, or those schools of thought variously labeled “indigenous knowledge” and “nativism”) does not specifically attend to issues of gender. Postcolonial theory does draw attention to issues of agency and subjectivity, while working to subvert essentialisms, and has produced such concepts as “hybridity” in attempts to capture a fluid or multiple identity that these theorists argue marks postcolonial life. Such concepts can provide useful insights to issues of identity, and thus lend themselves to issues of gendered identities. However, this aspect would still be present without postcolonial theory, via feminism and, later, postmodernism, which has in many regards co-opted many points and questions previously raised by feminist scholars, but which did not find widespread acceptance until given a masculine legitimacy in postmodernism (Mascia-Lees et al 1989; Wolf 1992).
Under the general label of “postcolonialism,” some Third World writers, “instead of using the sophisticated theoretical tools of postmodernism, have trawled the past and interrogated cultural practices in the attempt to give indigenous knowledge appropriate status in the world…to recover ‘old’ ways of understanding and to restore ‘old,’ lost, or forgotten ways of doing” (Morrell and Swart 2005:93). These frameworks, variously called “indigenous knowledge” and “nativism,” share in common with other postcolonial theories an opposition to the cultural domination of the West and its imperial gaze, and claim to produce “a type of knowledge that is site specific and claims no universal validity. Historically, it predates colonialism…and is possessed by indigenous, formerly colonized peoples. This type of knowledge offers different ways of understanding the world and making sense of life and death” (ibid). Local systems of knowledge have offered different concepts for, and ways of thinking about gender.

Oyeronke Oyewumi’s (1997) The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses, questions the universal application of Western feminist concepts of gender. For Oyewumi, gender is a colonial import with limited use in explaining African categories of identity and personhood in general, and Yoruba (a West African people, concentrated in Nigeria, with whom she conducted her research) social systems and social relationships in particular. She refuses the concept of “gender,” as it is employed in the West, as an analytical category. Instead, Oyewumi emphasizes male-female relations that she characterizes as consensual, rather than antagonistic or oppositional. For her, gender is simply one of many relational understandings encompassed by more holistic, overarching assumptions of people’s (both biological males and females) shared humanity.

Ifi Amadiume (1987) also takes Western feminists to task for their conceptualization of “men” and “women” as polemically different categories, with fundamentally different interests. Working among the Igbo of Nigeria, Amadiume seeks to recover precolonial Igbo knowledge in order to challenge universalist Western assumptions about gender. She, like Oyewumi, rejects Western feminisms adversarial approach to gender relations, and stresses community and
consensual human social relations. She paints a picture of gender harmony and fluidity in precolonial Igbo society, where men and women are united by their common humanity, rather than divided by their dissimilar gender.

Both Oyewumi (1997) and Amadiume (1987) argue that in West African societies, and even more so in precolonial times, a “traditional” worldview obtains, built around assumptions of a real connection and continuity with the past, ancestors and spirits, that time is conceived of as cyclical, people’s thinking is based on correlation rather than linear causation, a communal, rather than an individuated concept of self, and that humans do not exist independently from the rest of the natural world. This could well-describe, at a general level, Nùng society and culture. However, such a worldview does not result in harmony or equality between people with dissimilar genitals, in fact, quite the opposite. Theorists working within “indigenous knowledge” or “nativist” frameworks tend to over-romanticize local systems of relationships and the precolonial past, in which they assume that gender fluidity results in harmony and equality. In the Nùng case, gender is not conceived as binary categories that stand in opposition to one another, but this does not result in some harmonious, egalitarian paradise.

In South African contexts, similar claims have been made with reference to the concept *ubuntu*. This concept has gained such popularity in South Africa that it is employed as a popular religious philosophy, a management philosophy, a pedagogical philosophy, political doctrine, and a general outline for a successful way of life. Taken from Zulu language, this term can be defined most simply as “humanness,” or “peopleness” (Mbigi 1995; Morrell and Swart 2005). But in the past twenty years it has come to symbolize much more. Augustine Shuttle states that, “It is a unifying vision or world view enshrined in the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, i.e. ‘a person is a person through other persons’” (1993:46). J. Broodryk states that “Ubuntu is an ancient African worldview based on the primary values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative human community life in the spirit of family” (2002:56). Gloria Ladson-Billings argues “the African saying ’*Ubuntu,*’ translated ‘I am because we are,’ asserts
that the individual’s existence (and knowledge) is contingent upon relationships with others” (2000:257).

South African nativist writers draw on the notion of “ubuntu,” as the dependency of individuals on social relationships, on collectivity, and that the human enterprise joins people (both men and women) together, to frame their discussions of “gender.” Rejecting the categories and projects of Western feminism as irrelevant to African conditions, these theorists take the individual’s personhood or humanity as the common category of analysis, rather than the oppositional categories of “man” and “woman,” which signifiers of identity, it is argued, are taken to be acquired individually in the West (Makang 1997; Qunta 1987).

Indigenous knowledge can, of course, be very useful in explicating local systems of gendered relationships, and the ways in which particular people conceive of gender. However, only appealing to a local system of knowledge, with its attendant social practices and cultural assumptions, does not problematize gender. In other words, it does not question the meanings, assumptions, practices, and relationships that attend to one’s biological sex. Leaving cultural premises unquestioned simply re-establishes the local gender order as natural. Indigenous knowledge claims can be, and have been, used to rebuff outside scrutiny of oppressive regimes that can justify injustice by claiming their ideologies and practices are validated because they are drawn from the local culture. Ubuntu, which is also conceived of and employed as “the universal brotherhood of Africans,” has also been used to mask the oppression of women in African societies, and reinforce local systems of patriarchy by focusing on racial and ethnic oppression from external forces, and diverting attention from the oppression of women by internal forces. As Robert Morrell and Sandra Swart have shown, “In South Africa, the ubuntu approach has been used for a variety of purposes—party political, nationalist, and gendered (patriarchal)” (2005:99).

I recognize that what these approaches are often attempting to demonstrate is the disastrous impacts that Euro-American colonialism can and did have on indigenous social systems, including gender systems. These
approaches do provide insights that there are other ways of constructing identity (gendered or otherwise) and constituting personhood than those found in Western social theory. However, in their lamentations, these approaches run the risk of assuming a highly romanticized picture of paradisiacal gender systems that flourished in the precolonial past, in which men and women shared status and power equally without reference to gender categories. Such approaches can blunt understandings of gendered systems of relations as a local field of critical inquiry.

MASculinItY StuDIES

Masculinity studies has only recently come of age as an intellectual field of inquiry (Kimmel 2002), with courses being regularly offered in numerous universities (Brod 2002; Robinson 2002), and its own canonical body of literature (see Flood 2008), including scholarly journals (e.g. Journal of Men’s Studies; Men and Masculinities; and Psychology of Men and Masculinity), and textbooks (e.g. Kimmel and Messner 1995). There exists a shifting, and complex relationship between feminism and masculinity studies, marked by popular antagonism (Clatterbaugh 2000), and, in academic studies, marked by dependency on feminist frameworks that analyze gender in terms of power and hierarchy, which are given priority in contemporary gender studies (Newton 1998).

From the late 1980s to the present there has been a proliferation of studies on men and masculinity. During this period, many feminists and pro-feminist men began recognizing that men, like women, do not constitute a monolithic or homogeneous category, and that masculinity, like femininity, is a gender and therefore subject to historical and sociocultural processes. In its most popular form, “masculinity studies is a significant outgrowth of feminist studies and an ally to its older sister in a complex and constantly shifting relationship” (Kimmel 2002:ix). Taking into account earlier anxieties among, and criticisms from feminists about allowing the inclusion of men and masculinity studies, most
scholars now contend that pursuing such studies is not only congruent to, but necessary for the political project of feminism. Calvin Thomas observes that “to leave masculinity unstudied, to proceed as if it were somehow not a form of gender, is to leave it naturalized, and thus to render it less permeable to change” (2002:61).

Some of the earlier scholarly work that dealt specifically with men came in the form of ethnography (and here I do not refer to the earlier ethnographies where men have been implicitly taken as the universal sign for humanity, but rather ethnographies that have taken men as a marked category of analysis in and of itself). The main focus of these studies “has been the making of masculinity in a particular milieu or moment” using ethnographic research “to give close descriptions of processes and outcomes in the local site” (Connell 2005a:71). For example, in Michael Herzfeld’s (1985) *The Poetics of Manhood*, he looks at the cultural imagery of masculinity in a Cretan mountain village. Specifically, he focuses on the masculine practice of stealing sheep as the performance of masculine ideals in a particular place at a particular time.

In Gilbert Herdt’s (1981) *Guardians of the Flutes*, he examines how cultural assumptions and ideology are concretely embedded and manifest in social practice, and more specifically ritual practice. His primary focus is on the men’s cult initiation rites among the Sambia of Papua New Guinea. In these initiation rites, boys suck the penises and swallow the semen of young men. This ensures the survival of the society because semen is believed to contain the essence of masculinity, which must be passed from one generation of men to the next. Without the transmission of this essential masculinity, boys would not become men, and the society could not perpetuate itself. What makes his account especially interesting is that he presents a sociocultural context marked by chronic warfare, cultural ideals and social practices that reproduce hyper-aggressive and violent masculinities, in which *all* men participate in homosexual relationships, at least during certain life stages. This flies in the face of Western assumptions of the masculine, in which male homosexual behavior is restricted
to a minority, and deviant demographic, and which results in effeminate men rather than masculine men.

Rather than confining himself to a specific sociocultural “site,” David Gilmore (1990) summarizes a large amount of ethnographic material concerning men from around the world in his *Manhood in the Making*. Gilmore’s stated aim is to show how “people in different cultures conceive and experience manhood…as the approved ways of being an adult male in any given society” (ibid:1), rather than reinstating the earlier ethnographies where men are taken as synonymous with humanity. However, instead of making men synonymous with humanity he makes a singular version of masculinity synonymous with maleness. Premising his cross-cultural survey on the assumed dichotomous gender categories found in sex role theory, he attempts to identify a general, cross-cultural, universally rooted structure or archetype of masculinity. He assumes that maleness is monolithic, innate, and stands in polar opposition to femaleness. This assumption, and his anticipated conclusions are made clear in his treatment of ethnographic cases “where manhood is of minimal interest to men or where the subject is entirely elided as a symbolic category among members of both sexes”, which are dismissed by Gilmore as “exceptional” and “anomalous” (ibid:4). He broadly concludes that archetypical masculine ideals function in human society as motivation for men to work towards the perpetuation of that society: “Manhood is the social barrier that societies must erect against entropy, human enemies, the processes of nature, time and all the human weaknesses that endanger group life…So long as there are battles to be fought, wars to be won, heights to be scaled, hard work to be done, some of us will have to ‘act like men’” (ibid:226, 231). Men, for Gilmore, must bear the necessary burden of procreating, protecting, and provisioning.

What Gilmore (1990) does not address is why men have to fight the battles, scale the heights, and do the hard work. It could be presumed in his conclusion that men do these things because they are typically physically stronger than women. However, this conclusion does not take into account that women also fight battles, scale heights, and in many societies perform the bulk of
physical labor; women, too, play a crucial role in perpetuating our social species. Thus, we could equally conclude that women “have to ‘act like men’”, or that to perform hard physical labor, and so forth is to “act like a woman.”

Feminist and other anthropologists studying gender have began taking insights from masculinity studies and incorporating them into critical ethnographies of men (see Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994). Dorothy Hodgson, in her ethnography of the production of Maasai masculinities in the context of modernization, for example, recognizes:

that in order to analyze the production, reproduction, and transformation of gender inequalities we must go beyond just recording the experiences and ideas of women. Since gender, like patriarchal power, is not a monolithic, ahistorical entity, but is produced and reproduced through the contested actions and ideas of men and women, we must analyze masculinities as well as femininities, men as well as women, male dominance as well as female subordination. (Hodgson 1999:123)

Michael Peletz, responding to the analytical treatment of men in much feminist anthropological writing, in his ethnographic study of contrasting representations of masculinity in a Malay society, also argues that:

feminist anthropologists and others dealing with gender…need to take more seriously cultural constructions of maleness, which continue to suffer from the ‘taken-for-granted syndrome’…that a singular focus on the voices or experiences of women—especially one that fails to examine how these voices and experiences articulate with those of men and with encompassing structures of power and prestige—runs the risk of essentializing ‘woman,’ and otherwise hindering the realization of feminists’ intellectual and political agendas. (Peletz 1994:137)

Cross-cultural ethnographic studies of men further complicate masculinity studies, which have been dominated by sociologists concerned with Western society. Anthropological investigations of masculinity not only support the argument found in Western sociological studies of men that masculinity is not a homogeneous category, but also additionally highlight “the difficulties of translating particular meanings of masculinity from one social setting to another…and raise questions about the social contexts in which such categories
are used” (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994a:2). Anthropologist Angie Hart (1994) has demonstrated the semantic problems that arise by importing Western conceptions of masculinity as an analytical category to other cultural contexts. Hart argues that ethnographies of masculinity often reproduce the cultural assumptions of the researcher. This can be seen in the disproportionate number of such studies that have been conducted in Spain, or that focus on things like Latino *machismo*, which are often touted as hallmarks of masculinity in the West. One of the primary values of ethnographic comparison for Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994b) is a disentangling of “male,” “men,” and “masculinity” (as well as “female,” “women,” and “femininity”) from the notions of overlapping referents that explicitly and implicitly premise these categories of English language and Western sociological analyses.

As alluded to above, most of the critical work in masculinity studies has been done by sociologists with feminist inclinations, and focuses on Western masculinities. An outgrowth of women’s and feminist studies, masculinity studies has been heavily dependent on feminism for its theoretical frameworks and methodologies. As Kimmel states, you can “‘do’ feminist theory by exploring masculinity as an important dimension of gender relations, hierarchy, inequality, and power” or you can “‘do’ masculinity studies by using feminist theory…to explore some aspect of masculinity” (Kimmel 2002:x). Thus, Lynne Segal (2000) notes that men’s studies literature “uncannily mirrors” feminist writing, employing a model of victimization, similar to that of second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s (Gardiner 2002), “it focuses upon men’s own experiences, [and] generates evidence of men’s gender-specific suffering” (Segal 2000:160).

Victimization rhetoric within men’s studies, at large, follows two general trajectories. The first takes the form of popular “masculinist” men’s movements that see present social conditions, and particularly the women’s movement, as oppressively inhibitive of men’s natural maleness. The second takes the form of theorizing men as oppressed by patriarchal social structures and cultural ideals that force conformity to a naturalized masculinity that in fact does not exist. Taken together, these divergent views of male victimization constitute what has
come to be known as "the crises of masculinity," both popularly and in academic masculinity studies.

Most men responded negatively and derisively to second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, as early feminists attacked men. Men struck back by claiming that they were the victims, or that masculine characteristics and privilege were a natural function of biology and evolution (Clatterbaugh 2000). This backlash lacked any real central organizing body, or rallying point around which to form a social movement; most men went merrily on their masculine way. In the 1990s, however, several "masculinist" men's movements took shape, such as the Christian based Promise Keepers, which promotes husbands as loving and gentle leaders of the household, who should follow the example of Jesus Christ, and to whom wives should willingly submit; and the secular Mythopoetic men's movement, inspired by the work of mythology professor, Joseph Campbell. The tenets of this movement are canonized in such works as Robert Bly's (1990) Iron John, with frequent reference to gender archetypes found in Jungian psychology (i.e., "the deep masculine"). These popular movements decry male victimization at the hands of feminism, which is blamed for widespread psychological and social problems, such as anxiety, criminality, suicide, and the loss of men's status.

The second form of "masculine victimization" can be found in academic masculinity studies literature (e.g. Brod 1987; Connell 2005; Kimmel 1996). Much of this literature, written by pro-feminist men, takes as its premise that all men are harmed by cultural ideals of masculinity as socially powerful men standing in opposition to women (and all things feminine, for that matter) and men with lesser sociocultural capital and status (e.g. gay men, and visible minorities) than the men who embody the valorized form of masculinity. These writers argue that the valorization of, adherence to, or striving for the dominant form of masculinity:

- narrowed [men's] options, forced them into confining roles, dampened their emotions, inhibited their relationships with other men, precluded intimacy with women and children, imposed sexual and gender conformity, distorted their self-perceptions, limited their social consciousness, and
doomed them to continual and humiliating fear of failure to live up to the masculinity mark. (Gardiner 2002:5-6)

Michael Kimmel, in *The Gendered Society*, further states, “Men are just beginning to realize that the ‘traditional’ definition of masculinity leaves them unfulfilled and dissatisfied” (2000:268). What became clear in the course of these arguments being made from the different victimization camps, is that men, like women, are marked by gender. Furthermore, it became evident that masculinity was not a monolithic, unitary concept, nor a coherent, homogenous practice.

In R.W. Connell’s (2005) *Masculinities*, he attempts to outline different categories of masculinity, or different configurations of masculine practices, and explain the relationships between them. One of the most enduring and frequently employed concepts in masculinity studies is what Connell has termed “hegemonic masculinity.” He defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (ibid:77).

Connell goes on to identify other categories of masculinity that are configured in “specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men” (2005:78). He argues that gay men are the epitome of subordinated masculinity. “Gayness,” at least in patriarchal Western ideology, “is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity,” ranging from a highly developed sense of fashion and interior decorating, to being sexually penetrated (ibid). Although gay masculinity is the most conspicuous, Connell argues that there are different degrees of subordination among men; all of which depend on the degree that a man exhibits hegemonic masculinity’s symbolic expulsions, read as femininity. The process of masculine subordination is manifest in such classifiers as “wimp,” “mamma’s boy,” “pansy,” “nerd,” “pussy,” “chicken,” and
so forth. All of these signal a form of feminine assimilation, highlighting that “proper” masculinity is defined as not feminine.

Connell muses that “The number of men rigorously practicing the hegemonic pattern [of masculinity] in its entirety may be quite small” (2005:79). Many men, he argues, do not completely measure up to the dominant cultural ideal of masculinity, but “the majority of men gain from its hegemony” (ibid). This he calls “complicit masculinities,” or “Masculinities constructed in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend [the advantages that accrue to all men from the general subordination of women] without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy” (ibid). Complicit masculinities are more subtle than simply being “slacker versions of hegemonic masculinity” (ibid). He argues that most men engage in relationships with women that involve compromises, rather than absolute, tyrannical domination. He gives the example of familial relationships, in which men are husbands, fathers, and sons, who respect and care for their wives and mothers, do not abuse their children, bring home the bacon, and even contribute to domestic maintenance. However, these same men often have no interest in participating in feminist projects of changing social structures and institutions, or reconfiguring cultural assumptions and social practices that would put women’s, as well as gay and minority men’s, social statuses, emotions, epistemologies, relationships, etc. on par with those of white, heterosexual men.

Connell also identifies a second category of relationships between differently configured and situated masculinities. This second category consists of “relations between the masculinities in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups”, which he calls “marginalized masculinities” (2005:80). He argues that black athletes in the U.S., for example, may exemplify the hegemonic pattern of masculinity in the dominant culture, but whose exemplary status “has no trickle-down effect” for the social status and authority for black men in general. Thus, marginalized masculinities are “always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the
dominant group” (ibid:80-81). Whereas hegemonic, subordinate, and complicit masculinities “are relations internal the gender order” of a given society, race or class, marginalized masculinities reference the intersections of race and class with the dominant culture’s gender order (ibid:80), which also points to the existence of relationships between subordinate or complicit masculinities with marginalized masculinities.

Connell (2005) argues that any specific configurations of masculine practices can be analyzed by the above framework. On the surface, his categories of masculinity appear rather rigid, and his framework somewhat totalizing. However, as the title of his book implies, he does not view masculinity as homogeneous or unitary, and claims that he does not conceive of his categories as “fixed character types but configurations of practice generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationships” (ibid:81), thus allowing for analyses of multiple intersecting structures, as well as being able to account for historical processes of change.

Other scholars engaged in masculinity studies argue that the focus of a truly pro-feminist field should not concern relationships between men, which often frame men as equally victimized with women by hegemonic forms of masculinity. Critics of this kind of masculinity studies revisit some of the earlier critiques made by “anti-masculinity studies” feminists such as Modleski (1991), however, less absolutely. In Calvin Thomas’ (2002:62) “Reenfleshing the Bright Boys,” he cites Modleski (1991:6-7) in arguing that the best kind of masculinity study is “the kind that analyzes male power, male hegemony, with a concern for the effect of this power on the female subject and with an awareness of how frequently male subjectivity works to appropriate ‘femininity’ while oppressing women.” These authors argue that the assimilation of a male-focused masculinity studies into the feminist project runs the risk of producing a neutralized gender studies. Neutralized in the sense of viewing men as no less gendered than women, and that masculinity is just as socially constructed and multiple as femininity, which can play into the erroneous assumption that “men and women are equally installed into
symmetrically gendered positions” (Thomas 2002:61). This would mute the feminist argument that sociocultural assumptions ascribed to human bodies with similar reproductive equipment (i.e., men and women) maintain “unequal and asymmetrical relations of power” (ibid).

Much feminist theorizing of gender seeks to critique and dismantle patriarchal systems of power, concentrating on the processes of feminine identity formation and women’s conditions within contexts of unequal power relationships. Masculinity studies largely seem to be preoccupied with relationships between men and how these are shaped by different “regimes of masculinity” (Gardiner 2002:14). Regardless of current preoccupations, these various feminisms and critical masculinity studies have come to consensus on certain interlinking issues that are pertinent to the present study. First, these studies have shown that men, too, are gendered, making both men and women subject to “historical and cultural processes of gender formation that distribute power and privilege unevenly” among males and females (ibid:11). Second, masculinity is not a unitary, homogeneous, monolithic thing. And thirdly, these multiple masculinities are constituted in and by variable social relationships that produce different results from one individual, group, and society to the next. The present study is in agreement with these tenets of contemporary gender theory, at least at the level of general abstraction. This study further incorporates the anthropological premise that the notions of male/men/masculinity in Western constructions of gender difference, both in social theory and everyday sociocultural assumptions and practices, cannot be unproblematically imported from one cultural context to another.

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The present study is not a probing, critique, or deconstruction of power, but an ethnographic analysis of how cultural assumptions and social practices shape and reproduce masculine identities. Before any sociocultural system or process can be effectively critiqued or dismantled, it must first be understood. Neither would I be so presumptuous as to advise the Nùng Fản Sling in ways
that they should reorganize their systems of personal relationships, nor fundamentally change the cultural assumptions on which their social practices are premised. I do plumb masculine domination and power maintained by a patriarchal system of gender inequality because it is through these sociocultural systems and relationships that masculine identities are reproduced, and which systems and relationships are in turn reproduced by gendered practices. However, the main thrust of this ethnography is to understand the construction and reproduction of masculine identities. Thus, mine is not a project of engaging “masculinities through the prism of feminist theory or to write feminist theory using masculinities as an analytical dimension” (Kimmel 2002:x). In problematizing and theorizing masculinity I am not attempting to foster a male centered feminism, nor to take the wind out of feminist sails, nor to valorize hegemonic forms of masculinity, nor to demonstrate that men, too, are vulnerable, in crisis, or victims of a sociocultural patriarchy. Rather, I am engaging gendered identities by drawing insights from a variety of interpretive frameworks. The resultant synthesis is a writing of a locally engaged sociocultural gender theory, which I use to outline Nùng masculinities and situate them within a Nùng system of gendered relations.
3. ENGENDERING DIFFERENCE: PRIMAL SONS, PROVISIONAL DAUGHTERS

Here in Viet Nam our parents are precious. If your kids are just going to put you in an old people’s home and forget you, why have children at all? You have children so that they will take care of you.
- Thị, remarking on my description of nursing and retirement homes in the U.S.

It is important that your grandchildren remember you. If you don’t have sons, who will remember you, clean your grave, make offerings to you?
- An elderly man from Dự Vãng

In attempting to understand the sociocultural processes through which gendered identities are constructed and socially reproduced, it makes sense to me to examine the ways in which children are socialized. Child rearing practices among the Nùng foreshadow difference between the social positions, obligations, expectations, entitlements and privileges of women and men. Although there are stark disparities in the social statuses of boys and girls, this difference cannot be articulated as a simple dichotomy, as there is also some overlapping similitude between the treatment of boys and girls in ritual practices.

In this chapter I give an overview, which is at once partial and generalized, of the socialization of children in Dự Vãng with an eye toward gender. I interacted with and observed the children of my host household and the children of Pão’s sister-in-law, Yên, on a daily basis. I was also privy to parent-child and child-child interactions in the several households I visited on a regular basis, as well as those I observed during ritual events and in the rounds of everyday, public social life. My proceeding analysis is grounded in my observations of parent-child and other adult-child interactions, of which interactions I foreground adults as socializing agents. I also draw upon a gendered narrative that was shared with me. Although this narrative began as a monologue about a topic other than
children, it was shot through with assumptions about the social positions of sons and daughters, and eventually turned into a dialogue that was inflected with the commentary of two adolescents (a son and a daughter) who were also present during its telling.

In framing my analysis, I draw on a concept of “primacy,” and Victor Turner’s (1974) concept of “marginality” to inform my descriptions and interpretations of difference between boys and girls. However, I argue that the social positions of boys reproduced as primal, and girls reproduced as marginal only make sense in the context of Dụ Vǎng if we take into account the cultural logic and social practices that construct and reproduce sons as permanent and daughters as provisional in relation to the patrilineage.

In Dụ Vǎng, where children are concerned, there is an emphasis placed on the importance of sons. Laura Ahearn refers to such an emphasis on sons as the “ideology of the patriline” (2001:68). Such an ideology produces certain tensions around the statuses of Nùng Fản Sling women. The Nùng Fản Sling men and women I know hold certain beliefs around male spiritual potency, and assert that this potency is maintained by, among other things, the avoidance of prolonged contact (especially sexual) and association with women. However, this belief runs headlong into the exigencies of non-mechanized agriculture, and spiritual life after death. Both of these practical concerns necessitate, for men, taking a wife and producing children with her, especially sons, who remain in and/or near their natal homes providing care and labor resources for the parents, and providing for the wants and needs of parents’ ghosts after death.

Commenting on the status of Polynesian women, Sherry Ortner states that, “most of the negative ideology concerning women centers upon their sexual and reproductive activities as lovers, wives, and mothers; kinswomen, who are neither sexual nor reproductive from the point of view of their kinsmen, escape the problematic associations of such activities and functions” (1981:395). Hy V. Luong’s (2003b) research on gender relations among Vietnam’s Kinh ethnic majority has demonstrated that gendered inequalities reproduced in sociocultural ideologies and a political economy supported by a male-centered kinship system
structured around patrilineages and patrilocality work to disadavantage women socially, economically and politically.

Among the Nùng, the negative ideology surrounding women does not only concern their sexual and reproductive activities. Rather, it must also be understood in terms of patrilineality. The marginal status of women in Dụ Văng comes into clearer focus when viewed in terms of their provisionality within any given patriline. The negative ideology that constructs Dụ Văng women as provisional to the patriline begins to shape their identities and positions them socially before they ever engage in “reproductive activities as lovers, wives, and mothers”. Even as kinswomen within a particular patrilineage, and thus escaping the problematic associations and relationships involved in sexual reproduction, they are still surrounded by a negative ideology in terms of their provisionality within the patriline.

I want to emphasize that the mothers and fathers I interacted with most in the village genuinely cared for and loved their daughters. The two families I was closest to had marriageable teenage daughters, Thảo and Thủy (both sixteen-years-old), and several boys’ parents from neighboring villages had come and tried to negotiate marriage engagements with both of these families. However, the girls’ parents were very selective with regards to which household they were willing to “sell” their daughters to in marriage, and to date have not agreed to any marriage proposals. Parents are very concerned to “sell” their daughters to good households. One mother told me, “of course parents try to sell [i.e., marry] their daughters to good households where the groom’s father is a good, gentle man [it is often the patriarch who sets the tone of the household]. We want our daughters to be happy.” Other factors are also taken into consideration when arranging marriages, for example the resources a potential groom’s household has access to. Regardless of the fact that a majority of mothers and fathers do care for their daughters, they do not cherish them like sons. From my observations and conversations with men and women, there is a large discrepancy between the way parents (as well as grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters and cousins, for that matter) dote on, cuddle, fondle, comfort,
give attention to and submit to the wants of their male children and female children.

THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF PROVISIONALITY AND PERMANENCE

In Dụ Vằng there is a distinct preference for sons. The cultural logic underlying this preference concerns everyday practical matters, as well as spiritual matters. A sharp distinction between “everyday” and “spiritual” matters is not recognized among the Nùng Fản Sling of Dụ Vằng. Rather, each is seen as a continuation of, and embedded in the other. Although people distinguish between the spirit realm [tị đắm] and the human/physical world [tị dạ], this distinction does not signify a concrete divide or separation, but two contiguous spaces and states that mutually constitute a forum of “social” interaction. Thus, “everyday” and “spiritual” matters are both conceived of as everyday and practical concerns.

The Nùng Fản Sling are a patrilineal society, and practice patrilocality: after marriage, daughters leave their natal home to reside with, and contribute their reproductive capacity and labor power to their husband’s household. Sons typically remain in their parents’ village after marriage, and at least one son, with his wife and children, will continue to reside with the parents in an extended family household. Within the larger patrilineage, extended families, consisting of fathers and sons together with marrying-in women and subsequent offspring, form corporate landholding groups. With the death of the father, and sometimes before, the brothers divide up the family land, and each of these nuclear families, which most often eventually become extended families, become separate, corporate landholding groups. Each of these patrilineal units is not only dependent upon the agricultural labor power of sons, but also the labor power of the women the sons acquire through marriage, as well as the offspring each conjugal couple within the extended family produces.

There is a Nùng proverb that was told to me as follows: khổ pên phi, mi pên put [poor/difficult become/like/are demon/evil spirit, wealthy/to have become/like/are saint/venerated ancestor]. This can be translated as, “the poor
become devils [wandering spirits who cause misfortune], the wealthy become saints [ascend to a family alter to be venerated by descendants].” The elderly man who provided the second of the two quotes that opened this chapter, once asked me, “Over there is it also the poor people who are bad, who steal, commit crime, and fight?” I responded that surely some poor people do. The elderly man nodded, and, looking contemplative, said, “It is that way everywhere. It is poor people who lack food and money, so they are the ones who steal and fight.”

One particular household in Dụ Vãng is considered to be exceptionally poor. This household has been socially stigmatized; its members are actively avoided by others, frequently excluded from social events and gatherings, and suffer open deprecation from adults and adolescents. I even witnessed two instances where young children openly taunted this household’s patriarch; a very rare event in Dụ Vãng, indeed. When I inquired of Pão about this particular household’s circumstances, he told me, “The man is very poor because he does not have any sons, only daughters. He is old and weak and unable to labor, and he has no sons to work the fields for him. All his five daughters, except for the one still at home, are married and working for their husbands’ households.”

Sonless couples who do not produce any male offspring will often adopt the son of a close relative, if one is available. If there are no close relatives available for adoption then sometimes a sonless couple will adopt one of their daughters’ husbands, a practice called khumlah khoài, for purposes of inheritance and ancestor worship. However, if a daughter’s husband stands to lose more by becoming an adoptive son of his wife’s parents than what he stands to gain by remaining an inheriting heir of his birth parents then there is little incentive for him to agree to khumlah khoài. If a sonless couple is not able to acquire an adopted son then they can be left quite destitute in their old age. There is a Nùng term used to describe childless couples, or more accurately, sonless couples, as daughters are seen as provisional children. This term is pô mê côn, literally translated as “male female stone,” with pô being “male,” mê being “female,” and côn being the classifier for stones. Other things described as côn are 투 mụ condemnation, a type of large monkey that lives alone.
Indeed, a sonless couple is destined to live out their later years alone as they are avoided and even shunned by others.

In addition to this, once a person dies and begins his or her existence as a ghost, that person continues to require the same kinds of things, though in spirit form, that the living require: food, shelter, clothing, attention, liquor, tobacco, money, and so forth. If a ghost does not receive these things, then it will wander in misery, causing misfortune to the living. It is sons who provide the ghosts of their patrilineal ancestors with these wants and needs, not daughters, who have become members of their husbands’ households and whose main concern is, or is supposed to be with their own children’s patrilineage. This further compounds the economic difficulties a sonless couple faces. In Dụ Vǎng it is generally assumed that once a sonless couple dies, they will become evil spirits who will torment the living, as they have no male descendants to provide for their wants and needs in the afterlife. Thus, while still alive, sonless couples, who are seen as future troublemakers and miscreants, are held in very low esteem and sometimes treated contemptuously.

The economics of physical agricultural labor, the Nùng Fǎn Sling system of kinship, marital practices, and postmarital residence patterns, coupled with deeply held beliefs about the nature of the afterlife structure social life in such a way that boys are held in very high regard relative to girls, by both males and females. Notwithstanding that this inequality is plainly manifest in everyday social life, there were several times that I was struck by the equal treatment of boys and girls during ritual events that take place during childhood.

RITUAL EQUALITY: BIRTH AND TỨC TÓN

Upon the birth of a conjugal couple’s first child, an altar is established in the couple’s household that is used to make offerings to Án Vá, a female guardian spirit of children (see Plates 3.1 – 3.2). Interestingly, it is the newborn’s maternal grandparents who have the responsibility for facilitating the establishment of this altar, which entails providing the sacrifice (commonly an
egg, a pig’s head, and five chickens) and enlisting the services of a priest to perform the ritual of establishing the altar and offering the sacrifice (see Plates 3.3 – 3.5). I asked several people why it is the maternal side of the family who must establish this altar. Each time I was told it was to demonstrate that the maternal grandparent’s also have a responsibility for the well-being of the child. Perhaps, as well, Án Vá is the only female spirit, besides the ghosts of a person’s patrilineal female ancestors, that is venerated, at least openly. As a female entity, Án Vá may be implicitly more closely associated with the mother and her kin.

As noted above, the veneration of and offerings to Án Vá takes place at a separate altar, rather than the household’s primary altar, which is reserved for patrilineal ancestors. The altar used to venerate and make sacrifices to Án Vá is often referred to as the song bồng làng [table side behind/after] or “maternal altar” rather than the Án Vá altar. From the perspective of the ghostly inhabitants of the primary, patrilineal altar (i.e., the patrilineal ancestors who look outward from this primary altar, or song nà cái; see Plate 3.2), the altar for venerating Án Vá hangs on the adjacent wall to the left. Three to fifteen days after the birth of a conjugal couple’s first child, a priest establishes this altar, announces the child’s arrival to Án Vá, offers the appropriate sacrifice, asks for her blessings of protection for the child, and prays that the couple will continue to produce children. The steps taken in this ritual process are the same for both boys and girls.

After the birth of a second child these same ritual steps are once again enacted, with three differences. First, no new altar is established, the offering and supplication are made at the altar established upon the birth of the first child. Second, the offering consists only of one chicken. Finally, it is the child’s immediate family who provide the offering and enlist a priest to make the offering,

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18 In kinship terms, any of ego’s maternal kin who are more distantly related than ego’s mother’s parents, are not considered to be kin at all.

19 There are various spiritual practices I was told about by women, which, they claimed, were specifically women’s spiritual practices. I discovered that these practices were avoided, looked down upon, and held suspect by men. A discussion of these gendered spiritual practices and beliefs is beyond the scope of this dissertation.
not the mother’s kin. Otherwise, the supplication for blessings and protection for the child are the same. There is no gender hierarchy regarding male or female children embedded in this ritual, as the sex of the child is irrelevant to the ritual. At this point in a child’s life, boys and girls are not ritually distinguished from one another. Whether male or female, all socially legitimate children equally merit presentation to, and protection from Án Vá. What it does highlight is an age hierarchy, in which the importance and primacy of the first or “head child” (lục tau), whether male or female, is reproduced and reinforced: by making a more elaborate offering, and, perhaps more importantly, through connecting and bringing together maternal and paternal kin, ensuring a broader social network of support and nurturance for the child. However, for female children this ritual equality does not carry over into everyday social relationships. Furthermore, ritual equality itself is gradually eroded as children grow into other social positions they inhabit as men and women.

There are several other occasions when the Án Vá entity and altar, and an individual’s social position as a child are ritually emphasized. For the purposes of the present argument, I will only address one other: the tức tổn ritual. Here I will only comment on the primary features and meanings of this ritual, and save the detailed steps for elsewhere.

Tức tổn literally means to “strike/fight holes/perforations”, in other words, to resist or combat incompleteness. The ritual and the offering are performed by a priest on behalf of a child, male or female, who is becoming physically mature. Papiro explained to me, “The offering is so the child will grow up healthy, not be deaf, so it will be able to hear [heed] the parents, and not have other physical difficulties...This bài [a written document, in this case a “prayer” or “supplication” accompanying the offering] is so the child will grow up and become a man or a woman and be healthy, be a person” (see Plates 3.6 – 3.7)

This ritual should not be envisioned in terms of a “right of passage” or a “coming of age” ritual, as it does not share common key elements assumed by these analytic categories. In fact, the girl whose tức tổn ritual I attended was at school through the entire course of this ritual made on her behalf, returning home
once the feast that followed the ritual had already commenced. Pão and the girl’s father told me that it is not necessary for the child to be present during the ritual; the priest simply needs to know the child’s “numbers” (slóż) and name. Slóż, or “numbers” refer to a person’s birth year, month, day and hour, and not only shape a person’s destiny or fate (variously called mĩng, slóż fươn, or slăn făn), but also a person’s physical and mental capacities, and, to some degree, their personality. Each of these “numbers” corresponds to an astrological sign in the Nùng zodiac (see Table 8.1 in Chapter Eight).

The tục tổn offering made on behalf of a couple’s first child once again enjoins the child’s maternal and paternal kin. The maternal grandparents must provide the meat for the offering (and thus, the subsequent feast), which often consists of chickens, ducks, and pigs, and enlist the services of a priest to perform the offering. The quantity of meat is not fixed. Pão told me that, “the maternal side provides according to their means/conditions. Those with much offer much, those with little offer little.” As well, like the offering made upon the birth of a child, the tục tổn offering is made at the “maternal altar” used to venerate Án Vá. Pão explained to me that:

The offering is not made to the ancestors, it is made at the secondary altar because it is of behind/after [i.e., maternal]. Maternal side has the responsibility of helping protect the child and raising it, so this offering is made on behalf of the maternal side. Some meat and rice are placed on the inside [i.e., paternal] altar as well for happiness/fun, to invite them to attend, but the offering is not made to them, they are just invited to attend and share in the fun.

Similar to the ritual offerings made upon the birth of children, the involvement of maternal kin only pertains to the tục tổn offering for a couple’s first child. If a couple has any more children, the tục tổn offering must be provided and the services of a priest enlisted by the child’s paternal kin.

The tục tổn ritual that I observed and participated in, and as generally described and explained to me by Pão, consists of three primary features, of which I only provide a general overview. The first is the offering made to and blessings asked of Án Vá at the maternal altar. The second entails gathering any
negative spiritual influences that may be present in the house into a small bamboo framework, which is then burned (see Plate 3.8). The third feature revolves around buffering the child against negative spiritual influences and ill-intentioned ghosts that may bring harm to or impede the child’s physical development into a healthy, whole adult. Two distinct steps are taken to bolster the child’s imperviousness to such misfortune.

The first step involves increasing the numbers with which a child is born. Using a wooden die that has been engraved with Chinese characters that represent auspicious configurations of numbers, and powdered charcoal as a printing medium, strips of paper are imprinted with the auspicious numbers. These strips of paper [kíng], along with a written supplication, are then burnt in offering to Án Vá (see Plates 3.9 – 3.12). Both Pão and the father of the girl whose tục tổn ceremony I attended explained to me that a person’s birth numbers cannot be changed. What they were trying to accomplish was to add to or buttress the girl’s existing numbers, rather than changing the configuration of numbers with which she was born.

The second step involves the priest taking a shirt that the child ordinarily wears and passing it through the bamboo framework, mentioned above, in order to draw out any negative spiritual influences that the shirt may be harboring. Then inserting a sláu cân—a ritual instrument used by priests, which was described to me as a “god’s”, “saint’s” or “ghost’s” hand—into the folded shirt the priest chants a prayer, or “makes a prayer into the shirt.” On two separate occasions, I was told by two different priests, Pão and Linh, that this particular prayer, which is also made into articles of clothing at other rituals, is made to ward off malevolent ghosts, and will be absorbed by the child through the wearing of the shirt. On a different occasion, a group of middle-aged women told me that making this prayer into articles of clothing will make the wearer less visible to ghosts, thereby decreasing the likelihood of being bitten by a ghost. At

20 A special stick used by priests in a variety rituals that has been carved into the likeness of a closed hand, approximately 30 cm in length, and handed down from father priests to son priests. This priestly instrument, called a sláu cân, represents the hand of the venerated spirit being called upon during a given ritual.
the tức tổn ritual I attended, once the girl returned home from school she grabbed her shirt, into which the prayer had been made, and quickly put it on, even before bothering to take off her school shirt, and held it wrapped snuggly about her.

The tức tổn ritual shows that boys and girls both merit being presented to and protected by Án Vá. As well, it demonstrates that boys and girls have the same kinds of capacities for susceptibility to the same kinds of physical and spiritual infirmities, and both are capable of having their individual capacities for imperviousness to these infirmities bolstered through the same ritual practices. But these moments of ritual equality between boys and girls do not endure everyday gendered relationships as children continue to mature toward adulthood and the social positions marked by either permanence or provisionality vis-à-vis the patriline. These social positions constituted by one’s relationship to the patrilineage, which are underlain by cultural prescripts for determining relationships to, and positions within the patrilineage, reproduce and reinforce the primacy of sons, and provisionality of daughters.

TRAINING TODDLERS

One evening, the eldest priest in the village, Không, invited Pão and I to his house for dinner. Không’s household consists of himself, his wife (Minh), his youngest of five sons (Duy), Duy’s wife (Phúc), this young couple’s infant daughter, and Không’s unmarried daughter (Thiên). Joining us for dinner was Duy, and Không’s third oldest son, Linh. Also present, though not invited to partake in the meal, were Minh, Phúc, and two grandchildren—Linh’s three-year-old son, and Duy’s nine-month-old daughter. Throughout the meal, the young boy made frequent demands to be held, to be paid attention to, to be given various items of interest that he wanted to play with, to be given various items of food and drink, and sometimes simply climbing up on one of the men’s laps to grab at things on the table. Whenever the boy would whine or cry he was responded to immediately; not always tenderly, but always lovingly with comments akin to English phrases such as “oh, you little scamp!” or “you little
whipper-snapper!" Whatever the boy requested, whether food, drink, something to play with, or simply attention, it was given to him; not only by his father, but his uncle, his grandfather, and Pão as well. The little girl, in contrast, was left crying by herself on the floor. Infrequently, Minh (the grandmother) would pay the little girl some attention, giving her a plastic bottle filled with pebbles that would rattle when shaken, and tell her to stop her crying. Minh, however, appeared to be much more interested in attending to the little boy, intently watching his activity, trying to get his attention with objects he could play with, and responding to his various and frequent demands. The men seated around the table almost completely ignored the little girl, only occasionally glancing over at her, obviously annoyed, when her crying would climb to that high-pitched-screaming-baby-cry that only human infants can make. Otherwise, and notwithstanding all the noise she was making, the little girl was invisible.

When the little girl’s mother, Phúc, emerged from the kitchen, after completing the cooking and cleaning chores expected of a daughter-in-law, she comforted her daughter and began to bathe the infant before putting her to bed. For the first time that evening, Không seemed to take an interest in the little girl. As the baby’s mother went about the tasks of bathing and dressing her, Không sat at the dinner table giving his daughter-in-law orders and curt instructions as to how to bathe and handle his grandchild.

From a very young age, children learn that males dominate the social stage, that their needs, wants, social presence, and relationships with kin are primary. Children also learn that females exist on the periphery; especially in the presence of men, females’ social presence remains largely invisible unless illuminated by being acted upon by men. Furthermore, females learn that their concerns and social duties should be directed toward the central, male activities, concerns and spheres of social life, rather than toward others inhabiting the social margins. The only time I ever witnessed women direct their attention primarily and exclusively toward other women was in the absence of men—men besides myself, as I inhabited a position of ambiguous exception and people were often unsure how to incorporate me into their social realities and
relationships. Thus, I sometimes became somewhat of a social non-presence, an anomalous, pseudo-periphery inhabitant, who females could relate to because I drifted on the margins of full, masculine social incorporation, but also incapable of being socially incorporated into the margins, as I am a man, and a very strange one according to the inhabitants of Dụ Vãng.

OF BIKES AND BOYS

The sociocultural beliefs, values and practices surrounding female provisionality and marginality, and male primacy are tacitly conveyed to children, who, as adults, reproduce these sociocultural assumptions and practices through the socialization of the proceeding generations. And not by men alone, as females have learned that their attention and concerns should be focused on males, while their own and other females’ conditions, issues, endeavors, and so forth are secondary, marginal, and frequently invisible to men and women alike.

On one occasion, I was preparing lunch with my host family. It was a cloudless, and brutally hot and humid summer day. The youngest daughter (ten-years-old), Êng, came home from school early. She has to walk to and from school, which is a five-kilometer round trip—not a long distance to walk by Nùng standards. She was not feeling well and looked unusually exhausted from her walk in the hot sun. Her mother and sister asked after her briefly, “Did you eat, are you not feeling well?” to which Êng responded with shakes and nods of her head. She went and lay down and went to sleep, and no one made any further comments or undertook any action with regards to her.

After lunch was finished, the youngest son (twelve-years-old), Út, came home from school. He gets to ride a bike to and from the same school. Út was sweating from the hot ride home and looked flushed, but was still energized enough with his typical twelve-year-old spunk as to be able to chase a few chickens around the courtyard before coming inside. When he had finished his fun with the chickens, he jauntily sauntered through the open door. As soon as he came in, his mother, Thị, his aunt, Yên, and oldest sister, Thảo, all looked up
from the TV program they were watching and started exclaiming how tired he
looked and how hot the ride home must have been, and immediately started
doting on him. Thảo turned the electric fan toward him, Thị got him water to drink
and told him to eat some noodles, Thảo jumped up and went into the kitchen to
start boiling water for the noodles, and Yên started manually fanning him with her
hat. All three women seemed delighted to see him and eager to ensure his
comfort and well-being. Út draped himself in the chair his older sister had just
vacated, and began watching television, giving no indication, at least that I could
discern, that he was surprised or even pleased with his treatment; he behaved as
if nothing was out of the ordinary.

I was a little surprised at the difference in the treatment the daughter and
son received, and I made the comment, “Éng had to walk home in the same sun
and she is sick and no one pitied her. Why do you pity Út so?” Thị and Yên
laughed uncertainly, and Thị rebuffed, “Well, he had to ride a bike home from
school.” To which I responded, “Walking takes longer so Éng had to be out in the
sun longer.” Thị responded, “She is still small and does not know how to ride a
bike.” Thảo reemerged from the kitchen and responded to her mother, saying,
“Yes she does, she just does not have a bike to ride.” The people present at this
exchange seemed a little uncertain as to why I was asking such ridiculous
questions. I sensed that a combination of the crushing heat and the obtuse
anthropologist asking frustrating questions were wearing people’s patience thin,
so I dropped the subject.

The above interaction illustrates a reproduction of the gender order—
through everyday practices premised by cultural assumptions—that dominates
gendered social relationships in Dụ Vẳng. Initially, there were only women
present, except for myself, and I was sitting against a far wall near the open door
elaborating some fieldnotes taken earlier and trying to take full advantage of a
slight breeze that periodically found its way through the open doorway. When
Éng arrived home, she was obviously not feeling well, and her mother, aunt, and
sister recognized this quickly enough. But this recognition did not result in any
action other than asking her the rhetorical question, “are you not feeling well?”
Beyond this fleeting recognition, Êng’s condition garnered no further attention, nor apparent concern. Additionally, Êng herself did not seek (nor seemingly expect) any further attention, and contributed to her own invisibility by retreating to the women’s sleeping room. Út, on the other hand, though feeling physically better and in better spirits than his younger sister, warranted the immediate and concentrated attention and action of all the women present. Rather than being told to take his late lunch in the kitchen, a common female practice, or even at the tea table, the center of the social space that was currently being created around the TV was made available to him (by the removal of his older sister), and he promptly and confidently occupied it. Út did not have to voice his wants and/or needs; they were anticipated and delivered to him. Despite these three women’s complete attentiveness to Út, their efforts to ensure his well-being and comfort appeared to be invisible to him; they went unrecognized and elicited no response from him, just as Êng’s ill-being and discomfort elicited no response from these women. Females learn marginality and non-recognition as the natural workings of the social world, and males learn primacy as the natural social order.

SONS ENDURE, DAUGHTERS DESIST

The marginality of daughters and primacy of sons, reproduced in everyday social practices, is underlain by cultural assumptions of female provisionality and male permanence within the patriline. These assumptions of provisionality and permanence are concretely experienced and naturalized in and by postmarital residence patterns and the expectations and obligations regarding affinal and consanguineal kin relations embedded in the social positions of married women and men. Although the stark reality of these expectations, obligations, and relationships may only be concretely experienced by a girl once she has married and taken up residence in her husband’s household, a girl’s own patriline

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21 In every household in Dụ Vàng, the women’s sleeping room is always housed in a peripheral wing partitioned off from the home’s central living space, which central space also serves as the men’s sleeping quarters.
anticipates her eventual “lineage shift.” This anticipation shapes a girl’s position within her own patriline and her relationships with patrilineal kin.

Păo’s extended, joint family consists of Păo, his mother (Lăo), his wife (Thị), his two daughters (Thảo and Êng), his two sons (Hùng and Út), his deceased brother’s wife (Yên), and her two daughters (Thủy and Như) (see Plate 3.13). They considered themselves “one household,” though they actually occupied two separate dwellings: Păo, Thị, Thảo, Êng, and Hùng occupy the house built by Păo’s father and grandfather, which I will refer to as “Păo’s house;” and Lăo, Yên, Thủy, Như, and Út occupy the house that Păo’s extended family had built after his younger brother was married and brought his bride, Yên, to live with his parents. I will call this house, “Yên’s house,” though Păo claimed ownership.

One evening I was invited to join Lăo, Yên, Thủy, Như, Hùng, and Út at Yên’s house for dinner. After we finished the meal, we sat around talking, as per usual. Yên began explaining to me that in 1990 she was ready to “skip town,” to leave her two daughters, her house and family to go south and work in the coffee fields. She said that she was going through very hard times. Her husband had died before giving her a son. She had to labor all day and take care of her two infant daughters who “would just cry all the time.” If she had enough money to make the trip she would have left them and gone south. I asked, “You would have left your daughters, your children?” Yên said, “Surely, they are only girls, I did not have a son. Sons are the ones who take care of you; they take care of the parents. Girls leave and take care of their husband’s household, sons are very important, not daughters.” I turned and asked Yên’s oldest daughter, Thủy, who is an atypically independent and outspoken young woman, what she thought of all this. She simply said, “That’s right.” Then Hùng, Păo’s fifteen-year-old son, spoke up and said very matter-of-factly, “Girls are nothing. They get sold as wives and become members of other households.” Yên, looking a bit consternated at once again having to explain the obvious, nodded in agreement.

Yên must have been in a very difficult position. She had been sold as a wife to another household, so she no longer belonged to her natal patrilineage.
Before she could bear a son, the man she had been sold to died. Thus, without a son and her husband dead she no longer had a substantial link to her new household’s patrilineage, and was left in a vulnerable position. Victor Turner’s concept of “marginality” can be a useful analytic tool for understanding and describing women’s positions within Nùng Fản Sling society. Turner states, “Marginals like liminars [ritual passengers who experience social liminality during rites of passage] are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity” (1974:233). Marginal, yes, but the social experiences of women, as conveyed to and observed by me, of existing “betwixt and between” with “no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity” was underscored by women’s provisionality within their parents’ and husband’s patrilineages. Men’s social centrality and primacy seemed to be constituted, at least in part, by their relatively stable and permanent positions within the patrilineage.

Several months after Yên first related the above story to me, this same point, which was more subtly made to me on numerous occasions, was poignantly driven home during a conversation with Thị. She was explaining the importance of marriage to me, and in the course of her explanation told me that I needed to have a child. I told her, “I already have a child.” She replied by saying, “You have a daughter. Unless you have a son it is not really your child.”

Returning to Thị’s quote which opened this chapter: “If your kids are just going to put you in an old people’s home and forget you, why have children at all? You have children so that they will take care of you.” Based upon the social positions and expectations of sons and daughters in Dụ Vǎng, I think it is safe to assume that Thị’s reference to children only applies to sons. Sons are the children who will remain, who contribute their labor and the labor of their children and wives to the maintenance of the patrilineal household. Sons are the children who will remember you, “clean your grave, make offerings to you” and perpetuate the patrilineage.
PLATES

Plate 3.1 Maternal altars used to venerate Án Vá [Wangsgard]

Plate 3.2 Hùng placing New Year’s offerings on his extended family’s maternal altars [Wangsgard]
Plates 3.3 and 3.4 Păo making offerings to Án Vá during a tục tôn ritual [Wangsgard]
Plate 3.5 Păo chanting from a prayer book [Wangsgard]

Plate 3.6 Păo reading out a bài, or written offering to Án Vá [Wangsgard]

Plate 3.7 Păo using a slău cân, or saint's hand to present the bài to Án Vá [Wangsgard]
Plate 3.8 Pão passing ritual artifacts through a bamboo framework to remove negative influences [Wangsgard]

Plates 3.9 and 3.10 Using a wooden die to imprint strips of paper with auspicious numbers, or King [Wangsgard]
Plates 3.11 and 3.12 Making a burnt offering to Án Vá [Wangsgard]
Plate 3.13 Pāo’s extended, joint household. Back row, from left to right: Yên, Thùy, Như, Thảo, and Thị. Front row, from left to right: Lão, Út, Hùng, Êng, and Pāo [Wangsgard]
4. GENDER RELATIONS: FLIRTING, LOVERS, AND IMPROPRIETY

In this chapter, my aim is to forward an understanding, via description, of a gendered social context to better situate my analyses and interpretations of the cultural construction and social reproduction of gender and masculine identities. I conceive of gender as configurations of social practices, premised on cultural assumptions about males and females, and reproduced in gendered social relationships. Nùng Fản Sìng cultural assumptions of love and proper male-female interactions premise the social practices of flirting and social interactions between lovers. Flirting with lovers not only illuminates gender relations, comprised of said cultural assumptions and gendered social practices, but also reproduces these.


The people in Dụ Vâng who were most willing, and even eager to talk with me about love and flirting were married women with children. Although I was privy to the perspectives of a few young, unmarried women, and one young woman who was married but had not yet moved into her husband’s household, the bulk of the information I was given about love and flirting came from Yên and Thị: the women who belonged to the household of which I was a temporary member, and the two women I was closest to (see Plate 4.1). Men were more reluctant to engage me in conversations about their own experiences of love and flirting. Rather, men seemed more interested in describing to me the ways in which I (and others) should not interact with women. Perhaps this was because my willingness to socially, and publicly interact with women was such an aberration to the Nùng Fản Sìng men I know.
There is no Nùng Fản Sling exact equivalent for the English term “love” and the Western notions that accompany it. The terms that the people of Dụ Vãng use to describe “love” are ăi, đẹp, and kết. These terms can also be used to reference “want” or “like,” such as ăi ău, with ău meaning “take,” which references wanting or liking to take something. The phrases tô ăi and tô đẹp, with tô meaning “together,” and kết j, with j meaning “will,” “desire,” or “heart” in the metaphorical sense, are used to describe two people who like each other, such as two close, male friends. When one of the above phrases is used to describe the feelings a male and female have for each other then it takes on different connotations, which transcend ordinary notions of the “together liking” that is experienced between friends, because friends are almost exclusively persons of the same sex. Thus, when a male and female tô ăi, then it is conceived of as an extraordinary instance of two people who share a mutual liking for each other.

Flirting and finding lovers among the Nùng Fản Sling is most commonly facilitated by the practice of sī—repartee singing between groups of young men and young women. Especially during the festival season (the first and second lunar months), groups of young men and women will travel to other Nùng Fản Sling villages and “festival markets” [hội hàng], and take to the surrounding hills and forests in order to get to know one another from a distance through sung verses traded back and forth. If the groups, or particular members of the groups decide that they “like” one another [tô ăi] then appointments can be made, through song, for a more intimate encounter, which typically entails meeting face-to-face in the company of one or more friends, and perhaps, eventually, exchanging gifts (see Plates 4.2 – 4.3).

These flirting practices should not be misunderstood as “courting,” because these flirtatious interactions between “lovers” typically do not, nor are they expected to, culminate in conjugal unions, or “marriage.” Marriage is not a personal affair for the Nùng, but is a social arrangement negotiated between extended, patrilineal households through consultation with a priest who knows how to “read/see numbers” [chêu siê] and thus determine the appropriateness of any given match. Children do voice their preferences for potential mates, but
parents and the stars (tô hap, or astrological appropriateness) have the final say regarding who their child will marry. Although it is not the norm to marry one’s lover, it is not an impossibility. As Pão’s sixteen-year-old daughter, Thảo, explained to me in the presence of her mother, Thị, who agreed with her daughter’s assessment:

There is only one person in the village who actually married his lover: Tùng [the son of Pão’s father’s younger brother]. Everybody else in the village would like to split up. They got married because their parents forced them. The groom’s parents go and talk to the bride’s parents and it is the parents of the two households who arrange the marriage.

I was told by several parents that a marriage will not happen if either the groom or bride refuses the match. However, I was also told that no good child will reject their parents’ wishes and demands. In the paragraphs that follow, I will enlist the perspectives of women and men from Dụ Vãng to help further illuminate the concepts and practices of “flirting” and “love.”

One evening after dinner, I was sitting around the fire with Thị, Hùng and Êng. Thị brought up the subject of love and lovers. She asked if people in the West only have one lover, like the Kinh. I told her that it is common to only have one lover at a time, but it depends on the individual. I further explained that when Westerners refer to “lovers” it often means two people who are in a romantic and sexual relationship. In response to my comment about lovers being sexually involved, she said that the Nùng, at least in her village, “never do this.” She then said, “well, very rarely a woman and a man sleep together before marriage and the woman will get sick and have to go to the clinic to get treatment. But this hardly ever happens.” I confirmed that what she meant by “getting sick” and going to the clinic to “get treatment” was that the woman gets pregnant and goes to the clinic to get an abortion. She said “yes.” She went on to say that the Yao,22 another ethnic minority group who live in close proximity to Dụ Vãng, and the Kinh only have one lover and “they love very strongly.” She said you can always tell who their lover is because:

22 In Vietnamese orthography, Yao is transcribed as Dao.
they’re all over one another, holding hands, sitting very close and touching one another in public. The Nùng don’t love that strongly, but have many lovers. But you don’t let everyone know who your lovers are, you make appointments to meet your lovers at the market, in the forest and on the hills. And you don’t touch one another, you just sit and talk. There are some people who truly touch and that’s when the woman gets sick. But most lovers only sit and talk—they’re too shy to do anything else...This way you can have multiple lovers and nobody gets jealous.

Thị’s statements seem to indicate that there are no notions of “strong” attachment or possession, nor sustained, physical or exclusive involvement that accompany the way “love” is conceived of in Dự Vắng.

On another occasion, Đức’s twenty-year-old niece, Phương, had come to Pao’s house to visit Thị. The three of us began chatting about a small group of Vietnamese government geologists who were working in the area for a few weeks and passed through the village regularly, often stopping by the house to visit briefly. Phương commented about how frequently the wives of these men called them on their cell phones. Thị admonished that you have to be wary of Kinh women “because they love very strongly.” She also said that, “you should have lots of lovers and not love too quickly because you have to assess them and see which one is the best and which one you love best. You have to discover their heart and find out if it’s good, and this is something that can’t be accomplished quickly.” Phương agreed that Kinh women love very strongly, saying, “If their man goes away for a little bit to work or to play the woman is always calling or going to find him, and not to ask how he is and make sure he is healthy, but to chastise him and suspect him.”

It seems to me that the Nùng concept of “love” can be best be understood in Western terms of “strong affinity,” without connotations of possession, exclusive attachment, jealousy, or physical intimacy—more liberal in some regards, and more restrained in others. “Love” seems to mostly be pursued and experienced by young men and women, who are considered to be in the more fanciful and carefree days of their lives. Many married adults with children spoke
of “love” as frivolous to their contemporary everyday lives, though they recalled their own pursuits and experiences of “love” with fondness.

The Good...

One late afternoon after the rice harvest had been brought in, Thị, Yên, Hùng, Thảo, Thủy, and I were threshing rice in the courtyard, which entails laying out the dried rice stalks and leading a large buffalo over the stalks to remove the seeds (see Plate 4.4). We were talking about the festivities that take place around the lunar New Year, which was still three months away, but people were already looking forward to festivities with anticipation. The topic turned to flirting because it is during festive occasions that boys and girls take to the hills to exchange sli and gifts. They told me that girls give boys white or bright blue shirts accented with brightly colored cuffs, closures, and fringe. In the past, boys would give girls little yellow, black and red baskets (see Plates 4.5–4.8). Because most boys no longer practice plaiting, nowadays they usually give small compacts (small metal cases with a mirror and hair pick, in which girls often keep face powder). I asked the girls (Thảo and Thủy) if they flirt with boys from Dụ Vãng, to which Thủy responded, “no, you don’t flirt with boys from your own village, you already know everything about them and their families so you wouldn’t have anything interesting or new to talk about.”

On other occasions, both Thị and Yên reminisced about their experiences of flirting with lovers. One day while taking a rest from breaking up large dirt clods in a field to prepare it for planting, Yên shared the following with me:

When I was a youth the only thing I was concerned with was going and playing, singing sli in different villages and flirting with lovers. My family used to plant tobacco and I would make up lies about going to market to buy tobacco plants or going to watch buffalo so I could go meet lovers. One windy night I stole one hundred plants from my own house to give my lover. Because it was windy I could tell my grandfather that the plants blew away...When I was young, I made eighteen white shirts, two sets of indigo pants and shirts, and several embroidered bags [see Plate 4.9] and scarves. The white shirts have fourteen closures, and the indigo shirts,
those have seven. The closures are doubled on the white shirts and those on the indigo shirts are single. The white shirts are made for lovers so they are nicer: embroidered and double closures. When I was young I thought I would never grow old, and would go and play and flirt...

...Groups of young boys would go from village to village and trade sli with the girls, and if we liked each other we exchange gifts, but we did this with many lovers. Or the boys and girls will go up the hills in groups and sing back and forth all night. Then one group might leave to go to another place and the remaining group would sing and ask “what’s wrong, where are you going, don’t you like us?” for example. Or we would go into the forest to talk, or if we were at market we would go into a side street to talk, and see if the boy is a crafty talker [i.e., intelligent].

I asked Yến if young people sleep with their lovers, and she simply said, a little taken aback, “You sleep with your husband or wife.” I asked her to tell me more about the sli, as she was considered by many in the village to be somewhat of an expert, and she said:

There are memorized sli and free sli. The memorized sli one side will sing a verse and then the other side will respond with a verse. The free sli are exchanged line for line. One side will sing a line that they have made up to find out about the others. People who know a lot of songs, like me, can stay up all night singing...If you didn’t know the songs then there were songs that others would sing to chastise and mock you.

Yến is considered by many people I know in Dụ Vằng to be somewhat of a “romantic,” described as thằng càng đời hảu [trap/set/fasten talk accompany others], or “someone whose talk is trapped in the accompaniment of another”, i.e., “someone who is always talking about a lover.” Although Yến spoke fondly of love and flirting, she often framed her talk in terms of testing or trying others.

Lê, who I introduced in Chapter One, had come up from Hà Nội to visit her parents in Lạng Sơn City. While she was in the province, she hired a motorbike taxi and paid me an unexpected visit in Dụ Vằng. After dinner, Pão’s family insisted that she stay the night in their home instead of making the trip back to the city at night. Gossip quickly spread through the village that Lê must surely love me. Why else would she have come all the way from Hà Nội to pay me a visit? It was several days after Lê’s visit that I was helping Yến break ground in
the field and asking her about flirting and *sli*. In the course of our conversation, Yến began to talk about love in reference to Lê and I, and teased me about secretly planning to marry her. She told me that I “need to test Lê to see if she is good and has sincere/true love by asking her to give you a gift.” I asked her, “if a person does not give the requested gift then you know they are no-good and do not marry them?” She said, “no, you may still marry them because your numbers are appropriate/fitting, and other good things, you’ll just know that if they say their love is sincere that it’s really not.” For Yến, another’s love is not something that is readily apparent, and any romantic overtures or implications made through flirtatious banter or the seeking of the other’s company can only be confirmed through test and trial. Furthermore, she did not talk of love as a prerequisite of marriage, but emphasized astrological appropriateness and “other good things.”

The experiences Thi shared with me about flirting were similar to Yến’s. One afternoon I accompanied Thi to work in the watermelon field. As we walked the two kilometers down a narrow valley that led to her household’s melon fields, she talked of her youth and going to tend the buffalo or get firewood, and began pointing out particular hills where she had gone as a youth to flirt and trade *sli:*

Me with my friends would sit here on this hill, and there would be boys over there on that hill and we would sing back and forth. That was the only way to get to know one another and flirt. There are verses to find out how many boys there are in a group [so you know how many girlfriends to bring] and verses to find out if they want to meet. Then you can sing to make appointments to meet at the market or in the forest to talk. There are verses to find out if they really like you and really want to meet. You sing back and forth to find out what they’re like, if they’re crafty talkers and to decide if you like them. Then you and friends go to meet the boys in the forest to talk. There were times when I was supposed to be collecting firewood but I would go and flirt with the boys instead and forget the time. Then as it got dark I would hurry and go cut down one tree [instead of the bundles of little firewood usually gathered] and run home. I would tell my parents that when I went to get firewood there were people who said I was stealing firewood and chased me away, so I was only able to shoulder one tree home.

I asked if she would ever flirt with the boys in her own village. She said, “You don’t flirt with the boys from your own village because you’re usually relatives.
You go to this village and that village and flirt with lots of different boys—a
different boy in every village. That way you can find out which is the best one."

Flirting takes place away from the prying eyes of one’s elders (e.g. the
hills, the forests, side streets at the market), it is not supposed to be a “public”
interaction. However, it does not escape the publicity and scrutiny of one’s peers;
one’s confidants but also potential whistle blowers. It is also practiced from a
distance, and if face-to-face meetings are arranged, according to those who
spoke with me about flirting, they are done so in ways that do not permit a single
couple to isolate themselves from the company of peers.

In speaking with both men and women about flirting practices, a common
theme that frequently emerged was a concept of flirting as testing, expressed by
the phrase: thi Ḗ hàu (to know, by trial, another’s heart/desire/will). Whether
framed in terms of testing others’ craftiness/intelligence by assessing how well a
person crafts or memorizes verses of sli, or how well a person crafts his or her
“talk” in conversation, or testing another’s sincerity through the exchange of gifts,
flirting, in general, and the trading of sli, in particular, were talked about and
practiced as trials.

Like Yên, the village police officer, Sơn, was considered an accomplished
sli singer and composer. Having such a reputation also makes one renowned as
a “wicked flirter.” One evening, Sơn was visiting Pão at home, as he often did.
The three of us were sitting at the tea table talking about various upcoming
festivals. I asked them to tell me about flirting and singing sli. Sơn told me the
following:

Sli that are sung during the day are free sli that the singers make up as
they go in order to know one another. The sli that are sung at night are
longer verses that are memorized. One group will start a sli and if the
other group doesn’t have the response memorized then they loose. Like a
competition. The two sides will sing back and forth until one group doesn’t
have a sli memorized that the other side started. The wining side then sing
taunting/criticizing sli to the loosing side, calling them dogs and other
insults.
The competitive nature of, and the practices of “testing others” embedded within flirting and *s*ī*/*/*śī*/*/*/śī*/ seem to create an adversarial tension between the opposing flirting parties. During one particular lion dance practice, there were young men and women present. The young men practiced the dance, and the young women practiced beating out a rhythm on gongs and drums in preparation for upcoming festivals at which the dance is performed. At this practice session I witnessed a spontaneous exchange of *s*ī*/*/*/śī*/ that looked very much like verbal sparring. I did not write down the exact content of the exchange, nor do I remember it. However, I do remember that Sơn sang an impromptu *s*ī*/*/*/śī*/ verse to disparage a young woman’s performance and musical ability. The young woman, also by means of a single verse of *s*ī*/*/*/śī*/, rebuffed Sơn. Sơn, still using the medium of *s*ī*/*/*/śī*, responded harshly to the girls rebuffing, and the girl did not attempt a response but cast her eyes down and appeared to be on the verge of tears.

Consider the following verses of *s*ī*. These two brief verses are a popular exchange, and each time I heard them sung, the words used were either the same, or a very similar rendition to what I have reproduced here. The first four lines are sung by a man, and the last two lines are sung in response by a woman:

1 Noọng páy lăng, cỏ páy sạu [younger sibling go what, older brother go with]
2 Noọng khàm lông, cỏ khàm tạ [younger sibling cross stream, older brother cross river]
3 Noọng khừn pô, cỏ long tọng [younger sibling up mountain, older brother down field]
4 Noọng páy harrass, cỏ cúng ăi páy sạu noọng, đày mi noọng? [younger sibling go where, older brother also like/want go with younger sibling, able/OK not/negative particle younger sibling?]

1 Hést lăng mi đày, pị bajò? [Do what not/negative particle able/OK, older brother?]
2 Pị bajò tấng bò mi khà mi sự? [Older brother alone/individually not have leg/foot not/negative particle correct?]

Interpretation:

1 Where you go, I will go
2 If you cross a stream, I will cross a river
3 If you ascend a mountain, I will descend to the fields
4 Wherever you go, I want to go with you, is that alright?

1 Why would it not be alright, older brother?
2 What, do you not have your own legs?

There are definite romantic overtures in the initiating, male verse: the man will go wherever his object of affinity goes, regardless of obstacles. The female response, however, is ambiguous and a bit dismissive, showing neither reception nor outright rejection, telling the man that he can do what he likes, its his business, with which she is not concerned. We can interpret the female response as lacking confidence in the man's initial advances, waiting instead for more concrete affirmation of his affinity.

Flirting also highlights a social distance that obtains in the gendered relationships between men and women. Although transgressing the social distance reproduced in the practices of flirting is a serious faux pas, this distance also seems to be a source of passion, or even a muse. Consider a popular, long, memorized verse of sli, popularly known as Phong slư [Love Letter]. Pão and Sơn translated the subtleties and nuances of this verse into Vietnamese, from which I have produced the following interpretation in English. 23

1 Oh young one, we have departed far from one another
2 With deep love/affection I write the verses of this letter
3 I immediately grasp the pen and write at once
4 Send someone to the market, arrive right away and take it in your hand
5 Take it in your hand and read verse by verse
6 Read long, think on it every so often to depart from sadness
7 separated from each other, very sad, oh young one
8 do I know if you think I am sad or not
9 Day in and day out my thoughts are saddened with you
10 Close to one another I feel normal
11 Far from one another I feel endless love/affection
12 The person is far the heart is still not far

23 I have not reproduced the original or a literal translation here, and hope that my other literal translations and the fact that I relied on two native speakers who are also fluent in Vietnamese to help in the translation are adequate to inspire reader confidence in my interpretations. Furthermore, I have only reproduced the initiating verse of this sli, sung by a man.
13 Far from each other on the face of the earth, under the sun we are together
14 Far from each other, far from the shape/image of the village’s shadow
15 Not yet far from the sentiments of we two
16 Send a letter of a few confiding words
17 Inquire after the health of the person I love
18 Oh young one, do not let your thoughts be distant
19 Think near, forever remember the loving heart of your lover
20 Look up towards the quiet hills and mountains
21 Look down to the earth below, your shadow is absent
22 Far from one another, feelings deep as the ocean
23 Far from each other, feelings are written into a letter
24 This letter is sent from my mountain village
25 I send someone from the village to carry it to Ky Lua
26 Fly up steep roads, tall mountains
27 Fly past mountain forests and send it into your hand
28 If you are able to catch it, read, consider
29 Finish reading, if it pleases you write a letter in response

I never learned what a typical female response to this verse of sli might look like. The men I spoke with about sli showed no interest in talking about female verses. In fact, when Pão learned that I had asked Yên to copy her own hand-written collection of sli he seemed offended, and asked me what I wanted with a collection of women’s sli—for men, the social distance I refer to is more than just the physical space in which gendered relationships take place, but a social distancing from things feminine.

Returning to the above verse, what stands out to me is passion, love, deep felt affection, or some affective state constituted by longing, desire, and affinity that is born of distance; something craved but out of reach and unrealized, an affective state that is produced by the tension of unsatisfied (and unsatisfiable?) want. Although it could be argued that it is implied, the above verse never does explicitly state a desire to close the distance, or to resolve the tension. Rather, the words seem to revel in longing, desire, and caring, but the distance is what creates and sustains these. Perhaps if the distance is closed, and the tension slaked, the passion will be lost. My purposes here are not literary interpretation of Nùng poetry and verse. Whether or not distance kindles and
stokes fires of passion through tension, I cannot be certain. What I do know is that distance between young men and women is socially enforced in Dụ Vãng.

...the Bad...

A family in the village was constructing a new house, and had hired a small crew of construction workers, all of them young men in their late teens and early twenties. During the work week, these workers would stay with the extended family members of the household that had hired them, in order to avoid having to make a daily trip to and from Dụ Vãng. Yên’s house is a popular gathering place in the evening for young women, and sometimes young men from Dụ Vãng —there is no resident adult male, and the atmosphere is decidedly more relaxed than any of the male-headed households I had ever visited in Dụ Vãng, and I had visited almost all of them. While the crew of home builders were in the village there were a few of them who would often go over to Yên’s house in the evening to hang-out and talk. Thủy would often sit out in the courtyard and chat with them—during the summer months, the courtyard is much cooler than the inside of the concrete and brick houses that are quickly replacing the more traditional mud-brick homes in Dụ Vãng. I witnessed Thủy chatting with the construction workers on a couple of occasions—always sitting at least two meters away from the nearest boy—and thought nothing of it. Then one day, Hùng brought it up in conversation with me, and paused to gauge my reaction. I was not sure why he was bringing it up, so I reacted by asking, “so what?” Hùng began gushing about what a rotten girl Thủy is for sitting and talking to these Kinh boys, “sometimes until ten o’clock at night, when she should have gone to bed already!” The following day, Thị made a comment about what a good girl Như is (Thủy’s younger sister), and went on to say, “she’s not like Thủy who will sit and talk miscellaneous with the Kinh boys. If the Kinh boys wanted to talk with Như she would not suffer them. She’d say ‘if you have something to say to me then say it and get it over with, don’t talk nonsense to me.’ But Thủy will sit and speak miscellaneous with those boys.”
Twenty days after Thị shared the above information with me, I was having a typical after-dinner conversation with Thị and Thảo. They told me that a lot of young women in the village are afraid to talk to me because I am a man, and women usually only talk to women. They told me another reason is that the young women are afraid other people will “talk.” Thảo told me:

When me and Thủy go to school, or anywhere outside the village and go with or talk to male friends we are always worried that someone, especially old people [i.e. her parents’ age and older] from the village will see us and scold us for talking to boys and tell other people that we are bad girls. If you’re seen talking to a boy, just talking, for example at a refreshment stand, others will talk and say ‘ah-ha, you love that boy’ and spread rumors about you.

Thị went on to explain that “younger girls’ understanding is expanding because they go to school with boys, they have to sit with boys and so they aren’t afraid to talk to boys.” But when she was young and she wanted to talk to a boy she would have to secretly make an appointment and meet in the forest or on a hill. She would then go with friends to meet the boys and then make up lies as to where she had been all day. “If old people know you have been talking to boys they’ll scold you.” During this conversation, Thị also reiterated having many lovers, one in each village. “Even after you’re married or several months pregnant but not showing yet. You go and lie to the boys that you’re single so that they’ll flirt with you. But you just talk you don’t play nonsense/in a foul manner.” Thảo lamented that it was no longer this way, that boys and girls rarely meet each other in the forest and on hills anymore. “We still like to meet and flirt, but if people see us at a refreshment stand along the street, or somewhere open flirting with boys they’ll talk bad about us.”

Thị was very aware of the reality of flirting and having lovers, a reality she had experienced in her youth and fondly remembered. She could also commiserate, to some degree, with her daughter’s lack of flirting venues and the decline of secret hilltop and forest encounters. However, when she observed her

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24 People from Dụ Vãng never seemed to go anywhere alone—many people commented on how I must be extremely brave or stupid to have come all the way to Dụ Vãng alone.
niece chatting with boys in public, and in close proximity to them, her response, like the responses of other “old people” that her daughter feared, was critical of Thủy, who had failed to maintain a social distance between herself and these boys.

...and the Ugly

I experienced first-hand the social scrutiny that can rain down on people who transgress the social distance that men and women are expected to maintain in Dụ Vãng. The day after Lê unexpectedly arrived for a visit in Dụ Vãng, mentioned briefly above, I gave her a ride back to Lạng Sơn, where I stayed to have a late lunch with Lê and her parents before returning to Dụ Vãng. I arrived back in the village around 8:30 p.m.— rather late by Dụ Vãng standards. That same evening a large group of men had gathered at Pão’s home to discuss a communal work project. As soon as I entered the house, everyone (or so it seemed) began simultaneously interrogating me, asking me if I had “behaved in a foul manner” while I was in the city with Lê. I was told by a number of the men present, in no uncertain terms, that they thought it was both hilarious and “worthy of pity” that I would go around with a woman all day. I was further informed by this large contingent of men that “it will sap your strength and make you weak to be around women so much.”

I had previously been told on a number of occasions that keeping the company of women will drain away a man’s health and strength, so this did not come as much of a surprise to me. What I did not expect is how deeply offensive my public interaction with Lê was to people in Dụ Vãng. By my appraisal, Lê and I had done nothing untoward and had behaved very conservatively. We strolled through the village together, stopped by a few houses for brief visits, and a few times strayed from the village a short distance to look at some scenery I found particularly pretty. Not once did we make physical contact. But in the days that followed, I became acutely aware that people in Dụ Vãng interpreted our behavior as extremely inappropriate.
Over the next few days, everyone I met and spoke with brought up my and Lê’s gendered impropriety, including children. The people who saw us walking together were very keen to let me know how “ugly” it looked. Sitting at the dinner table with Pão’s family, Thị explained to me: “Here, men only go with men, you go play with men friends, and women with other women. If you do differently it looks very ugly.” Linh, one of the priests in the village, sought me out and sat me down to give me his appraisal of the incident and Lê: “First of all, she’s too skinny, she’s very skinny and I don’t like that style/model at all. Second, I really dislike the way she is all over you, the way she’s does like ‘oh David this, and oh David that’ is very ugly to the point of making my stomach hurt. Women should be shy to go with men, they should respect/fear men.” Although Lê and I did not come into physical contact with one another during her visit to the village, because we had gone walking side by side Linh still perceived us to have been “all over” each other.

Son, who often liked to emphasize that I was at his mercy and there were any number of ignominious ends that awaited me should I run afoul of him, took a storied approach to illustrate the possible consequences of my behavior. While visiting Pão’s home, he related the following story to me:

While one of the new houses below the culture house was being built some of the construction workers were staying in my house. One night two of the construction workers, a boy and a girl, were outside late together talking and flirting. They came back around ten or eleven at night. I refused to let them in the house. They banged on the door, but I would not suffer to let them enter...they had been behaving in a foul manner, hugging and kissing...

At this point, Thị interrupted, saying: “Of course, no one can know for sure because they were out in the dark, and they may have only been talking.” Son interjected, “I know! Why did I refuse to let them in? So in the middle of the night they had to go out of the village to find a place to sleep. It was very funny to see the girl walking and crying at the same time.”

Relationships between young men and women, particularly when experienced in the realms of flirting and love, are engaged from a distance, both
physical and social, are somewhat adversarial in nature, and marked by tension. When these relationships are enacted otherwise, social scrutiny ensues. That the social worlds of men and women are structured in ways that tend to exclude members of the opposite sex was plain to me. However, to conceive of this mutual exclusion as “mutual marginalization” would be off the mark. This is because the mutual exclusion is not one of parity. The emphasis is not mutually placed on male-female avoidance, but on male avoidance of females, underpinned by the beliefs around influence by association and thus the potential for the transference of female weakness from women to men. Though men tend to be excluded from women’s social realms, this is most often a self-imposed exclusion, as demonstrated by my relative ease of access to women’s social realms, except when restricted by men. Likewise, the privilege of avoiding contact with, and excluding women from men’s social realms is a masculine privilege; which privilege is buttressed by men’s social permanence and preeminence within the patrilineage. Men may be marginal to women’s social spheres of interaction in the sense that they are excluded, but they are not constructed as marginal in the sense of the concept as I employ it in this analysis. In other words, in Nùng Fản Sling society at large, and specifically within the context of gendered social relationships, men do not socially exist betwixt and between, they do not inhabit ambiguous positions within the patrilineage around which Nùng Fản Sling society is structured. Rather, they are central to patrilineal society, the symbols of permanence and continuity.

LOVERS AFTER MARRIAGE

Although it may be the case that two lovers eventually become husband and wife, these instances are considered coincidental. However hopeful two lovers may be, there is no real expectation that love and flirting will culminate in marriage. Love and flirting are considered to be frivolous indulgences of youth, while marriage is about other more practical concerns, to which I will turn in further detail in the next chapter.
One afternoon after lunch, Thị was telling me that Lê and I do not make a pretty couple because, “she is so small and you are so big.” I asked her if love was not the most important thing when finding a mate. She said, “a good match is what’s important.” I asked her if she loves Păo, who was just in the kitchen and within earshot, and she said “no.” Păo then walked through the front room and I asked him if he loves Thị, and he flatly said “no.” Thị then said that even though they do not love each other they can still live peaceably together.

Shortly after this exchange, Păo had to go out on priestly business. Thị took the opportunity to elaborate a bit more on the frivolity of love, and her and Păo’s relationship. She said:

When boys fall in love with girls the boys don’t focus on their studies, their minds go elsewhere and they can’t study well. This is why Păo only finished the tenth grade. Păo was very in love with a girl when he was young. That girl was very pretty, but very petite. Păo was so in love with her that he forgot his studies and dropped out of school. His parents did not approve of such a bad girl, because she caused him to drop out of school. What’s more, the girl was petite, so obviously she couldn’t labor well. Păo’s parents saw I was a good person, that I was healthy/strong and a hard worker. So, the parents put a stop to all the love nonsense and married Păo to me. Păo was not pleased with the match. Of course the match wasn’t from Păo, what would a handsome man like Păo be doing loving an ugly person like myself?

Later that same day, I was helping Yën haul some large bags of rice to her house. We sat down to rest and have a drink of tea. I asked her if she had loved the man she married. Her reply was very quick: “Oh, no! I was sixteen when I got married. My parents chose a household they thought was appropriate then went and asked that household if they agreed to the match, they did, so I married that man.”

Because marriage is viewed in practical terms, the possibility of having lovers after marriage remains open. Newly married couples are still considered to be youths, and indeed, marriage often occurs between the ages of fifteen and twenty years for both boys and girls. A newly married couple does not begin cohabiting until several years after the marriage takes place; most typically not until five to ten years afterward.
During one of our many conversations about love and flirting, I asked Yên if people keep lovers after they are married, and she said, “Of course. You can still meet them at market, or on the hills during festivals and you can exchange stories or love poems, but after you have children all this stops because you’re no longer young men and women and you have to stay home with your family. It was fun times going to play as a young woman.”

I was a bit surprised at Yên’s claim of keeping lovers after marriage. Because of my other conversations about, and my observations of flirting and love between young men and women, I had created a picture in my own mind about Nùng practices and beliefs around flirting and love: one of conservatism and restraint. Based on my own cultural assumptions, such conservatism and restraint would preclude keeping lovers after marriage, or at least making an open admission about doing so. Because Yên was considered by many to be atypically concerned with love and romance, I pursued the topic of lovers after marriage with Thị as well.

Two days after the above exchange with Yên, I was at home with Thị and Pão. Thị was bundling surplus green leafy vegetables that she would sell at the market, while Pão and I were grinding brewer’s yeast and breaking up clumps of cooked rice in preparation to make rice liquor. I took this opportunity to ask Thị and Pão about lovers after marriage. Thị began by reiterating to me that you should have many lovers, “one in each village.” She then launched into the following story, while Pão kept himself noticeably aloof from the conversation:

Even after you’re married you can continue to meet your lovers—at least until you have children, the women that is, because women have to stay home and take care of the children—and your husband can’t get jealous because you don’t touch each other, you just talk and flirt. This is why I don’t mind if Pão goes to flirt with lovers, because me and my husband aren’t lovers. Even after you’re several months pregnant but not showing yet. You go and lie to the boys that you’re single so that they’ll flirt with you [flirting often includes the giving of gifts], but you just talk you don’t play in a foul manner...Once in the past, me and my friends met some boys on a hill and one of the boys offered us some barbequed bread, but we knew that he had a wife and child already, so I said, “what are you doing giving
me this bread? Take it home to your child!” This was very embarrassing to
the boy because after none of the other girls would flirt with him. He tried
to deny that he had a child or was married, but we knew that he already
did, we had discovered him earlier, so we wouldn’t suffer him to flirt with
us.

After a couple is married they can still go and flirt with their lovers, but
when children come along the wife must assume responsibility for the
children; she can hardly take the kids along to go and flirt. However, the
husband is not burdened with the responsibility of taking care of the children,
so he is still free to go and flirt. This draws attention to gender difference as
capacity. The desire to flirt, before and after marriage, is characteristic of both
men and women. However, after marriage and children, women’s capacities to
engage in such pursuits are limited relative to men’s capacities.

Flirting with lovers is entertainment, an innocuous indulgence that entails
engaging members of the opposite sex whose company one may enjoy because
of his or her skill in crafting talk, and/or the exchange of gifts. It is generally not
seen as compromising the integrity of a marriage or a family, as these institutions
are not premised on frivolous indulgences such as love, but are about more
important practical matters. If, however, flirting and lovers begin to impinge on
the integrity of marriage and family, and thus threaten to undermine the more
important practical matters that these serve (e.g. children, agricultural labor
force, or the maintenance of patrilineal ancestors in the spirit realm), then action
is taken to impede such whimsy. This can be seen in the actions that Pão’s
parents took when they perceived that he was compromising practical matters
through his fanciful over-indulgence in love. But this point, and many others took
on considerably more texture for me through Yên’s poignant stories of love and
loss.

Yên shared one particular story with me over the course of multiple
tellings. Each time she recounted the story to me, though much of it I had heard
before, a different piece of her recalled experience came into view, and
eventually I gained a clearer picture of not only the chronology of her experience,
but the significance of it. The version I present below is in her own words,
translated and interpreted by me. However, I have imposed some artificial
coherence on it by arranging different pieces from different tellings in order to
represent the chronological order of events, and to encompass the key elements
of the story, which did not emerge in any one single telling.

In Dụ Vãng, people drew on personal life histories to narrate their present
selves with a sense of continuity, though these self-representations were often
inconsistent and shifting; changing from one time, context, or conversational
topic to the next. Often times, Yên pined for and nostalgically romanticized her
lost love, at other times she recounted tales of this particular lover’s bitterness
and unjust acts. Each time she recounted the story it was different, but then it
was stimulated by different conversational topics, memories, and situations.
Regardless, each telling was imbued with cultural assumptions about the world,
and connected memories of past experiences with present situations. And each
telling represented different parts of a “self” constituted by different, and
sometimes conflicting experiences and emotions, or at least the memories of
these.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in 1990 Yên was seriously
contemplating leaving Dụ Vãng to go south and work in the coffee fields.
During this time, several families from Dụ Vãng and surrounding Nùng Fản
Sling villages had already made the move. One of her motivations for wanting
to make the move herself was that a particular young man was among those
who left for the south. This is her story:

When I was eighteen I loved very much a boy from Hải Yên...I was
already married but not yet living in my husband’s household so I would
still meet this boy to flirt and talk. He is such a crafty talker, and sings sli
very well, so romantic. Oh, he talked so well, like you he is a person who
does not talk down a straight road, someone who also talks down side
roads. People who talk down a straight road only have a half hour, or an
hour at most of talk, and then there is nothing left to talk about. That’s no
fun. People who talk down intersections can talk all day and never run out
of conversation. I gave him eight white, embroidered shirts, two indigo
suits and an embroidered handbag. He gave me one of those little
compact mirrors with a little hair pick attached by a chain, the ones that
young women take to festivals to make sure their hair and face look OK
after walking far. Now I use it to keep betel nut and tobacco. My lover had to do mandatory military service but was at the army base in Lang Son. Every market day at Kỳ Lùa he would come and meet me at the market to flirt and trade sili. Every time he left the base to go play at the market his commander would fine him 10,000 đồng. I felt very sorry for him so I went and collected and sold anise and gave him 50,000 đồng to help pay his fines...

...After he finished his army work, his parents arranged a marriage to another girl and had already had the engagement/asking ceremony and had paid the bride price to that family in the south because he had gone with his parents to work coffee near Saigon...Before he left he told me to give him the post office number here so he could send me letters. I told the post office clerk not to tell anyone if any letters arrived for me. Oh, sky! In the first year he sent me five letters! The post office clerk surely told someone who knows me, because this was very interesting news, a Nùng village woman with a husband already receiving letters from a man in the south. Of course, my husband discovered me, and he came and asked me harshly. I said “yes, this man in the south is one of my lovers, but do not worry my heart is as sturdy as a kêng.” [A kêng is a three-legged iron tripod used to hold pots and frying pans over the cooking fire, and her statement can be interpreted to mean that she is unfailingly faithful to her husband in terms of what marriage entails among the Nùng Fản Sling]. He had to accept my words because he also continued to go and flirt with lovers after we were married...

...We continued to send letters for each other, writing the same way we used to talk so when I read the letters it was like he was here talking together. I would take them with me when I went to work alone in the forest or look after buffalo so nobody else could see what was in those letters...I read the letters over and over and I still have them. Sometimes at night when I can’t sleep because I’m worrying about life because I don’t have a son and think and think about supporting my family, when I’m sad I take them out and read them...

...I answered all of his letters, and in letters we agreed to dump our spouses and I would go be with him in the south and marry each other...He had not yet had his wedding, and I was not yet living with my husband’s household, but I never had enough money to go to the south. That boy’s family was able to find a lot of money working coffee and he sent me 500,000 đồng to pay back the bride price to my husband’s family and go south. Oh, sky! At that time 500,000 đồng was like 5,000,000 đồng!...

...After I married my husband, he was on top of a tree picking fruit and he fell down. There were many sticks around that tree, when he fell down to
the ground a sharp stick pierced his foot, that stick came through his foot from the bottom to the top. After that he always went with a limp. I went to my husband with that money and told him I did not want a lame husband, a man who goes with a limp. I handed him the money and told him to dump each other [i.e., she wanted a divorce]. But my husband’s household refused the money and did not allow us to dump each other. They said the marriage was done already, they had paid my household money already, so that’s all. Even when I had that payback money they still refused. They announced “what girl is here with talk of nonsense/miscellaneous love?” I know they refused because it would be very difficult to find another good wife for their lame son...

...My lover came up from the south, thinking I would return south with him. He sent word to meet him on a hill, oh, oh, I didn’t know what I can do. So when I met him I gave the money to him and told him we could not take each other [i.e., get married] because my husband did not agree to dump each other. Oh, oh, he was furious. He said to me, “you ruined my life! I have dumped my wife already and am now waiting for you, and you say you won’t marry me! Now I have to find yet another wife, you have ruined my life!” Oh, sky! He took the money from me and threw it on the ground and the wind blew it away, and he cursed me and my husband to die! I always wonder if I did marry him would I have met with better luck than I have? I don’t know if the reason I have met with such bad luck is because my lover threw all that money to the earth, like an offering [to the earth spirits], and said such a bitter curse? Others also say that throwing the money to the earth and cursing me with death was much too bitter a thing to do and this has been the cause of my bad luck and hardship and misery...I am very sad and full of regret that things happened like that. It was real love, and I still dream about it at night and will often cry about it when I lie in bed at night alone and sometimes I take out the old letters and take them into the forest to read. It is truly too bad, I am truly regretful...

...Things are better now, the most difficult times have passed. My daughters are grown and can help me work, I have fields to work and there is enough to eat. I no longer plan to run to the south, I no longer want to, there is no longer any reason to do that.

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25 People who have physical imperfections that inhibit their ability to labor, e.g. a gimpy leg or hand, or who are prone to illness or generally have weak health are not only considered unattractive but also to be unlucky, have weak or bad numbers. These people do not make desirable spouses, and unless the parents of such boys are rich the only spouses they can get are those who are also considered “less desirable.” I attended a wedding in Yến’s hometown, and a large number of people commented that the boy was sickly and generally of poor health, so his bride was not very beautiful or healthy/hearty looking, and in order to get a good bride this boy’s family would have to be rich, but they were not.
After Yên’s first recounting of this story to me, I told her it was a very good story and should be made into a film. She just laughed. Thủy, her oldest daughter, who was present at the first telling, asked me if I had any stories that were as romantic. I truthfully told her, “no.” Yên’s story embodies several themes I want to address. Here I will only touch on those germane to the discussion at hand, but will refer back to this story in the next chapter as it again becomes relevant.

Not many years after Yên’s lover cursed her and her husband to die, her husband was picking anise in what was described to me as a “public forest,” but to which a Yao household claimed exclusive rights. This particular Yao household threatened that if they ever saw any Nùng Fản Slìng “stealing” from their forest the perpetrator would be killed. Yên’s husband, along with several others from Dụ Vãng, were in this forest picking anise. The others had finished filling their bags and left, leaving Yên’s husband alone to continue picking. After the others had left, Yên’s husband was shot dead. It is claimed by people in Dụ Vãng that a Yao man from the household who claimed ownership of the forest shot and killed him. This is one of the worst deaths conceivable. There are a number of deaths that the Nùng consider unlucky: dying young, dying outside the village, and dying violently. I was told that dying young is the least inauspicious kind of death among the three, because it will only prevent the ghost of the deceased from ascending the family altar. The other two unlucky deaths not only result in a person’s ghost being unable to ascend the family altar to be venerated, but also result in the inability to find rest. Instead, the unlucky dead wander for eternity as evil spirits or demons. Most people refused to talk about the unlucky dead because it is considered inauspicious, and the unlucky dead, who become wandering, evil spirits, are feared in a very real way. Those who did talk with me about it only did so reluctantly and in hushed tones. In fact, I never learned Yên’s deceased husband’s name, as no one was willing to mention it.

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26 The Nùng Fản Slìng are not hunters, per se, and I knew of no Nùng household that possessed a gun. The Yao are hunters, and are allowed hunting rifles by the Vietnamese government. Every Yao household I was acquainted with (six in total) owned a hunting rifle.
Whenever Yên shared with me her lamentations over the loss of her lover, her pain was palpable, and she mourned his loss like the death of a loved one. Whenever she lamented the loss of her husband, she always did so in terms of her position of sonless widow as a result of her husband’s death. I never heard her speak of, nor did I get the feeling that she mourned the loss of her husband as the loss of a loved one. Indeed, she was very open about not loving her spouse, as was almost every married person I know in Dụ Vãng.

Yên’s interpretation of what lay at the root of her ill fortune—being cursed by her lover—was not the only, nor the prevailing interpretation of these unlucky events and situations, especially among members of the dead man’s patrilineage. Pão, Sơn, and Tùng, three male members of Yên’s husband’s patrilineage, were willing to share with me their own take on the above events and circumstances, which I summarize below.

For Pão, Sơn, and Tùng, Yên had opposed the natural order of things by putting the frivolous before the practical. She had attempted to reject the match agreed upon by her own patrilineage, then to reject her husband’s patrilineage after the marriage had been accomplished, then to choose her own mate based on the whimsies of love rather than on the prudence of her and her husband’s patrilineages and astrological appropriateness. Although Pão, Sơn, and Tùng acknowledged the potency of her lover’s curse, for them, this would not have occurred if not for her impropriety. Such blatant impropriety would not go unnoticed by, nor would it garner any favor with the potentially benevolent ancestral spirits who intercede, for good or ill, in the lives of all individuals. For these male members of her deceased husband’s patriline, all the bad luck and tragedy in Yên’s life is a consequence of her impropriety; her behavior flew in the face of the natural order of things, which can only result in misfortune. Yên was perceived by many as an overly romantic woman who got carried away in the frivolity of love, and thus her suffering was self-inflicted.

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The cultural assumptions that premise the social practices within gendered relationships during youth shape the inhabitation of the gendered social position of wife or husband in life after youthhood. I now turn to an examination of feminine and masculine identities as culturally constructed and socially reproduced in and by the social positions of and relationships between husbands and wives.
PLATES

Plate 4.1 The author (center) with Yến (left) and Thị (right) [Pào]

Plate 4.2 A staged sli performance at a hội hàng, or festival market during the New Year season [Wangsgard]
Plate 4.3 During the sli performance, the singers slowly move closer together, symbolizing the potential meeting that such interactions may facilitate [Wangsgard]

Plate 4.4 Threshing rice with buffalo [Wangsgard]
Plate 4.5 Side view of a basket traditionally given to a girl by an enamoured boy [Wangsgard]

Plate 4.6 Bottom view of basket pictured above [Wangsgard]

Plate 4.7 Top view of basket pictured above [Wangsgard]
Plate 4.8 Example of the bright blue shirts that girls currently give boys with whom they are enamoured [Wangsgard]

Plate 4.9 Example of a traditional-style embroidered bag given to boys as gifts by girls [Wangsgard]
5. GENDER RELATIONS: LOVE, MARRIAGE, AND SEXUALITY

Páy dụ páy, mừ dụ mừ, mi mừ dụ thôi. [Go then go, return home then return home, not/negative particle return home then stop.] Interpreted as: If you are going to go, then go. If you are going to come home, then come home. If you do not come home, then that’s all.

- Popular saying among women in Dụ Vãng

Men’s and women’s gendered selves are shaped by cultural assumptions about the nature of males and females, and by their relative positions within the patrilineage. These assumptions and positions are made manifest, and reproduced in relationships between husbands and wives and the social practices embedded in such relationships. I begin this chapter by describing the institution of marriage and the way in which marriages are contracted among the Nùng Fản Sling in order to provide a context in which to better understand the gendered positions of, and relationships between husbands and wives. In order to situate masculinity and the sociocultural processes through which it is constructed and reproduced within a context of gender relations requires an attendance to femininity. Thus, I give special consideration to women’s positions as wives within a gendered system of relationships to illuminate Nùng masculinity through comparison, as masculine and feminine identities are reproduced through gendered interaction with one another. To further generate understanding of how gendered identities are constructed and reproduced in gendered social relationships, I present men’s and women’s perspectives on spouses and various other aspects of marriage, which perspectives are shaped by social positions within the patrilineage and premised upon assumptions about males and females. I then turn to a discussion of divorce to demonstrate the differentials that exist between men and women in terms of gendered power and privilege. I conclude the chapter by revisiting the theme of spiritual potency and
influence by association through an examination of men’s and women’s perspectives on and experiences of sexuality and affection.

GETTING MARRIED

To foster a more fully contextualized understanding of the gendered relationships between husbands and wives, and how gendered identities are played out and reproduced within these relationships, I provide a generalized overview of how the institution of marriage is arranged and established among the Nùng Fản Sling. My descriptions of how one gets married are drawn from conversations with men and women who had gone through the process, men and women who had been or were currently involved in arranging the marriages of their own children, youth who anticipated marriage, priests who had mediated marriage negotiations and officiated at weddings, and my own observations of and participation in five different weddings.

Engagements

When a boy’s household decides it is time for him to take a wife, often when a boy is in his mid-teens to early twenties and depending on the household’s resources, his parents will go to the homes of girls that the boy likes to inquire about the girl’s eligibility for marriage. Or the parents may ignore their son’s wishes and go find out about the girls they want their son to marry, which was the most common practice in the recent past. (I was told that only in the past ten years have children begun to dare refuse their parents’ choice of marriage partners.) Nowadays, parents typically consult with their children about eligible marriage partners rather than forcing a marriage [ep aũ] because if the groom rejects his bride, or if the bride refuses to take up residence with the groom it becomes, in Pão’s words, “a terrible mess, and a waste of money.” Both young men and women are typically between fifteen and twenty-years-old when their marriage arrangements are made.
After the fifteenth day of the first lunar month (the last day of the New Year holiday), and before the third day of the third lunar month (grave cleaning holiday), boys’ parents can go find out about potential brides. This is called aú mình or aú słoż, which means “getting/taking numbers/destiny/fate.” The boy’s parents then take his numbers and the girls’ numbers to a priest who knows how to “see” or read numbers. After the priest determines which girls would make appropriate matches with the boy, his parents return to the girls’ homes to further discuss the potential match with the girls’ parents. If a girl’s parents approve of the match then the two households discuss money and meat, or in anthropological terms, bride price.

The Nùng term that refers to giving a daughter away in marriage is khai lực sáo, literally translated it means “sell daughter.” The average price for a bride in 2004 was two million VND, and at least one large rotisserie roasted pig.

**Weddings**

The wedding itself takes place over the course of three days. These days are chosen in consultation with a priest, so that the wedding takes place on auspicious days. The first day is a day of preparation at both the groom and bride’s respective homes. This basically involves stockpiling rice liquor, food preparation and preparing the homes to receive guests. The quantity of meat that was agreed upon during the marriage negotiations is prepared at the groom’s house and inspected by the priest who was involved in the marriage negotiations to ensure that the proper amount has been provided. The meat is then offered to the groom’s ancestors by the priest, who prays for luck, success and happiness for the bride and groom. After this offering is complete, the food is taken by the cooks and kitchen helpers to the bride’s house, where it is offered to her ancestors. During any kind of festivities, the lead cooks are always men, with
women serving in the capacity of helpers who perform the menial tasks such as cooking the rice, washing the dishes, and so forth (see Plates 5.1 – 5.2).²⁷

On the second day of the wedding the primary festivities take place at the bride’s home. The groom comes to the bride’s house accompanied by two helper friends or “groom’s assistants.” Friends and family of the bride are gathered and lots of food and liquor has been prepared for the occasion. The large feast is then consumed and many toasts made to the bride and groom’s happiness and success (see Plates 5.3 – 5.7). When the meal is finished, or before the meal commences, depending on personal preference and the tempo of the party when the groom arrives, the groom offers the adult males a drink of rice liquor, a drink of tea and a cigarette (see Plate 5.8). When this is finished the adult males stuff money (small denominations of 1000 or 2000 VND) into one of the empty cups to give to the bride and groom. Then two women from the groom’s side arrive with betel nut that is put into rice bowls with a little fresh tobacco and a cigarette and placed on a mat in the middle of the floor. Then close female friends and family of the bride put money on a collection plate and are given a bowl of betel nut with the tobacco and cigarette by the two women from the groom’s house (see Plates 5.9 – 5.10). During this time the groom is escorted home by his two groom’s assistants. After the bowls of betel nut, tobacco and cigarettes have been distributed, the priest makes a prayer in front of the bride’s family altar for a good union, long life and happiness for the bride and groom. Then two young women from the bride’s side leave for the groom’s house. One of the young women carries a shoulder pole with a container on each end that hold the bride’s blanket, mosquito net, and some personal items. The other young woman carries a sleeping mat that is rolled around two poles that will be used to hang the mosquito net. In the mat is also a stalk of sugar cane, representing sweetness so

²⁷ Although women and children typically prepare the food that sustains daily life in the village, it is generally assumed, at least among the men, that men are inherently better cooks than women. I most often heard men make this claim over daily meals while disparaging the food prepared by their wives and children. So, naturally, men take the lead in preparing important meals. I never heard a woman or child rebuff a patriarch’s criticism of their cooking while he was still present. However, on several occasions, and in the patriarch’s absence I heard women and children grumble, saying things such as, “If he doesn’t like it he can cook for himself.”
that the bride will cook deliciously. These two young women are not allowed to turn around or look back once they leave for the groom’s house—a symbolic cutting of ties with the bride’s natal family. As the bride prepares to leave, the priest makes a prayer into an umbrella that is given to the bride, or one of her escorts to carry to protect the bride from rain or shine as she makes the trek to her husband’s house (see Plate 5.11).

Then, at an auspicious hour appointed by the priest, the bride is escorted halfway to the groom’s house (most often in a different village) by a group of female friends, an adult male relative, and the priest. As the bride leaves her parents’ home she must take care not to step upon the threshold (see Plates 5.12 – 5.13). I was told that if the bride does step upon the threshold it would be like treading on and destroying a retaining wall surrounding a terraced rice paddy. Such a breach in a retaining wall would allow the water and nutrients contained in the rice paddy to flow out, and the crop would be lost. Likewise, if a careless bride steps on her parents’ threshold as she leaves then the wealth and fortunes of the household would flow out after the bride.

After the bride and her escorts reach the halfway point on the journey to the groom’s house, all of her friends except for two helper friends, or “bride’s assistants” return to the wedding party at the bride’s home, and the bride with her two assistants, male protector, and priest finish the journey to the groom’s home. At some point after the halfway mark to the groom’s house, a chicken is sacrificed in order to chase away any spirits of the bride’s natal household that might be following her. This ritual sacrifice is called, song tức pại.

The bride and her entourage sleep at the groom’s house on the night they arrive. The following day is the primary wedding day at the groom’s house. The bride and her entourage participate in the feasting and drinking that take place during the day, and then in the evening they all return to their respective homes. Most often, when the bride’s entourage leaves the wedding party at the groom’s house to return to their home village, the bride also returns to her parents’ home. A bride typically does not take up permanent residency in her husband’s home until several years after the wedding. I will elaborate on this below.
The wedding celebration at the groom’s house looks very similar to the celebration and festivities that took place on the previous day at the bride’s house. The primary differences are the rituals that the priest performs and that it is the bride and her helpers who offer the wine, tea, cigarettes and betel nut to the guests.

The two young women carrying the bride’s belongings arrive at the groom’s house before the bride and put her things in the space that has been set aside for the new bride in the groom’s house. The bride’s space and her bed have been predetermined by the priest, and this is usually in the bride’s/women’s room. If there is no space for her in this room then she is given one of the beds that are often tucked in back and to either side of the household altar and screen. The priest spreads the bride’s sleeping mat out on her bed. The priest sits on the bride’s bed and makes a prayer to the ancestors asking that the bride and groom will be “a good match,” reproductively speaking. Holding a burning joss stick, a bowl of water, and reading from the appropriate prayer/chant book, the priest then cleanses the bed and sleeping mat by drawing any unlucky or bad influences into the bowl of water. The bowl of water represents the ocean—if there is anything bad or unlucky in the bed or sleeping mat they are “buried in the ocean” by the priest. The priest then empties the bowl of water under the bed, dispelling any bad influences.

The priest then makes prayers in all corners of the house to clean it of any bad influences that might otherwise come to the new member of the household. This is also accomplished with a burning joss stick and bowl of water, which are the general spiritual cleansing paraphernalia employed by priests. Then in front of the groom’s family altar the priest offers a chicken, rice, and joss sticks to the ancestors and introduces the new child-in-law (lúc luù) to the ancestors. This introduction can either take place on the night that the bride arrives at the groom’s house or the following day, depending on the priest’s druthers, so long as it is performed before the wedding concludes. Once this is accomplished, the offerings and ceremonies are finished. After this point it is just feasting, drinking
and partying—the Nùng term for “wedding” is kín làu, which literally means, “drink rice liquor.”

At every festive occasion that I ever witnessed, the men and women rarely mingled, and when they did it was mostly for utilitarian purposes (e.g. male and female kitchen helpers interacting to prepare the food; men giving direction to women to bring more chairs, etc.). The men in attendance were always seated with other men at tables set in central spaces that were the focal points of the festive activities. Women were always seated with other women at the margins of the festive spaces, most often at tables that were tucked into corners and side rooms (see Plates 5.3 – 5.4; 5.14 – 5.19). The one exception I ever saw to this arrangement was during the primary wedding day at a bride’s home. At the time, this particular bride was finishing her senior year in high school and many of the guests and friends in attendance were her schoolmates, comprised mostly of Kinh and Tày boys and girls who were socialized in mainstream lowland society. However, it was only the bride’s schoolmates (some of whom were also Nùng kids from the village) who sat, ate, drank and socialized in mixed company (see Plates 5.5 – 5.6).

On a fourth day, after the three days of a wedding have concluded, the groom and a few of his close male relatives and friends return to the bride’s house with some food and rice liquor. This is a ritualized activity that also takes place on an auspicious day appointed by a priest, and is called thọi hòi, or “bride returning ceremony.” If the bride did not return to her parents’ home on the evening of the third day of the wedding, then she accompanies the groom and his entourage on this day. At each of the five weddings I attended, however, the brides all returned to their parents’ homes at the end of the third wedding day. Several married women explained to me that young Nùng couples are extremely shy, the women more so than the men, and no young bride would feel comfortable sleeping in a strange house while only in the company of
strangers. Although this event is called the “bride returning ceremony,” at the two thời I witnessed it was exclusively men who gathered to eat, drink and socialize. When I inquired as to why this was case, I was told that, “this ceremony is basically to keep up good relations between the two households.” When people, male or female, spoke of households it was always in reference to the male members of the patriline.

Females occupy a difficult position in the system of Nùng gender relationships. As daughters, females are viewed as future members of other families: a woman’s labor power will be exploited in the interest of her future husband’s household; her reproductive power only has the potential to produce male members for her husband’s household; and she provides for the needs and wants of her husband’s deceased ancestors. Female offspring do not inherit any property. If a husband and wife do not have any sons they will adopt a son, rather than passing on wealth and property to female offspring, in order to keep wealth and property in the family, i.e., the male members.

As wives or luù (“female relative-in-law”), women do not transcend the position of provisional family member. I often heard married women speak of themselves as outsiders who consumed the resources of a household that was not theirs. I often heard men speak of luù as property, bought and paid for. Although women are responsible for the bulk of physical, agricultural labor, it is the men who own and control the land, as well as the produce thereof. Likewise, women bear the responsibility for the bulk of childcare, however, the children belong to the husband and his patriline. Reproduction was explained to me in agricultural terms: the man plants his seed in the woman, like he would plant a crop seed in his field—the land and the woman belong to the man, as do the fruits thereof.

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28 Trying to get a bride and groom to stand close enough together for a photograph is difficult. I saw this achieved just once, and only after considerable peer pressure was applied by the bride and groom’s lowland Kinh and Tày schoolmates and explanations from me, who happened to be the photographer, that if they wanted a photo together they had to at least stand close enough to both fit in the frame (see Plates 5.20 – 5.21).
The Nùng New Year coincides with the Sino-Vietnamese New Year. This is a very auspicious time of year and also considered to be the spring, carrying notions of new beginnings. Many households purchase piglets at this time (many of the adult pigs have been slaughtered for weddings and other festivities that occur at this time of the year). Pão was planning to purchase some piglets, as all of his adult animals had been sold or slaughtered. I told him that I would like to contribute some money towards the purchase as a New Year’s gesture of goodwill. Thị found out about my offer, and one afternoon, while Pão was away on “business” I recorded the following conversation with her: “Pão told me that you want to help pay for the pigs he is going to buy to wish the household happy New Year.” I confirmed her statement. She then told me, “Do not do this, we do not need you to do this, our household has enough. You are to act like a member of the household.” I told her, “I am behaving like a member of the household by contributing to the household. I know our household has plenty to eat and does not lack anything. The reason I do things for the household is because I like to. I feel more like a member of the household when I contribute to the household. Besides, it is the New Year season.” To this she responded, “I just want to make things easier for you. I know what it is like to be the stranger in a new household, I am luù. The first New Year I celebrated with my husband’s household was no fun. There was duck, chicken and pork to eat, and plenty to drink. The household did not lack anything. But it did not seem like anything at all to me. Everyone was enjoying the celebration and food, but I was the new luù, the stranger, and not truly of the household. After a few years it gets better.”

Thị’s story again speaks to the marginality, underscored by provisionality, of married women. She speaks of her status of a “stranger,” an outsider who does not belong. I believe that Thị, out of empathy, was attempting to console me as an outsider living in a “strange” household with her statement that, “After a few

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29 Men’s business frequently entails socializing and drinking with friends; a necessary activity in the establishment and maintenance of important male networks, which I will elaborate on later.
years it gets better.” However, I got no indication that she had experienced, nor expected any final resolution to her marginal status.\textsuperscript{30}

On another occasion, I was asking Yên about funeral practices, and in the course of our conversation she began describing some of her experiences as a daughter-in-law. This is what she told me:

Joss sticks have to be kept burning continually through each night and day of the funeral. Someone has to stay awake all night to make sure it stays lit, it is like a light for the ghost of the dead person; the joss sticks light the path for the ghost to follow. If it goes out it will be dark and the ghost may loose its way and wander from the path. I had to stay up all four nights\textsuperscript{31} of my father-in-law’s funeral to keep the joss sticks burning. Nobody wants this task because they want to sleep, so it becomes the responsibility of the women, and if there is a daughter-in-law it becomes her responsibility because she is the lowest and she has to be very deferential/humble, respectful and loving of her husband’s parents because she is eating their resources…The daughter-in-law must endure hardship and perform the most miserable tasks because she is not of her husband’s household, she is a stranger in the house but she eats their resources. A husband’s family is very jealous/resentful of a daughter-in-law because she is a stranger eating the family’s resources. When your husband’s family commands you to do something you must suffer them. And they command you to do the hardest tasks and much work because they resent you for eating their resources. But this is the proper way. If you come into a house that is not your own and eat their resources, of course they will be jealous/resentful of you. And because you are eating their resources you have to work very hard for them and know how to love and respect them.

Women are in a double bind in the Nùng system of gender relations. A daughter is only a provisional member of her parents’ household, one day to be sold as a wife. As such, she cannot inherit or lay claim to any of her parents’ resources, property, or wealth. Once married, women become provisional members of “strange” households, where they are constantly made aware that they are being sustained by resources that do not belong to them. However, it did seem to me that women’s status does improve in old age, especially if a woman

\textsuperscript{30} For examples and discussion of Kinh women’s experiences of being daughters-in-law in mainstream Vietnamese society see Luong (2003b) and Ngo thi Ngan Binh (2001).

\textsuperscript{31} Her father-in-law was a priest, and priests’ funerals last four days and nights, in contrast to the typical three days and nights of non-priests’ funerals.
has produced a male heir, who has also taken a wife. In these cases, a woman moves from the status of daughter-in-law, as her parents-in-law have passed away, to that of mother-in-law, though she retains her status of wife, and thus forever remains luù in this regard. Hence, the biggest change in a woman’s status is with regards to her own daughter-in-law. In other words, her status relative to male family members remains the same; her status improves in the sense that there is a new household member who is of lower status than her.

The men I know well in the village are generally respectful of their mothers, and in the sociocultural context of the village it is axiomatic that one’s elders must be respected. However, from my observations, children and adolescents were much more likely to talk back to, criticize or ignore a female elder than a male elder. Furthermore, women-in-law are expected to labor until they are physically unable to do so. I know several grandmothers in their seventies (a ripe, old age in the village) who are responsible for herding the buffalo, cutting and collecting firewood and other forest products, and performing a wide variety of physically demanding chores. Men, on the other hand, slow down considerably once their children are physically able to labor, and channel most of their energy into expanding and maintaining their social networks with other men. I will elaborate on this feature of masculinity in the next chapter.

The young unmarried women with whom I spoke at length took marriage for granted, had high hopes of being matched up with “ideal husbands,” but did not necessarily relish or enthusiastically anticipate becoming a wife and daughter-in-law. Thảo and Thủy explained subversive tactics to me that they could employ in order to thwart the marriage proposals of potential grooms’ households: “If a girl knows that her numbers have matched with a boy’s numbers and his parents are coming to make a marriage proposal she only has to sit out in the courtyard, or someplace the boy’s parents can see easily, and brush her hair, or wash her hair, or something like take care of herself and the boy’s parents will turn right around, go home and not return.” I asked why this is the case. Thảo told me it is simply pễn thĕn (a general term for a “bad sign” encountered when arranging or preparing to arrange a wedding). Thủy, the more
outspoken and socially audacious of the two, said, “It is considered very rude. A good bride should be very shy with her husband’s household [wives are forbidden to even eat at the same table with her male relatives-in-law]. She should be working the fields, collecting firewood, doing kitchen chores, or the like; not grooming herself outside!”

Such subversive tactics, though effective in the short-run, have serious consequences for young women’s future marriage prospects. News travels fast and far in the highlands, and instances of female impropriety were known and recounted far and wide. Just one case of female impropriety can impinge heavily on the reputation of an entire village. A “worst case scenario” had occurred in a neighboring village: a young, unmarried woman had become pregnant. The story told to me on two different occasions, basically goes like this: There were a group of construction workers in the village building a new house. They were Tày and Nùng boys, but they lived down on the paved road (i.e., they lived among the Kinh, and were considered by highland dwellers to have adopted Kinh ways of life). One of these boys started flirting with a girl from the village. He told her that he loved her and planned to marry her, and then he “really touched her.” The girl got pregnant, but by the time she found out, that boy had left and could not be found. The girl was chased from the village, and now no one goes to this particular village to get girls’ numbers anymore. However, this social calamity did not affect the ability of boys from this village to get wives, as I attended two wedding parties at grooms’ homes in this particular village. Likewise, if a girl sabotages a marriage proposal she will get a reputation of being “a bad girl,” which will compromise her marriageability. Although most women I know in Dư Vàng do not romanticize the institution of marriage or the realities of being a wife and daughter-in-law, it is still assumed to be the proper station for women, and men for that matter. The Nùng Fàn Sling term for “making a living” is hết kín [work/do/make eat], and for women this term is used synonymously with being a wife.
SERFING THE GENDER WAVE

Serf: a person in a condition of servitude, required to render services to a lord, commonly attached to the lord’s land...^{32}

(Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1).
http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/serf)

Practically Desire

During my fieldwork I was single, but had a child from my previous marriage (many people in the village had a difficult time coming to terms with my status of a divorced father who had not yet remarried). Although no one encouraged me to find a Nùng wife, many people were adamant that I find a wife and produce a son, and soon. Thị explained to me that, “You have to get married because men can’t exist without a soft female hand to nourish them.” Pão told me that there is no rush, and gave me this perspective on finding a wife:

You do not need to worry because the sea has many fish [this was his metaphor]. As long as you have got property/wealth, or the ability to get this, then it is very easy to get a wife in Viet Nam, or even wives. Even if you are old you can get a young wife because con gái thăm tài, con trai thăm sắc [Vietnamese: girls desire wealth/resources, boys desire beauty]. It does not matter if the man is young, old or ugly. There are many young women looking for husbands and they are afraid of not finding one. If a woman does something you do not like you only have to tell her you are not going to marry her and she will be afraid.

Later, Thị shared with me a view very similar to Pão’s with regards to what men and women desire in a mate:

Women desire property/wealth and men desire beauty. Before I married Pão, my numbers also matched with another man, and his family also asked my parents to buy me as a wife. But I refused the other man because his household had five sons, so the father’s land would have to be divided five ways. Pão’s household only had two sons. A man who has

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^{32} By invoking the term “serf” I do not suggest that Dụ Vãng can serve as an evolutionary window into any political, economic, or social system variously described as feudalism in Medieval Europe. I use this term here as an abstract category because it contains some key elements which point to features that husband-wife relationships seem to share in common among the Nùng Fản Sling.
many sons may be rich because he has many children to labor, but after he is dead and the sons establish individual households they have less land.

Pão and Thị’s comments highlight one of the meanings that marriage holds for Nùng Fản Sling women and men. In economic terms, for women it is the access to means of production, and for men it is the access to labor. In her admonishments to me about finding a wife, Thị also pointed to reasons that went beyond needing “a soft female hand to nourish” me. These other reasons centered on finding a wife who can work and make money for me, and who can bear children for me, especially sons.

What men and women desire in a mate is shaped by their social positions within the patrilineage. Because of women’s provisional status within their own patrilineages, women are divorced from the material resources of her natal family. Although men may generally desire wealth and property, when speaking in reference to finding a mate the amount of property a woman’s family controls is of no consequence. Thus, men, and more specifically young men, desire beauty. Older men, facing the exigencies of married adulthood, heading households, and with aging parents to support, recognize the importance of labor, and the value of a hearty woman who not only provides her own individual labor, but who can produce more labor in the form of children. Having one’s parents choose one’s mate helps to ensure that marriages are engaged on the bases of practicality.

A women, on the other hand, with no claim on her father’s material resources, would desire a husband who has these resources, typically thought of in terms of land in Dụ Vǎng’s agricultural economy, which she can work in order to provide for herself and her children. Although she has no traditional legal claim on her husband’s land, a woman can at least support herself by working it. Serfdom refers to the enforced labor of serfs on the fields of landowners, in return for protection and the right to work on their leased fields. After the death of Yên’s husband, because she had no son, and thus no heir to her husband’s land, her husband’s share of his father’s land reverted back.
to the ownership of the father, and then passed to Pão once the father died. The death of Yên's husband put her in a precarious situation, and could have had disastrous consequences for her. On one occasion she was explaining to me, from the positioned perspective of a widowed daughter-in-law, that if I wanted to avoid being taken advantage of and abused that I had to be a wicked talker. Yên told me that she is a very wicked talker, and in fact she has a reputation as such. She explained her position to me as follows:

If I was not a wicked talker I would suffer abuse from others, other people would dare to treat me very badly. I am luù with no husband and I live alone with only two daughters. After my husband died I had to speak very wickedly with my sister-in-law [Pão's wife, Thị 33] so the household would understand clearly why they should not treat me badly. I told them, "If I want I can leave, I can go back to my parents or go make a living [be a wife] elsewhere and you will have two more children to raise and feed beside the three you already have, and they are both girls. Won't that be very difficult for you? If you treat me well I will stay and raise the two girls and remain in your household." And now you see we two sisters-in-law never fight, and have you ever seen Pão chew me out? I think never. It is because I spoke very wickedly with them that our relationship is so good. Here, it is very difficult for people who are gentle and honest because they are not feared/respected. Others see them as stupid, because if people don't respect/fear you they won't do anything for you, they will only take advantage of you. Here, it is very hard to succeed if you are not feared/respected.

As I alluded to in Chapter One, men are expected to be acerb, or wickedly intelligent and clever in order to earn fuc hâu, or fear/respect; only then can one achieve one's own interests. Yên's statements, however, demonstrate that acerb and fuc hâu are personal attributes that are not exclusively available to or achievable by men; women also have capacities for these. The difference, it seems, is that these desirable personal traits are more readily available to and achievable by men, and thus men are assumed to have greater capacities for them. Women's marginal positions within the patrilineally organized and oriented

33 Direct confrontations between people are rare in Dụ Vãng. Such confrontations make people extremely uncomfortable and result in "lost face" for those involved. Thus, Yên was, in actuality, speaking wickedly to Pão by using Thị as an intermediary. I will return to the use of intermediaries in the next chapter.
society of Dụ Vãng makes it more difficult for them to achieve such desirable characteristics as ạc and fuc hàu, and rarely to the same degree as men. Yên’s statements also highlight that her marginality is underscored by her provisionality in regard to any patrilineage: “If I want I can leave, I can go back to my parents or go make a living elsewhere... If you treat me well I will stay and raise the two girls and remain in your household.” In contrast to the espousals of all of the men I know in Dụ Vãng, Yên’s statements demonstrate that she does not share the same sense of connectedness to or permanence within any particular patrilineage. Connectedness to, permanence within, and continuity of the patrilineage are of utmost importance to men and defining features of masculinity among the Nùng Fản Sìng.

The difficult situation in which Yên found herself upon the death of her husband was eventually mitigated against by Thị and Pão giving their youngest son, Út, to Yên in adoption. This solution served the interests of all parties involved. It gave Yên’s deceased husband a male heir, and gave Yên a more substantial claim to her place in Dụ Vãng. Also, it did not infringe upon the inheritance of either of Thị and Pão’s male offspring. Út would inherit his adoptive, deceased father’s land, and Hùng would inherit Pão’s land. This situation actually worked in the favor of Thị and Pão’s male offspring. If Yên would have had a biological son, he would have inherited Yên’s deceased husband’s land, while Út and Hùng would have had to divide Pão’s land between the two of them.

Marriage and the relationships it engenders between men and women are most often viewed in terms of practicality, not in terms of romance, love, or companionship. But the practicalities of men and women are constructed differently. Men, from positions of permanence and gendered preeminence within the patrilineage, view practicality in terms of ownership: owning the resources and needing a labor force to make those resources productive. Women, from positions of provisionality and gendered marginality within the patrilineage, view practicality in terms of no ownership, thus needing to produce for owners by working the owners’ resources. Hence the temptation to conceive of the Nùng
institution of marriage and the gender relations it reproduces as serfdom. The two do share several key components in common, at a conceptual level. However, husbands are also expected to contribute their own labor to the maintenance of the household.

Păo and numerous other men in the village, including myself, often enjoyed smoking from a điếu cày\textsuperscript{34} (a water pipe made from a length of bamboo and used to smoke tabacco) while socializing over tea and/or rice liquor. Much to Păo’s delight, I purchased one at the local market and brought it home. Not long afterwards, I was told by Păo’s wife and children not to encourage Păo’s bad habits—the tobacco bong in particular. In Păo’s presence, Thị told me that Păo is getting older and he is not as strong and healthy as he used to be so he has to be careful with his health. I turned to Păo and commented, “Do you see yet? Your wife and children are worried about you. They really do care for you.” Thị matter-of-factly corrected me and said, “Actually, I’m worried that his health will decline and he won’t be able to help me work. We [Thì and the kids] are afraid that we’ll have to work harder than we do now if Păo’s health is lost and he can no longer labor.” I shortly got rid of the điếu cày, and was afterwards chastised by several of Păo’s brothers, who frequently visited, for my “weakness of suffering to hear/heed a woman’s words.”

The amount of labor any one husband does contribute varies from one individual to the next. However, from my observations, my conversations with women and men about work, and in accompanying both men and women to work, it is women who perform the bulk of the labor necessary to maintain a household, including agricultural labor and domestic chores. In addition to marriage being viewed in practical terms of labor and access to resources, both men and women view marriage in terms of a “retirement plan,” which extends to issues of spiritual practicality as well—having one’s ghost provided for in the afterlife.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Điếu cày} is a Vietnamese word, but I never learned the Nùng term for this kind of water pipe, as everyone in the village only referred to it by its Vietnamese name.
Everyone I spoke with about the arrangement of children’s marriages, including parents who had recently arranged marriages (Đức and his wife, Trang, and Lợi and his wife, Ngọc), those who were anticipating marriage arrangements in the not-to-distant future (Thị, Pão, Đông, and Yên), and a young newly-wed couple (Ven and her husband, Tục) talked about what was considered a recent development in Dụ Vãng. Namely, that a marriage does not happen if the groom and bride to be do not agree to the match. However, these same people also told me that children should not refuse their parents’ wishes and demands. During one of our many conversations about marriage, Thị reiterated that she and Pão are not, nor never were lovers, saying, “What would someone who is handsome like Pão be doing marrying someone ugly like me? You get married and stay married to appease parents, and when parents are gone [i.e., dead] a husband and wife usually have children. After children people rarely ever split up—because that’s what marriage is truly about, having children.” I said, “yes, but husbands and wives can still live together and get along.” To which Thị responded:

Sure, you sometimes argue and fight, like husbands and wives everywhere do—some more than others—but you don’t go together [i.e., hang-out]. You never see a husband and wife go to market together, go to work together or go play together. You do these things separately and with the people you like [i.e., friends of the same sex]. Even if both me and Pão are going to market Pão will take the motorbike and I’ll walk. If he passes me on the road he doesn’t pick me up. But I don’t want to go with him on the motorbike, I don’t want him to pick me up. I’d rather walk and talk with my friends [i.e., other women]. We live separately [i.e., lead separate lives] because we want to.

Again, the point being made was that marriage is about practical concerns, not about love or companionship. On another occasion, I was speaking with Thi and Phương, and Thi asked me, “Over there [i.e., the West], when a wife dies does a husband remarry?” I answered, “Yes, often a husband will remarry. And if the husband dies the wife will often remarry.” Phương was incredulous, and earnestly asked, “Even if she has children?!” I said “yes.” Phương replied, “Here, the men remarry immediately, they don’t
know how to love children very well, they only want a wife. A woman will remarry if she doesn't have children, but if she already has children what does she need a husband for? Women know how to love their children well.”

Marriage is about access to resources, but it is also about having children. In Dụ Vãng, once you have your first child you are called by your first child's name, preceded by the appropriate personal term of address. But even personal terms of address are determined by your children, or by your parental status. For example, you call others by the kin term your children use to address them. My hosts, Păo and Thị, are older than I am, but they call me xúc [father's younger brother] because this is how their children should refer to me. Thị and Phương’s statements, recounted above, frame marriage in terms of practical matters of labor and reproduction. Their statements also illustrate the exclusivity of gendered social life in Dụ Vãng.

**Exclusivity of Gendered Social Spheres**

People would often explain the social practices I observed in Dụ Vãng by way of contrast and comparison. Thị explained the exclusivity of gendered social life by way of contrast with the Kinh and Yao: “Nùng husbands and wives aren't like the Kinh and the Yao. Here, husbands and wives sleep and work separately so when one goes away they don't miss each other. Đi thì đi, quay về thì về, không quay về thì thôi” (in this instance, Thị used the Vietnamese rendition of the Nùng, Páy dụ páy, mừ dự mừ, mi mừ dự thơ: “If you are going to go, then go. If you are going to come home, then come home. If you do not come home, then that’s all”). From the perspectives of the women with whom I spoke at length about marriage, husbands are viewed in terms of providing resources, children, and hopefully help with agricultural work. The women I know in Dụ Vãng seem to expect little else from a husband. When these basic expectations are not met, the most common recourse I saw and heard women take was attempting to bring social pressure to bear on a husband by telling anyone who would listen about the bad habits of a husband.
Several married women, as well as adolescent children, explained to me on a number of occasions that when a man says he is going to work in the fields or forests he will always stop in at brothers' and friends' homes to visit, drink and smoke, and accomplish very little actual work. A common joke among women and children is that the household patriarch’s forest knife is always just as sharp when he returns home as it was when he left. On the days that I remained at home to write, organize fieldnotes and the like, I would receive a steady flow of visitors; the vast majority of whom were married men in their late thirties and upward, and who wandered freely in and out of one another's homes, as they had been doing since childhood. The women and children I knew well were quite resentful of this masculine practice, mostly because it meant they had to pick up the slack and work harder. One evening after dinner, two of Pão’s brothers, Đức and Sơn, came over to visit. Sơn was notorious for going visiting and playing after telling his household he was going to work. He told the other two men, “Can you hear my wife scolding me at night? The past few days she has been scolding me too much! She scolds me because I work so hard during the day, expending all of my strength so when she requires sex I do not have the strength to fuck her!” Pão and Đức thought this was hilarious. After a hearty laugh, Pão announced that they had some unspecified business to attend to (i.e., going visiting and socializing), and the three of them left. After they were gone, Thị was beside herself with anger, and said to me:

They spoke very rudely! The real reason Sơn’s wife was scolding him is because he does not help with work. He tells his wife and children that he is going to work in the fields or work in the forest and then goes visiting and playing and then he scolds his wife and children, he even hits his wife, if they do not finish all of the work! He goes playing at night until very late, and gets up whenever he likes, usually very late. It is very rude for them to talk like that!

I often heard women criticize their husbands, and children criticize their fathers, however, they would rarely make these criticisms while the man they were criticizing was present. Rather than direct confrontation, wives would
often make their dissatisfaction known through less direct routes, such as talking to others, which talk almost always finds its way to the intended recipient in village society. On the very few occasions that I did hear a child criticize or oppose his or her father, the criticisms or oppositions were met with scathing rebukes that sent the children scurrying away in tears. More often I heard wives criticize their husbands in the man’s presence, however, such criticisms were often simply ignored, or at least went unanswered. During one of Thị’s interrogations of me about male-female relationships in the West, she told me, as I was told by other men and women in the village, “Men should not listen to their wives, they should do what they like because they are men. Here if a man suffers to hear his wife then he is not a good man.” Both men and women spoke of cohabiting peaceably, or at least the possibility of peaceable cohabitation. It seemed to me that this was often achieved by husbands and wives leading, to a large degree, separate social lives: men often spoke of ignoring women, and women tried to stay out of their husband’s way.

One cold, winter afternoon, I sat huddled in Yên’s kitchen with Yên and her neighbor Bế, a married woman in her early forties, eating sticky rice cakes and recording some of Yên’s seemingly endless stories. On this occasion, Yên was relating a story that went like this: “Some people came to the village looking for Mr. Lợi [the commune People’s Committee secretary]. They came to Mr. Lợi’s house, but only his wife was home. They asked if she knew where Mr. Lợi lives, and she told them to go ask someone else because she didn’t want to say her husband’s name.” I interrupted Yên and asked “why?” She told me that, “In the old days wives were too shy to speak their husband’s name, and the old women are still like that.” I pressed her further, and asked “Why were wives too shy to speak their husband’s name?” But both Yên and Bế said they were just too shy. They told me that “nowadays wives dare to speak their husband’s name, it was just in the old days that they didn’t.” At this point, we were joined by two other women: the same older woman Yên had been telling the story about, a sixty-two-year-old named Ngọc, and Tùng’s younger sister, Qúy, a married woman in her
late twenties who had not yet moved into her husband’s household. These two women sat down by the fire and chatted for a bit. I then took a chance and asked Ngọc what her husband’s name is. She gruffly replied, “If you want to know go to my house and look at one of the certificates on the wall.” I asked her why she could not simply tell me, and she told me, “Women are too shy to speak their husband’s name.” I asked her what she called him then, and she replied, “I don’t call him!” All of the women present burst out laughing. Ngọc continued, “Doing that would be like a mouse calling a cat!” I said, “you have to call him something.” She conceded that, “before children you call your husband ni [informal you], after children you call him your child’s father. But women are afraid of their husbands like a mouse is afraid of a cat.” Yën added:

Like I am afraid of a tiger when I go into the forest. If a wife dares to call her husband then that means she would dare talk to him, and if she dares talk to him he might sleep with her. Even if a woman dares sit by the fire with her husband she’ll only stare at the ground or the fire, she won’t look at her husband because it might make him see that she wants to talk, and if they talk he might want to sleep with her, and women are afraid to sleep with men. If a woman sleeps next to a man she doesn’t sleep, she doesn’t dare to.

When women spoke to me about their studied avoidance of their husbands, I initially thought they were putting on airs of being proper Nùng women: shy, deferential, reserved, and repulsed by physical intimacy with men. However, as my observations of and conversations with men about their relationships with their wives continued to accumulate, women’s studied avoidance took on a more concrete reality beyond that of putting on “good face.”

Middle-aged married men were quite positive about marriage. Although I heard many of these men speak about the sexual perks of marriage, they spoke of this subject less often than the younger men, and as demonstrated above, sometimes used the topic to make jokes about their wives. Rather, middle-aged married men spoke of marriage in terms of their children and wives’ labor power. For example, one afternoon I was drinking with Păo and Tĭng, a middle-aged
married man, who in recent years had moved out of Dụ Vãng. Keeping in mind that several rounds of rice liquor had been consumed and we were all hận tập heng (see/feel liver strong—“feeling strong livered” or “feeling bold/courageous”), here is an excerpt from our conversation:

I moved out to the paved road because it is too difficult to make a living in the village, but here they are still my brothers and my house remains open all day to my brothers from Dụ Vãng. I continually have guests. In one day I expend at least three liters of rice liquor and three to four packs of cigarettes. But that is no worry because I have a wife and my children are grown so I can stay home and play all day. If I want something I send the children to get it. If there is work to be done I command my wife and children to do it.

Pão nodded and grunted his agreement, and I remarked that, “Your life is very easy because your wife does all the work for you.” Tìng responded adamantly, saying:

That is the way it is! I bought her, I gave her parents 100 kilograms of pork—she does not weigh that much! I own her flesh and her hair. She is my servant! If there is selling to be done in Lộc Bình she goes to Lộc Bình, if the selling is in Lạng Sơn she goes to Lạng Sơn. And when she gets home she has to give me her flesh three times if I want. I gave her parents three roasted pigs, and who knows how much money, and now she is at my house, eating my resources. I bought her, of course she has to serve me, for what other reason did I buy her?!

I said, “With all that work she is sure to get old fast.” To this Pão responded, “No problem, if it breaks down then buy a new one.” Tìng added, “That is right, buy an eighteen-year-old, a younger one who is tighter, softer and healthier.”

From my experience, men viewed marriage more enthusiastically than women, often speaking of the opportunities for leisure that their wives’ and children’s labor afforded them. Women also confirmed this gendered arrangement of duties and freedoms that accompanied the positions of husbands and wives, telling me “men are players, women are workers.” This local conceptual framing of women as commodified labor, which recalls images of serfdom, opens up increased opportunity for masculine leisure and social
networking, which opportunities were almost always taken advantage of in exclusively masculine social spheres.

DIVORCE

Once a marriage proposal has been accepted and the marriage accomplished, young men and women are still able to sabotage the arrangement. Thị explained to me that:

When I was young, newly married couples did not dare split up, did not dare go against their parents’ wishes. Nowadays, it is quite common, it seems that all young couples split up, before they have children, that is. Once there are children, husbands and wives rarely ever split up. If a boy loves another girl, and wants to marry her instead, or if the girl is waiting too long to move into her husband’s household, the boy only needs to take the bride’s sleeping mat, mosquito net and other things that were brought to the groom’s house, and drop them in front of bride’s parents’ door. A boy will usually do this without letting his household know. He gathers up the bride’s things and quietly goes out at night while everyone in the house is sleeping. This stops the marriage. Nowadays you have to let the kids marry who they want, as long as their numbers match, if you force them it is pointless and complicated.

A woman cannot directly enact a divorce. Several middle-aged married women told me that when they were adolescents of marriageable age, the only way out of a marriage arrangement for a girl was suicide. They then recounted a story of a young woman they had personally known who had thrown herself into the river rather than accept the marriage arrangements made by her parents. Yên’s attempt to end her own marriage illustrates how difficult it is for a woman to escape an unwanted marriage, unless the man also objects to the match and takes action to scuttle it.

When speaking of divorce, the Nùng use either the term tô bồ (with tô meaning “together/each other” and bồ “to discard/dump”), or the term tô lữ (with

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35 I was told that rarely a man will “chase his wife home” (i.e., back to her parents) after they have children. If this occurs, the children stay with their father, because they are “of the man’s seed” and belong to his household. I asked Pão if Yên went to the south would he have allowed her to take her daughters. He answered with a resounding “No. They are only girls, but they are of their father’s household.”
lữ referencing “surplus/extra/left over”). The use of the term tô can mislead one to assume that divorce is a mutual act in which both parties equally discard each other. According to the women and men I spoke with about the topic, only a man can discard his wife, a woman cannot discard her husband. However, a woman can goad her husband into discarding her. In Pão’s estimation, nowadays parents have to seriously consider the possibility of divorce when arranging their children’s marriages. He told me:

Nowadays, it is a pointless waste to force your daughter into a marriage. If you take the money of the groom’s household and then the girl refuses to move into his household it becomes very difficult; it is like if someone buys a product, gives the seller the money and then the seller does not give the buyer the product. If the bride refuses to go the husband will eventually get frustrated and angry, he will take the bride’s blanket and mosquito net and dump them in front of her parents’ house. The groom’s household will require the bride’s household to return the money, but the bride’s household, of course, does not want to return the money and often tells the groom’s household that, ‘it is your son, your household that discarded the bride.’ Do you see how difficult this situation can be?

As evidenced by the above excerpts, women and men understand differently the burden of responsibility in regards to divorce. Women would often include in their talk the possibility of a boy being the agent responsible for a divorce: “If a boy loves another girl...and wants to marry her instead.” But women also recognized that the burden of responsibility may rest with the girl: “if the girl is waiting too long to move into her husband’s household.” Men, on the other hand, emphasized the difficulties of trafficking in willful commodities, and tended to place the burden of responsibility on recalcitrant brides.

I had heard of one young woman in the village who refused to move in with her husband, and another young woman who it seemed had been discarded by her husband. I was never able to learn the details of any particular case, as it was a very sensitive subject and source of embarrassment and shame for the entire village. I had the opportunity to briefly speak with these young women’s male relatives about the matter—one of the young woman’s father, and both of their paternal grandfathers. I was able to gather that at least one of the young
women refused to move in with her husband. This young woman’s father was somewhat apologetic of his daughter, saying, “She is too shy to move in with her husband.” However, he also criticized her for not listening to her parents’ wishes and causing a shameful and difficult situation for the family. This young woman’s grandfather was less sympathetic, shaking his head and roundly criticizing her for being a “disobedient, no-good girl.” The other grandfather I spoke with was not fond of the subject either. When he spoke to me about it, he diverted his eyes to the floor, which signaled to me his extreme discomfort since I am many years his junior. While still looking at the floor, he shook his head slowly and grumbled about his frustration with the situation. I did not linger on the subject with him.

The consequences of divorce weigh more heavily on women than men. If a man discards his wife the primary difficulty his family faces is having to pay another bride price; explained to me as, “a waste of money.” If a woman refuses to move into her husband's household the groom’s family will demand that the bride price be refunded. Perhaps more importantly, if a new bride refuses her marriage it brings shame on her entire family, and jeopardizes her future marriage prospects, and thus her position, as marginal as it may be, in Nùng society.

One afternoon I was speaking with Đức and Thị. Thị was explaining to me that, “If a woman has already been married and discarded and then marries again then the groom’s household only has to pay half the money of what they would normally give if she had not been married already—even if she does not have any children.” Đức interrupted and, grinning broadly, explained it to me thus:

It is like buying a used product, something that has been used by another man already. Like this teapot here; it is dirty from being used, the lid does not fit tightly and the handle is no longer firm. Do you see how it is loose? If you are buying something that has been used by another man already and it is loose and worn out then you do not pay full price.

36 As a sign of deference, younger people commonly divert their gaze from an elder’s face, not vice versa.
Thị, brushing past Đức’s lurid analogy, added, “It is not always the case that a [divorced] woman has ‘done something’ with her husband, maybe she never went near him. But how can other people know for sure? The only proof they have are the woman’s words, so they still only pay half price.”

As provisional members of a society structured around the patrilineage, women and girls are devalued. Đức, a man, explains brides in terms of commodity value, and devaluation if one is trafficking in “used” commodities. Although Thị, a woman, rejects this metaphor, she still speaks of women in terms of devaluation with regards to a “woman’s words,” and alludes that such words carry little credence.

A divorce that happens because of a bride’s refusal to move into her husband’s household does not usually happen until several years after the marriage. As I mentioned above, a bride does not move into her husband’s household until several years after the wedding has been accomplished. Or, more accurately, a new bride does not move to her husband’s house until after she becomes pregnant. The soonest I had heard of a bride moving in with her husband was five years after they had been married. A bride’s refusal to move in with her husband, therefore, may not become clear to a groom for quite some time. The men I know in the village made it very clear to me that the most desirable brides were in their late teens to early twenties, “young, fresh faced, fat/healthy.” By the time a groom divorces a hesitant bride she may very well be in her mid to late twenties, and her age may compound her undesirability, or value, as a potential wife for secondary suitors. A woman’s place and ability to make a living, or hết kín, in village society is seriously compromised if she is rejected by a husband, or rejects her station of wife.

SEXUALITY AND MASCULINE AFFECTION

I conceive of “sexuality” as how people experience and express themselves as sexual beings. In this section I explore sexuality, but do so from the perspective that sexual experiences are had, and sexual expressions are
made in the context of gendered relationships. Thus, these constituents of sexuality are not naturally occurring facts of nature, but are shaped by cultural assumptions and reproduced in configurations of social practices that are premised on said assumptions.

Men and women were never described to me as one being more inclined towards sex than the other. In other words, men were not described as having larger sexual appetites than women, and *vice versa*. However, men and women did have different perspectives about sex, and when talking to me they conveyed different sexualities, in that they expressed themselves and talked about their experiences as sexual beings differently. Women most often would speak of sex in terms of reproduction. Men also spoke of sex in terms of reproduction, usually by way of agricultural analogy, such as, “The deeper you drive your plow blade, the better the crop.” More often, when I heard men speak of sex, they spoke of their own physical pleasure. I never did hear a woman even imply physical pleasure in reference to sex. Despite these differences, both men and women seemed to agree that a person should be conservative with regards to the amount and frequency of sexual activity. But men and women emphasized different reasons that one should practice sexual restraint.

**Sexual Conservation: Masculine Perspectives**

One evening I was at home making rice liquor with Pão. He was asking about male-female sexual relationships in the West, my own personal sex life, and giving me advice about women in general. He admonished me that, “Sleeping with women a lot is dangerous because it is a serious drain on a man’s health and energy...Once in a while is OK, but doing it very often will expend much strength/health.”

Men’s talk about sex was always tempered with an undercurrent of avoiding the weakening influences of women. I have previously indicated that the Nùng Fân Sling assume that women have weak numbers. As well, people in Dự Vǎng have deeply held beliefs about influence by association. In other words, two things that come into contact will exchange essences, or each will influence
the other. For example, after Pão and I had purchased some piglets I lifted them into their pen. Thị was pleased with this, telling me, “now the pigs will grow up well-behaved like you, they will know the right place to shit, and the right place to sleep.” Afterwards, Yên was eager to have me help her put her pigs in their pen so that the pigs would “grow big and healthy/strong.” Thus, if a man spends any length of time in the company of women he is at risk of absorbing female weakness, diminishing his spiritual potency, and making him more susceptible to ghost bites and other misfortunes.

A contributing factor to women’s spiritual weakness, I was told on a number of occasions, is the fact that they menstruate. A woman’s reproductive organs are perceived as a source of her lesser strength, health and weak spiritual influence. The formal Nùng Fản Sling term for “vagina” is ầnhỉ, with ậ n being the classifier for inanimate objects, or “things” and ’hỉ, when used alone, meaning “fearful/afraid.” Coming into contact with female genitalia is what will drain a man’s strength and health, not the physical activity of sexual intercourse. Framed in terms of yin-yang theory, the dangers of sexual intercourse for men are the loss of strong and healthy male essences and the absorption of weaker female essences (Louie 2002).

Young married men, whose wives had taken up residence with them, spoke happily of having a sexual outlet. On a few occasions I heard young married men excitedly tell of how they had woken up in the night or early morning with an erection (a sign of male vigor and health) but did not have to suffer the discomfort because they were able to “đâm vợ mấy phát lại đi ngủ” [Vietnamese: “hit my wife a few times and go back to sleep”]. Despite these young men’s enthusiasm for sex, sexual moderation was a prominent theme in their banter—as for their actual practice, I cannot say. Several times I observed young married men arriving late for or leaving early from lion dance practices, and other male gatherings. These late arrivals or early departures were often met with taunts or criticisms from other young men, such as, “Where are you going? Home to sleep with your wife?”, or, “Ah ha, you must have woken up with an erection so you hit your wife a few times before coming.” Again, I emphasize that such comments
were given as criticisms and taunts, not compliments or grounds for boasts. After all, a proper man should be keeping the company of and socializing with "brothers," not exposing himself to the weakening influences of women, and possibly carrying those influences to other men. Although sexual moderation and restraint is a social maxim in Dụ Văng, it did not deter men from talking openly, and in vivid detail with other men about sex.

I was attending the funeral of a neighbor in Dụ Văng. Three of the village’s priests were working the funeral: Păo, Linh, and Căo (Linh’s younger brother). A typical funeral of a married adult with children lasts three days. Priests are integral to a funeral’s proceedings, and the priests officiating at a funeral are deeply engaged with the ritual event for its entire duration. Priests occupy a special space in the home where a funeral takes place; set in one of the front corners of a house’s main living room on a reserved mat with a portable priests’ altar. The priests are accoutered with all of the necessary priestly paraphernalia, and well supplied with rice liquor, tea, cigarettes, fruit, and other snacks (see Plate 5.22). At this particular funeral, the three priests invited me to sit with them on their mat, which I did. At this point in the funeral the priests were chanting as relatives and friends of the deceased took turns approaching the coffin, which occupies the center of the main living room, to make offerings of rice liquor, burning joss sticks, and bowing to venerate the deceased’s ghost. During such chanting phases in a funeral ritual, only one or two of the priests will chant at any given time, taking turns to allow each other to rest their voices so they do not go hoarse from chanting for three days. While resting, the priests who are not chanting will talk, joke, and even laugh for a bit before resuming the chant and allowing the other a respite.

It was during one of Linh’s breaks that he picked up an empty tea cup and plucked a marigold flower from the priests’ altar. He then turned to me, and grinning broadly he inserted the flower, petals first, into the tea cup, rotated it back and forth inside the cup, and asked me if I had done this to Lê. I was a little surprised at his choice of topic, given the particular setting, and also surprised that he asked in a voice loud enough for those around us to hear. I told him, “no.”
Linh’s question provoked a chuckle from Pão, who also was not chanting at that point, and a big grin from Cão, who still was chanting. Linh then turned the tea cup upside down, pushed the flower against the upturned bottom of the tea cup, and still grinning broadly said, “this is what it would be like if you tried this with Lê. I’d have to break the cup to get the flower in, and you’d have to tear Lê to get in.” All three priests burst into laughter at Linh’s joke, entirely stopping the chant and momentarily interrupting the flow of the offerings being made while they recomposed themselves. Completely caught off my guard, I just sat there, red-faced, laughing softly and slowly shaking my head at the strangeness of it all.

Around noon, all of the funeral participants take a break to eat lunch. After I had finished eating, Linh and Cão led me into some shade just below the house and asked me to teach them the English terms for a variety of sexual acts and experiences, such as “sex,” as well as their impolite equivalents, if any, such as “fuck.” As we exchanged crudities and their explanations, we were joined by several other men who were also attending the funeral. The Nùng terms that I understood to mean “sex” or “have sexual intercourse” were tô ê, tô khòn, tô pít, tô heo, and tô đầu, with some being considered more vulgar expressions than others. The group of men probed me for a detailed explanation of what exactly “sex” and “fuck” mean. I explained that it entails “putting it in and moving it back and forth.” But these men told me that the Nùng terms I knew were not the same thing as the English words I was teaching them. I was told that “fuck” and “sex” refer to simply “putting it in,” and that is not what the Nùng term ê (the most popular term for “sex” among the men) referred to. One of the men, who was visiting from another village and whose name I never learned, said, “That’s not the good part. You put it in, then pull it back, then push it in to arrive at ê, suông” (suông is a Vietnamese word that literally means “elated/elation” and is used informally to mean “orgasm” or “sexual pleasure”). The men all agreed that this is what “sex” is, and this is what they wanted to learn to say in English. So I taught them “orgasm” and “cum,” and for the sake of easy pronunciation, they all abandoned trying to remember “orgasm” in favor of
“cum.” They then moved on to phrases that translated more directly into English, such as the phrase that describes when a man pushes a woman down to have sex, for which specific situation the Nùng have two phrases: cảm tôi mê, or tôi phóng để tôi mê; and how to command a woman to kín vây ngô, or “eat my dick.”

The physical intercourse that culminates in orgasm is not understood by these men as “sex,” at least not in the way I understand “sex.” The way these men described it to me is that orgasm alone constitutes sex, which apparently is the focus of male sexual activity. Based on the assumptions about the negative consequences of keeping company with women, beliefs around the transference of essences via physical contact, and how men conceived and talked about “sex,” I imagine that men would want to achieve ê, or get to “the good part” as quickly as possible in order to avoid prolonged contact with female genitalia. The ways in which we talk about the world often reflect the ways we conceive of and experience the world. Although the ways that men talk about sexual activity is most likely not a mirror image of concrete practice, it does provide a reflection or a window, however blurred, that allows us to glimpse the general contours of things. In addition, the ways that women expressed themselves sexually, and talked about their experiences of sex, though much more censored than the men, helps to round out a fuller and more grounded understanding, and heightens the resolution of these shadowy contours of sexuality among the men and women of Dụ Vãng.

**Sexual Conservation: Feminine Perspectives**

One cold and windy afternoon, I was sitting by the cooking fire with Thị and Lão (Pão’s mother) talking about weddings, as I had recently been invited to my first Nùng wedding. They were describing common wedding festivities that take place at the groom’s house once the bride has arrived. They explained to me that the house would be full of guests, many of whom would stay the night at the groom’s house, and that the party could last late into the night. I sounded as though there would be little opportunity for privacy and I inquired about the bride and groom sleeping together on the wedding night. Thị said, “They do not sleep
together for a long time. They are very shy and do not even dare talk to each other. Five to ten years after they get married do they sleep together, and only to have children.” I then asked about young, unmarried lovers sleeping together, and Thị told me, “Lovers may get together to talk or flirt, but you only sleep with your husband or wife.” I commented that, “Here I see that husbands and wives don’t sleep together, you don’t sleep with your husband.” Thị responded, “I only like to sleep with girls. I have no desire to sleep with a man—they stink, they smell of liquor and smoke. And what’s more, my husband is a priest and he especially must observe the taboos of this place. You sleep together in order to have children, after you have children then what do you need to sleep together for?” I answered, “For fun!” Thị firmly replied, “No. Maybe there are husbands and wives who choose to sleep together, but Pاؽ’s household properly observes the taboos of this place because he is a priest. We sleep together to have children but that’s it.” I started doing math out loud, “Your youngest child is 10 years old. You and your husband haven’t slept together for 10 years?” Thị said, “That’s right. I only sleep with the children, and men won’t suffer to sleep with babies because it would be very bothersome when the baby wakes up because it’s hungry, or when it goes pee in the night. The men won’t stand for this.”

At this point in our conversation, we had been joined by Yên, and Pاؽ’s niece, Qúy. Yên, lending her support to Thị, added, “I was married for ten years before I slept with my husband.” I again did the math: Yên got married when she was sixteen-years-old, she was forty years old at the time of the conversation, and her oldest child was sixteen years old, which works out to be roughly eight years after her marriage that she became pregnant for the first time. I then asked Qúy how long she had been married. She said to me, anticipating my follow up questions, “I have been married five years, I do not have any children yet, I have not slept with my husband, I still live with my parents and you only sleep with your husband to have children.” They all agreed with Thị’s statement that, “If you have miscellaneous sex with your husband or wife the ghosts will punish you, even to the point of death.” I told
them that I had had lots of “miscellaneous sex” with my wife and the ghosts never punished me. Thị explained:

The ghosts here are different, more harsh and wicked. The ghosts of the Kinh are also different. Here, we have to live according to the local Nùng ghosts, and the thổ côống [the paramount ghost of the village, or the principal male ancestor of the village] is a harsh one. If we do not observe the taboos and follow the customs of this place the thổ côống will punish us. People who have two children have slept together twice, three children then three times.

I responded by saying, “You do not get pregnant every time you have sex.” They all laughed and Thị continued:

Yes, but you only have sex to have to children. You have to believe us, you have seen it for yourself. You have been in this house how many months and have you ever seen me sleep with my husband? This young girl here has been married five years and does not have any children because she has not slept with her husband. Do you believe us yet?

I told them that I did, and was worried that my belaboring the topic might make the women present uncomfortable, so I changed the subject back to the wedding festivities.

These women’s perspectives on, and experiences of sex was again reiterated during my conversation with sixty-two-year-old Ngọc about being afraid to call her husband’s name, part of which I have recounted above. Towards the end of that same conversation, I asked Ngọc how old she was when she got married, and she said seventeen. I asked how old she was when she had her first child, she said twenty-four. I got a strong impression from married women that they really had no desire to have sex with men for anything but practical reasons. However, I was still uncertain about how a woman would become pregnant in the first place if she was not sleeping in her husband’s house.

Several months later, Thị was talking to me about being a wife and daughter-in-law. She said:

In the beginning it’s very hard to be luù [the bride and daughter-in-law] because you are in a house that is not yours and you are with a family that
is not your family. Of course, at first you do not move in completely, but you have to go and help your husband’s family with work, as well as still working for your own family. You do not move in with your husband’s family until you get pregnant, and then you are carrying a member of your husband’s household, and that new member of your husband’s household, of course, must stay in the husband’s household, therefore, so must you.

I asked, “If you are not yet living and sleeping in your husband’s household how do you get pregnant?” She said:

Sometimes you have to work your husband’s fields until dark, and then there is dinner to be made, dishes to wash and other household work to be done, most of this the new daughter-in-law must do. If you do not, people will criticize you and say that you are a lazy, no-good bride. When all this work is finished it is late, it is time to sleep, very dark, you are exhausted and your parents’ home is a far walk away, and no woman would dare to go alone in the dark; there will perhaps be ghosts out and women are more easily bitten than men because they have weaker numbers than men. So you sleep at your husband’s house, there has been a bed set aside for you since the wedding. In the wee hours when the household is asleep your husband will quietly come to your bed. And then he goes back to sleep in his own bed. Nùng husbands and wives are very shy.

The social distance and gendered avoidance, underscored by the spiritual pitfalls of transgressing this distance and avoidance, that marks gender relationships between men and women also shapes how men and women express and experience themselves as sexual beings. Nùng women are supposed to be reserved, shy, and almost repulsed by men. They are supposed to show no public affection towards men, no passion, but fear and deference. But more than simply being based on beliefs of spiritual impropriety, that women’s sexuality tends toward aversion is most likely a product of their lived experiences as well. Men talk bluntly about sex, and they do so frequently, sometimes in the presence of women and children. But included in this banter are admonishments to practice restraint, or at least moderation. Like women, men are not supposed to show affection towards lovers, fiancés, or spouses. When men talked about sex in terms other than practical reproduction the focus was on male physical pleasure: discretely closing the distance long enough to “hit your wife a few
times,” achieve ê, and then withdraw to one’s own bed. Indeed, on many occasions while watching TV dramas that depicted men and women kissing each other, the Dụ Vãng audience would get looks of disgust on their faces, and often turn to me and ask, “Why do Westerners and Kinh like to bite each other so much?”

**Masculine Affection**

Although publicly displaying affection towards members of the opposite sex is seen as “ugly” in Dụ Vãng, physical affection between men is frequently displayed publicly. My observations and experiences of male to male physical affection were at first disorienting. I first witnessed this kind of affection between adolescent boys. Not only did boys playfully wrestle with one another, but during less energized times would loosely and casually embrace one another, and sometimes playfully squeeze each other’s genitals. Although this behavior had caught my attention on occasion, I never paid it much mind until I started noticing similar behavior among adult men, who when interacting with each other would often do so in very close physical proximity with frequent physical contact.

During my time Dụ Vãng, I accompanied Pão to several ău hồn, or “calling the spirit home” ceremonies that are performed on behalf of sick people whose spirits have wandered. On one of these occasions we were in the home of a sick man in a neighboring village. I was sitting on the edge of one of the beds in the main living room of the sick man’s home, where the ceremony takes place, and an older man who looked to be in his sixties sat down next to me to talk. I do not remember the content of the conversation as it was very late and all those in attendance had been imbibing rice liquor, an integral part of the ceremony. As well, I was very distracted by the man’s non-verbal actions. He sat very close to me, leaning into my side, and as he casually talked to me he massaged the region of my groin and inner thigh, apparently unconscious of his palpations.

I had been living in Dụ Vãng for just over one month when a female ethnohistorian based in Hà Nội showed up in the village with a male research assistant. As per village protocol, they first came to the home of the village
headman, Păo, and informed him that they were there to record folktales and origin myths. Păo, who usually jumped at any opportunity to establish relationships with potentially well-connected or influential outsiders, pawned the two researchers off on Không, the old priest. Păo asked me to accompany him, and we led the two researchers to Không’s home. Introductions were made, and Păo and I reclined on one of the beds in the main living room, leaving Không seated at the tea table with the two researchers, who were trying rather unsuccessfully to explain to Không what exactly they meant by “origin myth.” As Păo and I lay there he began indirectly criticizing the woman’s research practice, in a voice loud enough for her to hear, telling me that when people come to the village for a day they do not really learn anything and that what I was doing was more appropriate because I “eat and sleep in the village.” As he spoke, he draped one of his legs over my legs and softly kneaded my arm with his hands, and he seemingly did this absent mindedly.

As the time I spent in Dụ Văng lengthened I grew more accustomed to masculine practices of physical affection. I frequently observed men reclining on the beds that occupy the central living rooms of houses touching and massaging each other’s bodies, of which genitals were not off-limits. On several occasions I was invited by various men to share their beds for the night. At first I was apprehensive, but eventually I did share a bed with two of the men, Păo and Thông (a thirty-three-year-old married man with two young children). Although nothing that approaches sexual intercourse occurred, in the Western or the Nùng sense, nor any such advances made, these men did not shy away from physical contact, but sought it.

Păo’s oldest son, Hùng, and I developed a fairly close friendship and trust with one another. As we became better acquainted and more comfortable with each other, he became more physically affectionate with me. During many of the countless conversations I had with visiting company or members of Păo’s family as I sat on the edge of one of the beds in the main living room of Păo’s home, Hùng would kneel behind me, drape his arms over my shoulders and press his
torso against my back. At other times he would sit beside me, pressed close
against me and playfully grab at my crotch.

These experiences and observations raised questions in my mind about
homosexuality and homoeroticism. Then one afternoon a thirty-four-year-old
married man named Du was visiting Pão’s home. Du, Pão, and I were the only
ones present. Du and I were seated at the tea table, while Pão was in the kitchen
filling a plastic bottle with rice liquor to sell to Du. Du proceeded to ask me if I had
slept with Pão. I confirmed that I had, and inquired as to why Du would ask. He
told me that if we did sleep together we could “try out one another’s váy [a
somewhat vulgar way to say “penis,” much like the English term, “dick”], try them
out and see if they are the same.” I asked Du what he meant by “try them out”
and he responded by making a circle with the forefinger and thumb of one hand,
and then slid the forefinger of his other hand back and forth through the circle,
smiling broadly. I said, “oh, really?” Du just laughed, so I turned to Pão, who had
been listening from just inside the kitchen, and asked him “would you allow this?”
Pão looked up, but did not reply. Du was considered by many to be a lurid or
lustful man, described as khằng lái [lustful very], so I was not sure if he was
teasing me or if there was any “truth” to the potentialities of what he was
suggesting might occur between men, and Pão showed no inclination to engage
the conversation. Pão’s silence was neither a refutation or confirmation of Du’s
comments. I had learned from prior interactions with Pão that whenever I
broached a subject he did not wish to discuss he would not respond, either
turning to some nearby task, changing the subject, or simply ignoring my
question. This does not mean the topics that evoked reticence in Pão were
uniformly avoided by residents of Dụ Vãng, as others would readily engage me in
conversations about the same topics on which Pão remained silent. So I decided
to put my questions to a different audience.

A few days later, Pão was away on priestly business and I was sitting at
the tea table with Đức and Sơn, who had come for a visit. Because I was not
sure how to subtly approach my questions I took a straightforward approach.
Speaking in Vietnamese, because Vietnamese makes a sharper distinction
between forms of romantic, sexual love and forms of platonic love, I used the romantic form and asked Đúc and Sơn, both of whom are fluent in Vietnamese, if there are instances of men loving each other. They both stared at me confusedly, and Đúc asked me what I meant. I expanded on my first question and asked, “Here, are there any men who love each other, and have sex with each other?” Both Đúc and Sơn’s eyes grew wide, and Đúc, who is the more easy-going of the two, burst out laughing. Sơn responded more defensively, and sharply exclaimed, “Coi chừng! Đừng nói láo như thế!”, which, in Vietnamese, means “Look out/beware! Do not speak in such a foul manner!” Apparently, Đu was teasing me, and sex between men is frowned upon in mainstream Đụ Vằng society.

**Ai**, or “love” between two men in Đụ Vằng is expected, and falls within the purview of the ordinary. Thus, it does not take on extraordinary, or “romantic” connotations the way that **ai** between a man and a woman does, though such extraordinary instances of **ai** do not necessarily entail physical affection. Likewise, “sex” is something that takes place between a man and a woman, and though there are expectations of at least brief physical contact, it does not carry expectations of physical affection.

Other men do not appear to be objects of socially acceptable masculine sexual desire in Đụ Vằng. However, other men are subjects of masculine affection. In the West, two manly men in public displays of close masculine camaraderie may rub each other’s backs, pat each other on the butt (e.g. professional athletes), or wrap an arm around the other’s shoulders. These are all interpreted as heterosexual signs of affection within the Western discourse of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005). They are not interpreted as homosexuality or latent homoerotic desire, even though these physical contacts may feel good (Gardiner 2002; Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2005). Similarly, though for different reasons, among the men of Đụ Vằng, acts of physical affection are proper and commonplace. Indeed, such physical affection between males is the *only* proper kind of affection a man should display. Because of women’s diminished capacity for strong, auspicious numbers, and Nùng beliefs
of influence by association, men avoid sustained contact, both physical and social, with women. Likewise, physical contact with healthy, strong and spiritually potent men can only bolster one’s own health, strength, and spiritual potency.

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Nùng Fản Sling traditional, or animist beliefs hold that men and women both have capacities for the same kinds of human characteristics and traits. However, these beliefs also hold that women’s spiritual, physical, and mental capacities are diminished relative to men. Such beliefs construct women as lesser, and men as greater. These beliefs in combination with ideas around influence through association, making women worthy of avoidance and exclusion, and women’s provisionality within the patrilineage exacerbates the social positions of women as marginal, and contributes to the preeminent positions of men. Thus, gender difference, in terms of characteristics, traits, power, and privileges, does not only arise from cultural assumptions about men and women’s capacities for spiritual potency, and other desirable human characteristics, but is socially reproduced by the system of gendered relationships structured around the patrilineage. This system of relationships opens up opportunities for men that are closed, or at least less available to women, thus reifying or naturalizing the assumptions of higher male capacities and male primacy.
PLATES

Plate 5.1 Men preparing the food for an elderly person's birthday celebration [Wangsgard]

Plate 5.2 Men preparing a pig for roasting, which will be offered to the ancestors and then consumed at a feast celebrating the completed construction of a new home [Wangsgard]
Plate 5.3 Male friends and relatives of the groom occupy the central space of the groom's home during a wedding [Wangsgard]

Plate 5.4 Male friends and relatives of the bride's family occupy the central space of the bride's home during a wedding [Wangsgard]
Plate 5.5 Male and female friends and family of a progressive bride celebrating her wedding in mixed company [Wangsgard]

Plate 5.6 Same wedding as above. Note the group of women to the right, who are observing the spectacle of inter-sexed socializing [Wangsgard]
Plate 5.7 A groom celebrating his wedding in a more traditional manner, keeping only the company of his male friends and family [Wangsgard]

Plate 5.8 The groom offering his male guests a drink of rice liquor [Wangsgard]
Plates 5.9 and 5.10 Women from the groom’s side offering tobacco and betel nut to female guests at the bride’s home [Wangsgard]
Plate 5.11 A priest making a prayer of blessing into the bride's umbrella. Note the metal containers spanned by a shoulder pole, which hold the bride's belongings that young girls will carry to the groom's house (lower-left corner). Also note the green and cream colored mat wrapped around a stalk of sugarcane leaning against the wall on the far side of the altar [Wangsgard]

Plate 5.12 The bride stepping over the threshold of her parents' home as she leaves on her journey to the groom's house [Wangsgard]
Plate 5.13 The bride and her friends embark on the road to the groom’s house [Wangsgard]

Plate 5.14 Men occupy the central space and women occupy the margins at an elderly woman’s birthday celebration [Wangsgard]
Plate 5.15 A group of female guests tucked into a side room during a wedding celebration [Wangsgard]

Plate 5.16 Men occupying the central space of a wedding celebration; women are seated in a corner [Wangsgard]
Plate 5.17 A group of men sharing a toast at the celebration of a newly completed house; women look on from a side room [Wangsgard]

Plates 5.18 and 5.19 Women seated in side rooms at wedding celebrations [Wangsgard]
Plate 5.20 A modern bride and groom standing awkwardly close to one another, but only after ample application of peer pressure [Wangsgard]

Plate 5.21 Tjing trying to persuade his recalcitrant wife to stand next to him for a photograph [Wangsgard]
Plate 5.22 Photograph of a priests' mat and altar taken at the conclusion of a funeral
[Wangsgard]
6. MEN AT WORK: MASCULINE PRACTICES, POSITIONS, AND RELATIONSHIPS

In this chapter I undertake an analysis of the social reproduction of masculinity through an examination of men’s social practices. Although my main concern here is with the things men do and say, I do incorporate the perspectives, practices, and positions of women, however sparsely. I do this in an effort to continue the situation of masculinity as constructed and reproduced within a context of gendered social relations constituted by masculine and feminine identities, perspectives, practices, and positions. I begin with a discussion of men’s and, to a lesser extent, women’s work as gendered social practice. I argue that men’s work is characterized by a preoccupation with socializing among other men, and that this social work is often carried out for the purposes of establishing, maintaining, and mobilizing masculine social networks. The mobilization of these networks is often facilitated by social negotiations in which a third-party intermediary is employed. The different degrees to which men and women pursue social networking and intermediation are underlain by assumptions about men’s and women’s capacities for such things. A person’s successful involvement in and opportunities for these social practices is further shaped by one’s gendered position within the patrilineage, which tend to provide men with increased opportunity for and efficacy in social networking and intermediation. This works to reify and reproduce assumptions about the gendered nature of men and women. I conclude the chapter with descriptions and analyses of masculine social practices that work to ensure brotherly equality and solidarity, upon which solid social networks can be built.
As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, very often when men reach middle-age (in their forties) they slow down considerably with regards to physical labor. Usually, by this time their children are physically able to labor, and their wives are expected to continue to labor until they are physically unable to do so. Men most often work separately from women and children, and both the men and women of Dụ Vãng seemed to prefer this arrangement. As Thi pointed out in her statement, quoted earlier, “You never see a husband and wife go to market together, go to work together or go play together. You do these things separately and with the people you like.”

I took numerous opportunities to accompany women and men to work. During harvest seasons, men contributed a much greater effort in bringing in the yield than they did during growing and planting seasons, with the exception of the initial plow work. Most households are able to bring in their harvests within a time span of two weeks to a month. However, these bursts of concentrated, middle-aged male labor seemed to only last as long as the harvest.

A Day in the Life of a Man

The following is an excerpt from my field journal, which describes one of the many typical workdays I spent with Pão:

This morning after breakfast Pão and I headed out around 8 a.m. to get veggies for the pigs. Pão has gardens and forests in the hills around the village, and on this particular day our destination was a sweet potato garden near a neighboring village. We stopped off at Tông’s house to chat. Tông also makes liquor—specifically the famous Mẫu Sơn liquor—and sells it hot off the fire. We had a few drinks and then a Tày man from Lộc Bình district came by to buy some liquor. I don’t know how much we drank but by 9 a.m. I was properly stoned. We sat and

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37 This includes the large harvests of food staples such as rice, maize, potatoes and sweet potatoes; watermelon, though not a staple crop, is one large harvest that may take a month as the melons sometimes do not ripen at a uniform rate.
chatted and smoked and drank until about 10 a.m., then we hit the road again, both of us drunk and not yet out of the village. We walked several km to [a neighboring village]—beautiful countryside—where we visited two homes. Of course, we drank at each home. At the second home we drank and had lunch and then passed out. Around 2:45 p.m. Pão woke me up and said it was time to go. We had one more smoke and one more cup of tea then hit the road again. We walked to Pão’s sweet potato garden and picked the leaves and vines to take home for the pigs. We talked about work, veggies and the various kinds of snakes we might encounter in the garden, and then bundled up the pig feed and headed home for dinner.

A great deal of men’s work is social work (see Plates 6.1 – 6.4). Seemingly simple, straightforward tasks that, in and of themselves, would take little time to accomplish often became endeavors spanning several hours. For men, the social work and opportunities small tasks entail often take precedence over the more concrete task. For example, I once accompanied Pão down to the market at the paved road. Our stated tasks were to purchase a new light bulb and check out the condition of watermelon seedlings that were being sold during this time of year. We stopped at a little shop near the weekly market, which sold sundry household items, snacks, cigarettes, and drinks. Within five minutes of our arrival we had purchased a light bulb. However, Pão then sought out the shop owner, who I had also become acquainted with through my patronage of this shop. We found the owner around the side of his shop chatting with two other men from Dụ Vãng, and Pão and I were quickly invited to join them. Forty-five minutes and several cups of tea and rice liquor later, Pão and I were back on the road, headed for the watermelon seedling vendor. This particular vendor is a native of Dụ Vãng, so naturally Pão preferred to deal with a “brother” rather than one of the other vendors. Pão did not plan to make a purchase this day because his fields were not yet ready for planting; he only wanted to briefly stop by and have a look at the seedlings. We arrived at the vendor’s home, which is situated in the midst of his “nursery fields,” and found several other men from Dụ Vãng
engaged in eating and drinking with the vendor, his father, and his two sons. Our stated task of briefly checking out the seedlings was accomplished, but only after three hours of socializing, agricultural discussions, and social negotiations. When we arrived back home, Pão was already late for another appointment: discussions and negotiations about the finishing work on a new culture house that was being built in the village.

Toiling on Cultural Ground

During a communal work project, and every communal work project I witnessed was inter-sexed, men’s and women’s work habits as different configurations of gendered practice came into sharp relief for me. The village, as a community, was breaking ground for the new culture house, which would be used for village and hamlet meetings, and other communal affairs and gatherings—almost all of which are exclusive male domains. The spot chosen for the culture house was on a hillside, which we had to dig away in order to create a level foundation for the building. This entailed several days’ work of pick-axing, shoveling and hauling away dirt. A work schedule was drawn up, and every household had to contribute a specific amount of labor hours to the project. I accompanied Pão to the worksite to help my host household fulfill its obligation. Once we were all busily engaged in the work at hand, Pão announced that he had "business to attend to" but that I was there as his household representative and to work in his stead. With that he left. The most difficult task was the pick-axing—the soil was a very hard, iron-rich clay, and breaking the ground required considerable physical effort. This task was mostly left to the women. The men gathered in the shade, as it was a hot and sunny day, to smoke and banter back and forth. When the large chunks of red clay that the women had broken loose piled up to the extent that it inhibited the women’s ability to proceed, the men would shovel the dirt into wheelbarrows, wheel the loads of dirt over to a steep slope (about three meters away), dump their loads, and retreat back to the shaded area. The shaded area was just large enough for the men to tightly crowd into, so when the women did rest, they were left to take their rest in the sun.
There were only four wheelbarrows available, so the men worked in shifts, while there were more than enough pick-axes for every one of the women. Feeling uncomfortable as a result of my own cultural assumptions about the kinds of work suited to men and women, I grabbed a pick-axe and started hammering away at the dirt with the women.

After about an hour of work, Linh quietly told me it was time for a break. Under the pretense of going to urinate, we stealthily made our way to a “brother’s” house that was near the worksite. Linh and I sat with Toàn, the patriarch of the home we were visiting, drinking rice liquor and tea, smoking and talking for about an hour. We then returned to the worksite, and found that many of the other men had also “gone to urinate,” while several others were reclining in the shade. The women were still hard at work. Feeling a bit sheepish, I grabbed a pick-axe and fell in line. Shortly after Linh and I had returned to the worksite, Pão reappeared. His face was flushed and his eyes were glassy—it appeared that he too had been socializing and visiting homes near the worksite. He was not happy with the progress that had been made in his absence and he turned on the women, who were still working, and began gruffly giving them orders to increase their productivity. Pão then turned to me and told me that I no longer needed to be there because the work schedule only required one person from his household at a time. I told him I did not mind being there and wanted to help with the work. Pão responded, “You want to work? Then go home and cook the rice!” I protested, telling him I would rather do this work. He replied, “Thị is not home yet. There is no one at home to cook rice. Go home and cook the rice.” He then retreated to the shade to squat and talk with the other men. I put down my pick-axe and started down the trail home, followed by jeers of “go home wife!” from several of the other men.

When I was invited to abandon the labor of breaking ground in favor of more masculine pursuits, and when I accepted that invitation I was well received: no one chided me for being lazy, or for being physically weak and quitting earlier than the women. Although I am apparently male, and was considered physically strong because of my relatively large size compared with the men of Dụ Vãng (I
stand a half head taller than the tallest man), such physical characteristics and features did not ensure my masculinity in the sociocultural context of Dụ Vãng. The way I employed my physicality, and how I positioned myself within the inter-sexed social arena of a communal work project was not masculine: laboring along side women, and performing a task associated with women—pick-axing. When Pǎo left the work site earlier, I was pick-axing along side the women. When he returned, there I was, still working like a woman. When I told him I wanted to continue working, pick-axe in hand, he sent me away and then took a proper masculine position in the shade with the other men. I was there in Pǎo's stead, his male representative, a man for a man, and should have behaved accordingly. If I was going to insist on being non-masculine, then he would send me home to perform the unmanly task of cooking rice for a daily meal, which task is most often reserved for women and children, and emphasized this implication by his statement that Thi, his wife, was not home yet so I should go complete the tasks of a wife in her stead. My unintentional auto-emasculating was further confirmed by the jeers of “go home wife” from other men.

These configurations of masculine and feminine work practices obtained whether men and women were working separately or together. Men’s work practices concentrated considerable time and energy into socializing and visiting with other men, or in other words, establishing and maintaining intra-, inter- and extra-village social networks—the importance of which I will further discuss below. Women’s work practices concentrated the majority of their time and energy into agricultural labor, gathering forest products, and household maintenance. Although women’s work practices involve socializing with women from one’s own household and village, and to a lesser extent neighboring villages, it is not to the same degree as men. Women’s socializing most often takes place in the context of other work, rather than an activity in and of itself.

**Women are Workers, Men are Players**

I spoke with several individuals, both men and women, about the differences between men and women’s work habits. Women explained to me that
men are players, and women are workers. When I asked Thị about the subject, she told me that, “I am a woman, women do not go play. Playing is for men. If women played then what would their children eat? They would starve to death. Men play, women work.” I asked her, “Are you jealous of men because they get to go play?” She said, “No, I am not jealous. I am a woman and a woman’s life is to work. That is the way this ethnic group is. You are a man so you should go play, I am a woman so I am going to work.”

One late morning in the early spring, I was sitting at the tea table talking with Pão. Yên and Thị were sitting in the corner of the room bundling up green leafy veggies to sell at market, and occasionally joining in the conversation. The subject of conversation turned to a festival that was taking place that day in a neighboring district, about a two-hour motorbike ride away (see Plates 6.5 – 6.7). Yên and Thị told me that this is one of the best festivals in the area because “it is solely a Nùng Fàn Sling festival market; no Kinh, no Tày, no Yao, only Nùng.” The two women then started encouraging me to go and see for myself. Pão grabbed onto the idea, and told me, “We can both ride on one motorbike—the only money you will have to spend is on gas and cigarettes. I have relatives there—the son of my father’s oldest brother, his son is Bản, who you have met before, so we can park the bike at his house and eat and drink at his house.” I was a little surprised that Pão was so ready and willing to go because a few minutes prior he was telling me about all the work he had to do that day. I agreed to the plan and half jokingly, because I already knew the answer (though my jest did not make Pão smile), told the women that they should go with us. Thị said, “I am a woman so I always have work to do and do not have time to play. It is enough that you and Pão go, you are men so you are able to go and play, you are permitted.” Yên added, “Women are not players, women are workers. It is OK for men to go play, but women must work—that is what a good woman does. Have you ever seen me once go playing?” Outside of attending weddings, funerals, birthdays and the like, I never did see either of the women go play just for the sake of playing. But women do attend weddings, funerals, festivals, weekly markets, birthdays and other very social and festive occasions, which
happen frequently in village life. The people I know in Dụ Vãng are all fond of a good party, men and women alike. However, the occurrence of exclusive men’s parties is much more frequent, as they often happen spontaneously, while those events listed above are organized and planned in advance. Gendered work practices, born of gendered social positions within the patrilineage, enable men’s capacities for socializing and leisure, while diminishing those of women.

When I spoke with married men about men and women’s different work habits, they would often, matter-of-factly, point out that they have wives and their children are big enough to labor. Thus, for these men the issue required no further explanation. Several men told me that men are able to **choi bèi**, or “lead a carefree/playboy life.”

**A Playboy Life**

Early one afternoon, a man named Hảo put the word out that his household would be slaughtering a pig, and that evening he would have fried pig entrails and organ meats, considered to be very manly foods, for the “brothers” to enjoy. I had spent the day with Pão and a government veterinarian visiting different homes and vaccinating buffalo in the hamlet over which Pão presided. As evening fell, the government veterinarian departed and Pão and I started home. Along the way, Pão asked me if I had ever seen a pig roasted on a spit “Nùng-style” (see Plate 6.8). I had not yet witnessed this style of gourmet cooking, and Pão reminded me that Hảo’s household was presently doing this very thing. So we changed course, and headed straight for the home where the party would be taking place.

When we arrived at Hảo’s home, we found a knot of men, and only men, already gathered, the pig already roasted, and the party well under way. Pão and I were boisterously called into the house where we were met with invitations to drink and encouragements to stuff ourselves with offals. Pão quickly immersed himself in the festivities, accepting invitations to drink, making invitations to others, indulging in the cuisine, and bantering back and forth with the others. During this exclusively male gathering, Hảo, the host of the party, exclaimed to
me over a toast, “This is doing/being a man, this is leading a carefree/playboy life!”

Unfortunately, I was not inclined to indulge to the same degree as the other male party-goers. I had been working with Pão all day, which entailed visiting numerous homes and drinking rice liquor during each visit. By the time we got to the party, my stomach and throat were on fire with a harsh bout of heartburn, and so I only drank about five shots of rice liquor, and only ate one bowl of the heavy, rich organ meat—a conspicuously modest amount by comparison to what others at the gathering were consuming. Others began taking note of my consumptive moderation, and so began filling my bowl for me and making more frequent invitations to drink, telling me, “don’t act like a guest, do naturally.” I began only sipping at my shot glass, as not to offend by outright declining invitations to share a drink. Eventually even the sipping was more than my tortured gastrointestinal tract could endure, so I excused myself and told the host of the party I was going home. I immediately sensed a “standoffishness” from the host and those seated immediately around me, who, perhaps, interpreted my behavior as rejecting their hospitality and their inclusion of me in the masculine festivities. Pão had a look of disappointment on his face and asked if I could find my own way home. I told him “of course,” and he quickly re-involved himself in the party. Sơn’s father, Khải, was sitting near the door and asked me where I was going. I told him I was going home to bed. He scowled, telling me I had eaten and drank very little, and spat the word “mệ” [wife] at me as I turned to leave.

Nùng women are not forbidden to drink liquor, and are also very capable of eating the organ meat of pigs. The women I know best told me without any bashfulness that they enjoyed these things, and at every inter-sexed, festive gathering I witnessed both men and women consume such sumptuous fare. But I never saw women indulge as often or to the same degree as men. The women who told me they enjoyed rice liquor and organ meats also told me that they most often partook in moderation. That men are expected to indulge to a greater
degree was made clear when I got up to leave the party after only consuming meager amounts of liquor and offals and was called mệ.

MASCULINE NETWORKS

As illustrated above, masculine practices entail a great deal of socializing with other men, sharing sentiment facilitated by the consumption of rice liquor, and establishing and maintaining ties between men. A simple trip to the market to purchase salt, lard, a bike tire or a new light bulb would, almost without fail, turn into a social event that spanned several hours. On the many trips I made to the market in the company of other men, we would stop in, whether of our own accord or at the behest of a household patriarch, to visit a relative, a friend, and, as often as possible, men of influence or wealth, which often meant a man in an official government position. The establishment, maintenance and expansion of one’s social networks are key to enlisting others into one’s causes, and garnering and calling upon favors. The more expansive a man’s social networks, the more opportunity and assistance he can muster.

As permanent members of households and the village, men are born into a fairly stable social network of “brothers” comprised of the patrilineage. On the other hand, women as daughters, wives, and daughters-in-law (i.e., temporary members of their natal households and villages, and provisional members of their husbands’ households and villages) have no such pre-established social networks, at least not to the same degree as men. Beyond the absence or presence of social networks inherited by default of a person’s sex at birth, there are configurations of gendered practices among the Nùng that work to increase men’s and diminish women’s capacities for establishing, maintaining, expanding and mobilizing social networks.

Among the men of Dụ Vãng, the necessity of a network of “brothers” in achieving one’s goals is axiomatic. Although all the men in the village are considered “brothers,” men have greater social obligations, as prescribed by Confucian-type social propriety, or đạo, to “blood brothers” than they do to
“cousin brothers.” If, for example, a man is vying for a political position within the village, he will mobilize his network of “blood brothers,” as they are obligated by đa nghĩa to lend their support. It is always men with the largest network of “blood brothers” who attain the most influential political positions within the village. Men very frequently explained their masculine networks as “creating means for each other.” Speaking of masculine networks in such terms frames them as mutually beneficial. However, I found that getting others to create means for oneself without having to reciprocate was seen as a sign of intelligence/craftiness [khôn, caãi] and wickedness [ác], all of which are positive characteristics to which people aspire.

I soon learned that in order to accomplish my own research goals I had to continually try to rally support from Pão, recounting the instances in which I had created means for him and implying that it was time for him to reciprocate. I also found it effective to make allusions to my networks that were external to the village (e.g., my research visa sponsor, The Institute of Vietnamese and Development Studies; my research permit sponsor, Lạng Sơn Department of Culture and Information; and my local sponsor, the commune level People’s Committee) when trying to directly enlist Pão in my efforts. If I, by myself, approached men who had agreed to participate in my research I would very often be put off and told, “another time.” Although I would perform physical labor, such as helping bring in a harvest, hoeing a field, or planting crops, or offer a gratuity in exchange for individuals’ participation in my research, I found that I most often had to mobilize networks in order to accomplish my ends. This was a challenge.

As an outsider living in a close knit community of brothers, the men in Dụ Vẳng had no obligation, and despite promises and verbal agreements seemed to have no compulsion to help me further my research interests. Interestingly, women, who seemed sympathetic to my position of outsider within the village, would sometimes champion my causes with men I had been trying to persuade to fulfill their agreements to help me with my research goals. I never asked any woman to lend me support in this way, it was all voluntary and based on these particular women’s observations of my sometimes futile efforts, and I would
always be made aware of their efforts after the fact. However, I also learned that having a network of “sisters” was almost as ineffectual as having no network at all.

Shortly after I arrived in Dụ Vằng, Păo was preparing to purchase a new motorbike, which is a considerable investment. He told me that on his own he did not have enough money to make the purchase. I asked him if he planned to get a loan from a bank in Lạng Sơn. He said:

I have many brothers, I do not need to borrow money from the bank. Besides, I would rather borrow from my brothers than the bank because it is much simpler, I do not have to pay interest, and it creates trust, good relationships. My wife and children complain when I borrow from brothers. They say, “If we do not have the money to buy then we should just endure.” They do not know men’s relationships. I even have a Yao friend who has agreed to loan me two million đồng. Do you see, I even have friendships with different ethnic groups. I know a man who sells motorbikes in Lạng Sơn, and he permits several payments if you do not have all of the money at the first. Sơn and Tổng bought from this man, and they did not have all of the money at first...Brothers create means for each other.

Păo spoke of drawing on his networks in order to create the means to purchase a new motorbike. He emphasized that it is the strength of relationships between men, on which these networks are based, that give him access to resources and enable opportunities that would be closed to him in the absence of these networks.

Above, I briefly mentioned an opportunity I had to accompany Păo to a festival market in a neighboring district. We did end up going and as we passed by villages within this district on our way to the festival Păo pointed out the villages and homes where women from his village had been sold as wives. We stopped at a snack stand along the way to get a drink and stretch our tired legs. Păo boasted to me that, “I can stop at any house in any village in [this district] and they will know me. I can stop at any house and eat and drink and sleep if I want to without any problem. The only thing I need to fear is that the household will not have any liquor.” Then, as if to prove his point, he began ordering me to stop at some of the houses along the road (I was driving the motorbike and he
was on back). The ride to the festival was taken as an opportunity to display, reaffirm, and maintain his networks of and relationships with other men.

Men in Dụ Vãng would very frequently, and with obvious pride, recount to me social networks and personal relationships that extend well beyond the village. Whenever I would travel outside the village with male friends they were always very keen to demonstrate to me the extent of their social networks and associations with people of import. Likewise, my male friends were also anxious to demonstrate to others their association with me. Whenever commune officials or cadres came to the village, or when a hamlet meeting was called, Pào would request me to be present. This was not out of any particular fondness or respect for me, but rather to demonstrate to others that his network of relationships “reach to America.”

These masculine social networks are not established and maintained simply or solely for bragging rights, or for landmarks that can be referenced in the construction and representation of one’s masculinity; though masculine networks are these things, they are also more than this. As we have seen, these networks can be utilized for hospitality while traveling outside of the village. Perhaps more importantly, these networks are used to access resources, garner favors and rally others to one’s causes.

Men in Dụ Vãng worked hard to maintain positive relationships with commune, district and provincial level officials and cadres. Several of the men in the village had achieved a strong relationship with Mr. Định, the president of the commune level People’s Committee, and Mr. Ling, the commune level construction cadre. Through these networks, the men of Dụ Vãng were able to receive funding, in the form of building materials, for the construction of the village culture house. The lion dance troupe from Dụ Vãng made yearly endeavors to perform in the homes of commune level officials, as well as in the homes of officials from the provincial level Department of Culture and Information. Their efforts resulted in positive relationships with these officials, and they received a recommendation from the commune level People’s Committee to the provincial level Department of Culture and Information for sponsorship to
perform at a cultural event in Hà Nội, which sponsorship was granted. Men from the village also established and maintained networks of men who sold crop seeds and seedlings. If a household had met with financial hardship men could draw on these networks and still obtain seeds and seedlings with a promise to repay the seller once the crop had been harvested. Configurations of masculine and feminine practices embedded within the Nùng system of gender relations gave men a greater capacity to establish and nurture these relationships and networks.

To be without a network of “brothers” not only limits one’s access to resources and favors, or one’s ability to muster support for one’s causes, but also leaves one in a potentially vulnerable position. People in Dụ Vãng were often perplexed when I would make trips to the market or to Lạng Sơn City by myself. They were especially amazed that I had traveled to the highlands of Vietnam on my own. I was often told, “You must be very brave, or perhaps stupid.” This point was driven home to me as I prepared to leave Dụ Vãng at the conclusion of my research. Sơn said to me, “You are lucky to have come to this village because we have protected you. You do not have any brothers here; here you are by yourself so we could have done what we wanted with you. If you would have gone to another village they would have fought/beat you and robbed you because you do not have any brothers here to protect you, but we have protected you and it has been a huge responsibility.”

**The Wingman: Intermediaries and Creating Means**

The social negotiations and processes of mobilizing social networks for the purposes of furthering one’s interests, or pushing one’s agenda include a prominent feature, or role of an intermediary. In my observations and experiences, whenever there was some matter between two parties that was considered to be important, difficult, or sensitive, direct confrontation was avoided whenever possible. If the two principally interested parties were to directly engage each other in negotiations there is the risk of running into an awkward situation, in which one or both parties might become offended and/or
“lose face.” Not having to directly approach the issue with one another allows more opportunity for open, free, and frank expression about an issue and one’s position regarding the issue. I was told that directly approaching others makes them uncomfortable, and people will say that you talk too much, with too many mouths, and they will hate you in their hearts. My own experiences of negotiating my room and board with Pão, as well as the purchase of his old motorbike illustrate the role of intermediaries in masculine social negotiations.

Before I moved into Pão’s home I told him that, of course, I intended to pay room and board. On the day that I actually moved in, I was sitting alone in the house with Pão discussing my research intentions, and I brought up the subject of room and board, telling him that I would like to arrive at an agreement. He dismissed the topic saying, “Yes, yes, we don’t need to talk about that now.” Over the next week Pão continued to avoid a direct conversation of the subject, but repeatedly brought up the topic of “creating means for each other,” alluding to the fact that I wanted to learn Nùng culture and he wanted to buy a new motorbike, but was still short on cash.

For the first four months of my fieldwork, I maintained a rental house in Lạng Sơn City. I would spend one to two nights at my rental house each weekend in order to correspond with family members via the internet; conduct research in the Department of Culture and Information’s library; and so that I could elaborate, read and reflect on fieldnotes and contemplate my research progress and possible future directions without the interruptions of the daily goings on of social life in the village. After returning from my first weekend away from Dụ Vẳng I was welcomed home by Pão and Son, who ushered me into the house and sat me down at the tea table. They inquired after my family’s health and asked for a detailed recounting of all my comings and goings during my time in Lạng Sơn City, including which officials I had met with. During our conversation, Pão and Son kept individually inviting me to drink, resulting in me drinking twice as much as either of them. After I had several shots of rice liquor under my belt, Son started asking me how much I paid in rent for the house in Lạng Sơn. I told him I paid 500,000 VND per month for the entire house. Son
was aghast, and told me that I was being greatly overcharged because I was only there two days per week. He then told me that I should also pay Pão 500,000 VND per month because I use his electricity, eat his food, and if it was not for Pão I could not be there, as there were no houses for rent in the village. During this discussion, Pão remained conspicuously silent, and it was Sơn who did all of the talking. I listened to Sơn’s argument and then reassured him that Pão and I would reach a mutually satisfactory and reasonable agreement, but that this business was between Pão and I. With this, Sơn left. I had expected Pão to continue the negotiation, however, Pão got up from the tea table, and without any further comment about the price of my room and board, busied himself with miscellaneous tasks in the kitchen. Sơn’s departure had effectively put an end to all talk about room and board. I realized that what I had expected to be a private negotiation between Pão and myself would actually be a group affair involving Pão’s network of brothers to help press his cause. This put me at a decided disadvantage, as I had no immediate network to stand behind me, or, more accurately, in front of me to champion my interests. As well, having to serve as my own point-man in the negotiation put me at risk of losing face with those I was negotiating.

At the same time that Pão was planning to buy a new motorbike, he was also looking to sell his old one, and it so happened that I was looking to buy a used motorbike. Pão offered to sell me his motorbike, a rugged, Belorussian-made Minsk. These models are very popular in the mountainous highlands of northern Vietnam, to which they are well suited. When I tried to discuss a price directly with Pão he would respond evasively, and instead make estimations about the amount of money a new motorbike would cost him. Once again, Pão called on his network of brothers and enlisted an intermediary to help press his cause. In negotiating a price for his used motorbike, and in trying to raise further money to purchase a new motorbike I was approached by Sơn and Đức.

38 I had been advised by my sponsors at The Institute of Vietnamese and Development Studies and Lạng Sơn’s Department of Culture and Information that 100,000 to 200,000 VND per month would be a generous amount to pay for room and board in the village.
Son was the first to take up Pào’s cause with me. We had finished eating lunch, and Pào’s wife and children had left to work in the fields. Son stopped by the house and sat down with Pào and I for tea and a drink of rice liquor. Son asked me if I was still interested in buying Pào’s old motorbike, and I responded that I was. Son then began telling me what a fine machine the bike is, and claimed that I could not find one in such good condition for less than six million VND. I am no stranger to motorbikes, and it was very apparent to me that Pào’s twelve-year-old motorbike, though it still ran, had seen many a hard, mountainous mile. Furthermore, I had been to a dealership in Lạng Sơn where brand new Minsk bikes were being sold for eight to ten million VND. During our discussion, Toàn came by to buy rice liquor. When he discovered that I was looking to buy a used Minsk, he anxiously told me that he had a friend in Lộc Bình who was selling one for three million VND that was in very good condition. Immediately, both Son and Pào began rapidly speaking Nùng to Toàn in hushed voices. The conversation up to this point had been in Vietnamese, as my Nùng language skills were still in their early stages of development. Toàn quickly began to back peddle, telling me that no one would buy his friend’s bike for three million VND because it was in deplorable condition, and that I would be much better off buying Pào’s bike for five million. Son interjected that this was a very good price for a bike such as Pào’s. I told Pào, who had not said much to me during this exchange, that five million was quite expensive. He asked me how much I could “help him,” and I said four million. Son then said that I should pay four-and-a-half million to help “create means for each other, like brothers should do.” After securing a promise from Pào that he would purchase the bike back from me when I left, which tentative offer had been tabled earlier by Son (for a lesser amount, of course, as I would put wear and tear on the bike), I agreed, and that was that (see Plate 6.9).

The following day Đức was visiting the house, and he, Pào, and I were having tea. He started telling me that Pào really needed to purchase a new motorbike, one of the newer, lighter, and prettier Japanese models, “not like the heavy, rough Minsk.” Đức explained that as the headman, Pào attended official
meetings at the People’s Committee offices, and “driving a rough, dirty, farmer’s
motorbike to attend meetings at the commune People’s Committee is not
appropriate/fitting.” Đức went on to say that my purchase of Pão’s old bike was
very helpful, but Pão was still short one to two million VND. He told me that “now
you have a bike, but your older brother does not have one.” Đức told me that I
should help my older brother by loaning Pão the money that he still needed to
buy his new bike, so that both older and younger brother could have a motorbike,
“Nếu có điều kiện nên tạo điều kiện cho nhau, giống hai anh em” [If you have the
means, you should create means for each other, like two brothers]. Instead of
loaning him the money, I proposed that I pay all of my room and board for the
entire year up front, that way Pão would have enough money to buy his bike, and
would not have to repay me later. Pão agreed to my proposal, and shortly
thereafter had a shiny, new motorbike.

The use of intermediaries is not solely reserved for dealings with
outsiders. I witnessed many instances when men who were not the principally
interested parties would serve as go-betweens in negotiations between
“brothers.” For example, whenever a death occurs in Dụ Vãng every household
is required to contribute to the funeral, either in the form of labor, food and liquor
for the guests and family of the deceased, or, in lieu of these, cash. Each time a
death occurred in the village during my fieldwork, the family of the deceased
would send an intermediary to negotiate with Pão the contributions that would be
required of each household, and to receive assurances from Pão that he would
enforce these requirements. These intermediaries were never members of the
deceased person’s immediate household. Then either Pão himself, or one of his
trusted wingmen would negotiate the expected contributions with the other
households in the village. These could sometimes become highly sensitive
matters when there were households claiming to be too busy, or too poor to
make any contribution. In order to maintain a network of good relationships from
which to draw support and resources, the interested parties must be on amicable
terms. By using intermediaries, networks of good relationships can be maintained
within the village through the avoidance of direct confrontation and possible loss
of face, which would compromise the involved parties' abilities to mobilize these networks in pursuing future interests (see Plate 6.10).

**Women as Ineffectual Intermediaries**

On the many occasions that I accompanied women to work in the fields and forests, the women never did stop in at friends' homes to visit or socialize. Instead, women would stop on their way to the fields or forests and socialize with other women they met along the way. Women would also take rest breaks (the longest rest break I ever experienced while working with women was approximately one hour) and socialize with women who were working in adjacent fields. As well, wives and female children who belonged to the same household would socialize among themselves while hoeing, planting, weeding, fertilizing and harvesting their husbands' and fathers' fields, or collecting firewood in their husbands' and fathers' forests, and so on.

Women do have the ability to establish and maintain social networks. Women’s socializing most often takes place in the context of agricultural labor. As men and women tend to lead separate social lives, women’s social networks consist of other women. However, burdened with childcare and the bulk of the agricultural labor, women are not able to establish and maintain social networks, especially outside of the village, to the same degree as men.

Whenever I would make some social blunder, the offended party would communicate their displeasure to me by way of intermediary. Not long after I arrived in Dụ Vãng, Pão was away at a funeral. Kiên’s father, Thiên, stopped by for a visit. As per the masculine norm, he let himself into the house, and uninvited sat down at the tea table. Being the only adult male at home, I was expected to receive the guest. Drawing on my observations of how other adult men received guests, and my own experiences of being received as a guest by adult men, I offered Thiên tea, a cigarette, and, after a bit of chit chat, a drink of rice liquor. After two shots of liquor and some idle conversation, Thiên left. That evening Pão returned home and I overheard Thảo telling him about Thiên’s visit. I thought
Thảo was simply recounting to Păo the goings on of the household while he had been absent.

The following day Păo had to attend a meeting at the People’s Committee offices. After lunch, with Păo gone, Thị did not return immediately to the fields. We sat chatting and she brought up Thiên’s visit, asking me why I had received him the way I did. I told her that I was following Păo’s example for receiving guests. She related the following to me:

Some men who come in, just offer them tea, don’t give them liquor. A lot of men drink then go home and yell at the kids and wife and grandkids. This isn’t good, they get lots of mouths and talk nonsense and yell at the children. When the families of these drunks know who gave them liquor they will be angry and offended. They may not say anything, but in their hearts they will be angry. You don’t know who these men are [who I shouldn’t give liquor to] so when Păo isn’t home let me give the liquor. Most of the men in the village don’t fall down when they get drunk, they get many mouths and say bad things.

I apologized and thanked Thị for a lesson learned. In this instance, I thought that Păo had asked Thị to convey this message to me, and considered the matter finished, my lesson learned. However, that evening Đức sought me out and invited me to his house for a drink. During our visit, Đức reiterated what Thị had told me earlier. He told me, “that old man only goes looking for liquor, and when he drinks liquor he becomes bad, talking nonsense, and doesn’t know what he’s doing or saying.” Đức then told me that Păo did not want to say anything to me about my mistake because he did not want me to think I was being chastised and “lose face.” I thanked him for letting me know and told him that Thị had already imparted this lesson to me. Đức responded explanatively, “Ah, but you have not yet heard it from a brother.”

As we have seen, men in Dụ Văng are loath to heed a woman’s words. Păo very likely knew that his wife had, or was going to pass his message along to me. But based on the assumption that any good man will dismiss a woman’s words, Păo further enlisted the words of a “brother” to ensure that I would hear. Men are culturally constructed and socially positioned to have a higher capacity
than women for conducting effectual social negotiations, as theirs are the words worth heeding.

**Relationships Between Sisters-in-Law**

Another aspect of women’s diminished capacity for social networking is the relationships between sisters-in-law. As previously noted, once married, a woman becomes a provisional member of her husband’s household. Once a wife becomes pregnant, she moves in permanently with her husband and becomes a stranger in a strange household. Sisters-in-law share in common a subordinate position in the gender system, however this does not mean that they inherently or automatically share an affinity for one another. In Dụ Vãng, relationships between sisters-in-law were stereotypically characterized by petty quarrels and arguments, backbiting, accusations, and turmoil in general.

In Dụ Vãng, Thị and Yên were particularly proud of their unique relationship. Perhaps other sisters-in-law in the village also enjoyed a close relationship, but I never heard anyone boast of their in-law relationship as positively as these two women did. As well, I observed that Thị and Yên frequently sought and kept one another’s company, more so than other sisters-in-law I knew and met on a regular basis. During several recording sessions with Yên, she spoke of her unique relationship with Thị. Following is an excerpt from one of her narratives:

If a husband dies the daughter-in-law will often return to her parent’s home, even if she has a son. A widow will leave the children with an uncle or the grandparents, especially if they are only daughters, and go home. I did not go home, and this proves the good and solid/firm/durable relationship I have with Thị. The sisters-in-law of a household rarely get along—always fighting and scolding each other. Our relationship is unique in Dụ Vãng; we are the only sisters-in-law who truly get along. Even after my husband died I stayed with his household, and I did not have a son.

During a conversation with Thị, she also spoke positively of her relationship with her sister-in-law:
Yên and I get along very well. Sisters-in-law usually talk bad about one another, saying, ‘she is not doing her share of the work, she wakes up late, she is lazy, she eats too much of the food, her children misbehave,’ and the like. But me and Yên share the work, we work together and help each other, and this is unique. Perhaps we get along so well because our fathers died when we were both still young, so we are alike.

The ability to mobilize a social network in support of one's own or a shared cause depends on the quality of relationships that constitute that network. If the relationships between sisters-in-law are tenuous and marked by turmoil, then rallying support from and nurturing solidarity within such a network would be difficult at best. I do need to point out that it was relationships between the sisters-in-law who belong to the same immediate households that were most commonly stereotyped as tumultuous; not necessarily inter-household relationships between married women. I am not arguing that there is no solidarity among sisters-in-law, or no support to be found in social networks of women. I am arguing that configurations of gendered practice and women’s position within the Nùng system of gender relations reproduce diminished female capacities for these things.

All of the married women I know in Dụ Vàng did return to their parents' homes for visits (the frequency often depending on the convenience of doing so in terms of distance and time). However, a woman’s opportunities to socialize with women from her natal village are much less frequent than opportunities to socialize with women living in her husband’s village. Furthermore, the fact that a married woman no longer “belongs” to her mother and that her sisters and friends have also dispersed and become members of other families and villages undermines social solidarity among women and their ability to maintain social networks in their natal households and villages, at least relative to the degree that men are able to maintain male networks and foster solidarity among themselves.
In Dụ Vǎng, there is a deeply ingrained and widespread ethos of brotherly equality and solidarity, each ideal being supportive of and supported by the other. The ideal of equality encompasses both social and material equality between brothers. Although there does exist social and material inequality between men in Dụ Vǎng, most of the men I know work hard to maintain at least the appearance of equality. There are two households in particular, both descended from the same grandfather, who own large forests of softwood trees and had become quite wealthy through the sale of lumber. The male heads of these two households did not go to great lengths to disguise their affluence (e.g., wearing leather jackets, owning and using cell phones, and driving high-end motorbikes). Although these two men could regularly be found at home and spent the bulk of their time within the village, I observed that they were also frequently absent from the daily rounds of social activity in the village; including organized social events that were planned in advance, and spontaneous male gatherings. Whether this social exclusion was self-imposed, the result of being shunned, or some combination is a question I never specifically pursued. But over the course of my research I did learn that material equality between brothers is closely scrutinized. If a brother visibly possesses anything in excess of another brother, the brother without fully expects to receive his share. I also learned that if you are not adept at concealing your "excess" then other men will quickly help divest you of it.

When I moved into Păo’s house, I brought with me a quantity of “practical gifts” I planned to give to people in return for their participation in my research. These included jackets, t-shirts, and small, battery-operated headlamps. When moving about the village at night, people almost always carry handheld flashlights with them. And most everyone I knew was always glad to acquire a new layer of clothing, especially during the cold winter months. Certain members of my own family had access to these products and provided me with a duffle-bag stuffed with them at no cost to me. Upon seeing this duffle-bag, Păo asked me what was in it. I told him of the contents and my plans for them. Păo quickly told me to hide the duffle-bag in the upper storage loft of the house. I asked him
why I should be so careful concealing the duffle-bag. Pão hesitated, seemingly uncertain what to say, and then simply told me he did not want his house targeted for theft. At the end of my research, I interpreted Pão’s concerns differently.

Early in my research, I attended a weekly market, where I purchased a quantity of batteries for my digital voice recorder and flashlight. I put the batteries in a plastic bag and leisurely strolled through the market, taking in the smells, sights, and sounds. I then purchased some toothpaste and instant coffee. During my shopping stroll, I encountered several small groups of men from Dụ Vãng. At each meeting, after exchanging greetings, one of the men would inevitably grab my bag, asking me what I had purchased, and then proceed to rummage through the contents of my bag. Yến, who was also at the market, had witnessed several of my encounters, and after the fourth such meeting she walked over to me, took my bag from me and stuffed it down inside her own bag, asking me, “Oh sky! What are you doing, trying to lose all your stuff?” Within the week, my entire stash of batteries, except for those I put into my electronic devices, had been commandeered by “brothers” who needed batteries for their flashlights—some told me they were taking them, others simply went to the cupboard where they knew I kept my things and took them. The next time I needed to replace batteries in my flashlight I became irritated when I found that my stash had been completely redistributed. Pão chuckled at my frustration, telling me “We’re all brothers here. If one person has more than another, the person who does not have will take [it] himself. You must do craftier.”

During one of my visits to Tĩnh’s home, he asked me to take some personal pictures for him, telling me he would pay for the cost of the film and its development. After I had developed the pictures, Tĩnh came to Pão’s house to collect them. Pão, Tĩnh, and I sat at the tea table, browsing the pictures and drinking rice liquor. When we had finished perusing the photos, Tĩnh gathered them up and stuffed them inside his shirt. I reminded him about the money he owed me, and he replied that he did not have any money right then, but that, “you don’t need to worry that I have not yet given you money for the pictures,
we’re all brothers here.” As Ting got up to leave, he noted that I had left my cigarettes on the tea table and he advised me to put them away, repeating that, “we’re all brothers here, and if you leave them out this group [the men of the village] will smoke them all.”

The masculine practices of helping oneself to other’s visible excess are commonplace, expected, and justified by the social ideal of equality among brothers. Thus, if one does have excess they do not wish to share, they must take steps to conceal it from the scrutiny of others, lest they get a reputation of selfishness by refusing to uphold the ideals of brotherly equality and solidarity. The teenage children of Pão’s household, and less often Thị, would sometimes come home with treats and goodies, such as barbequed corn, fruit, melon, candies, or sweet biscuits. If ever they heard someone approaching the house in the midst of their consumption of this fare, the kids would hurriedly gather up the treats and hide them away, explaining to me that if some man stopped by he would surely gobble up their goodies, or feel resentful/jealous that his children were not invited to indulge. Men also behaved similarly. Often times while sharing rice liquor and talk with one or two other men, we would hear someone approaching the house and the man who was hosting the small gathering would quickly cork the bottle and stash it out of sight.

Equality among brothers, which exists in a mutually catalytic relationship with the ideal of solidarity among brothers, is a social maxim in Dụ Vãng. However, it is not taken-for-granted, not simply a given by virtue of being born into a network of altruistic brothers. Equality has to be worked at, and is sometimes jealously enforced. This is not only pursued through daily, routine masculine practices of social scrutiny to ensure equality, but is also embedded in spiritual beliefs and extends to the afterlife.

The one time that a daughter can potentially make a significant ritual offering to the ghosts of her deceased parents is during her parents’ funerals. These “maternal side” offerings are fairly elaborate in terms of size and ritual procedure, and I was told that they only happen if the daughter’s new household has the means to provide the offering. In fact, the first “maternal side” funeral
offering I witnessed was also the first one that had been performed in years, and none of the village priests, besides old Không, had ever officiated such an offering. Thị, whose patrilineal relationship to the deceased precluded her from attending the funeral where the first “maternal side” offering that I witnessed took place, told me that she, as well as the majority of other adults in Dụ Vãng, had never seen a “maternal side” funeral offering made.39 The offering is basically to ensure that the deceased parent’s ghost is abundantly supplied in the afterlife with his or her wants and needs (see Plates 6.11 – 6.13). Interestingly, after this one instance of the offering being reintroduced into the funeral rites of one person, every funeral I attended thereafter included such an offering. I asked Pão about the revival of this ritual and he told me the following:

People now have more than they did in the past, so people now have the means to make this offering...If there is no daughter to make the offering then the ghost has to go without, clothes will become tattered. For people who are acquainted with being poor, this is no problem because they can endure. But letting your ancestors go without can be dangerous. If they see others around them with beautiful homes, new clothes, lots to eat and money to spend, then like people still living they will constantly approach their children and grandchildren and require things like new clothes and money. People with ghosts always following them have danger to their health, maybe the ghost of that person will follow the other ghosts, or maybe a ghost will bite them.

I was often told that ghosts behave the same way that the living do, and a person’s character endures, though in ghostly form, into the spirit realm. Thus, the ideal of equality between brothers also carries over to the spirit realm. Apparent equality is scrutinized in daily social practices, and when one brother is seen to have excess this is redistributed and “equalized” by other brothers helping themselves to that excess. In the spirit realm, wants and needs can only be properly obtained through the offerings of one’s descendents. After one daughter ensured that her deceased parent would enjoy bounty in the spirit realm, others responded by also making these offerings at subsequent funerals to ensure equality among ghosts.

39 Men can attend and “share sadness” at whatever funeral they want.
The majority of Nùng ritual practices and ceremonies that I was privy to involve some aspect or reference to brotherhood. I was told this is due to the fact that ritual acts and ceremonies involve a supplication made to the ancestors or ghosts, which entities are literally one’s parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and so forth. Pão explained to me the importance of demonstrating brotherly unity as follows: “If you argue, fight and do not get along with your brothers then the ghosts punish you because the ghosts are your parents, grandparents. And like living parents they scold bickering children.” There are several masculine ritual practices that explicitly encourage, reaffirm and emphasize the importance of “brotherly unity”, or pị noọng tọ ném (I most often heard this concept expressed as pị noọng đoàn kết, which is a combination of the Nùng term for “brother” and the popular Vietnamese term for “unity” or “to unify/unite”). Below, I will describe and discuss the ritualized masculine practices of grave cleaning and praying for rain.

Grave Cleaning

Every year on the third day of the third lunar month is “grave cleaning day,” or bünk slam số slam, văn xòn mồ, or simply páy xòn mồ. Typically, only adult and adolescent males, as well as children of both sexes, go to clean graves, which cleaning entails clearing away the brush that has grown over the gravesite since the last cleaning. Exceptions are made if a household has no sons. For example, Thủy went to clean her father’s grave because he had no sons. However, Hùng, her fifteen-year-old male cousin, accompanied her to the gravesite. Thị told me that it would be dangerous for a female to go alone to

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40 Anywhere from three to seven years after the funeral of a member of a man’s direct patriline, the deceased’s skeleton is exhumed and cleaned on grave cleaning day, a practice called fǎn dúc. Dirt is cleaned from the cavities of the skull using a long needle and all the bones are then placed in a container (traditionally made of fired clay, but nowadays plastic containers are also used) and reburied in the same grave. I was told this is to “protect the bones from being eaten by ants”, and is considered a great sign of respect and reverence for the deceased.

41 Út had technically been adopted by Yên, but it was recognized by both families that it was for technical reasons of inheritance, and perhaps more subtly for reasons of giving Yên a more stable social position within the village. Everyone I spoke with about the subject, including Út himself, still considered Út to be Pão and Thị’s son.
clean a grave, as there are bound to be ghosts at a gravesite, and without a strong male presence Thủy would be more susceptible to ghost bites. I accompanied Pão and his youngest daughter, Êng, to clean graves. We took a small, portable “ground-altar” on which offerings are placed. The offerings include rice liquor, paper money and joss sticks to burn in offering, red, yellow and black sticky rice, chicken, duck and deep fried sticky rice cakes. We also took a pick-axe and long jungle knife to clear brush with.

When cleaning graves, you start with your most recently departed patrilineal ancestor and then work backward in time. We started with Pão’s father’s grave, and because Pão is the only living son of his father, we were the only ones performing the cleaning and offering at this particular gravesite. There are graves a short distance away on either side of Pão’s father’s grave, and there was a young man at each of these gravesites clearing brush and making offerings. After we had finished clearing the brush, we placed the ground-altar at the foot of the grave, which is marked by a large mound of dirt (approximately 1 to 1.5 meter in height), and filled it with offerings of food and rice liquor. We then lit joss sticks and stuck them in the ground at the foot of the grave. Then Pão put some food and rice liquor on a single dinner plate and put this on the top of the grave mound along with some burning joss sticks. We then lit and burned some paper money at the foot of the grave, which concluded the offering (see Plate 6.14). After the offering was accomplished, we gathered with the young men, who were cleaning the graves to either side of us, to talk, drink and smoke. As I mentioned above, people only go to clean the graves of their direct patriline (i.e., father and mother, grandfather and grandmother, great grandfather and grandmother, and so on); people do not go to clean graves of uncles or other deceased paternal relatives from whom they did not directly descend.

After we had finished at Pão’s father’s grave, we moved on to his grandfather’s grave to perform the same tasks. Pão’s grandfather sired several sons, so all of the grandsons (i.e., “brothers”) congregate to clean this grave, make their offerings, socialize, drink and smoke. The further you move backward in time, or the older the grave, the more potential there is for a large group of
male scions to be gathered there to clean, make offerings and socialize (see Plate 6.15). The cleaning of graves is a very concrete display and reminder of who your brothers are. Year after year, Nùng men gather at the gravesites of their patrilineal ancestors, identify with one another through common descent, and celebrate their blood relations and solidarity among “brothers.” This ritual practice exemplifies brotherly unity, as no one would dare display anything but camaraderie, or make anything but friendly talk with one another in the presence of potentially punishing ancestral ghosts; it is an opportunity to downplay any rifts that may actually exist between men and reaffirm their brotherhood.

**Praying for Rain**

Every year on the second day of the fourth lunar month, the men of Dụ Vãng make an offering to the thổ côống, or principal ancestor of the village to pray for rain. Two days prior to this offering, all the male heads of household gathered in the home of Không, the old priest. Each household was asked to contribute 4000 VND, which would be used to buy a pig’s head that would serve as the offering to the thổ côống. As each male head of household came forward and made his contribution, his name was written on a ledger.

On the second day of the month, I accompanied Linh (a priest), Lộc (Đức’s younger brother), and a group of young children (both boys and girls) to the spirit house of the thổ côống. Linh set the pig’s head, some rice liquor and a bowl of rice in the spirit house. He then lit two large bundles of joss sticks, which he put into the joss stick-holders at either side of the spirit house. Linh then recited the prayer, which basically asks the principal ancestor to let the rain come. After he had finished the prayer, he lit a piece of paper money on fire and all the children, forming a semi-circle around the spirit house, bowed three times (see Plates 6.16 – 6.17). Then Linh, Lộc, and myself made our three bows in front of the spirit house. Once the paper money had completely burned to ash, we gathered up the rest of the offering and all headed for Không’s house.

Once we arrived at our destination, Linh and Lộc, using a scale to ensure equity, cut up the pig’s head into equal portions. By this time, several other
married men and children of both sexes had also joined us. Several of the men inspected and re-weighed the portions of meat and some minor redistribution was made (see Plate 6.18). Then Linh produced the list of names that had been drawn up two days prior, and began reading off the names on the list. When the name of a household patriarch was read, a child who belonged to that household would come forward with a bag or a bowl (a few of the children simply used their hands, and received reprimands) to collect their household’s portion of the meat.

After all of the meat had been distributed, Linh, Lộc, and Đức, who had arrived during the distribution of the meat, began to explain the ceremony to me. Đức said, “This is done to unite the village and show our unity to the thổ côống so he will make it rain. If brothers are arguing and fighting the ghosts do not like it, they see that we brothers are not behaving properly, so we will not meet with luck.” Linh added:

Did you see that as soon as everyone [i.e., the household patriarchs] gathered and contributed money to buy the pig head it rained that very night? But even if it is raining when the brothers gather to contribute money, or if its raining when we go out to make the offering then the offering still gets made to show the thổ côống we are united and make sure it continues to rain.

This is another instance in which the importance of masculine solidarity is ritualized, but also has real, felt consequences for the entire village. If the households that make up the village (i.e., the male members of the village, or the “brothers”) are not united in solidarity then the principal ancestor of the village stops the rains from coming. The lack of rain during this time of year, which is the primary growing season for staple food crops, can be devastating because most, if not all of the major crops have been planted. For Nùng men and women, “brotherly unity” is not just a symbolic badge of honor, but also a matter of survival.
Rivalries and Rifts

Despite the ideal of solidarity among brothers, there did exist rifts and rivalries between men in Dụ Vãng. As noted above, direct confrontation often made people quite uncomfortable, and solidarity was a significant concern for most men. When confrontation and conflict between brothers did rear its ugly head, most men tried to skirt around it or ignore it rather than engage it head-on. Most of the men endeavored to keep such rifts and conflicts under wraps, especially in the presence of outsiders, and indeed, most of these were played out subtly. It was not until late in my fieldwork that I even became aware of some of the rivalries and conflicts that others considered to be blatant.

After the offering had been made to the thổ côống to ensure the rain would come and the meat divided up and distributed to the different households of Dụ Vãng, Linh, Lộc, and Đức led me into Linh’s house. Several of the other men who a few minutes earlier had scrutinized the distribution of the offering accompanied us into Linh’s home. Among them was Kiên, who produced a bottle of rice liquor. As we began to imbibe, Kiên passionately told the others that the water pipe to his house was broken, that he had no money to buy the supplies he needed to repair the broken waterline, and that he needed his brothers to help create means for him. The other men appeared to only halfheartedly listen to Kiên’s troubles. As the liquor continued to diminish, one by one the other men got up and left while Kiên continued talking. Finally, Linh himself got up and disappeared into his kitchen. I was left alone with Kiên, and a little unsure what I should do. Kiên began telling me that his water storage tanks were empty and his household was going to have to start hauling water from the stream. He told me that no one was willing to help him in his difficult situation. Kiên said that he had gone to the “party members” in the village, Đức and Lợi, to see if he could get assistance from the government, but “they wouldn’t listen/hear.” He said that if he was a “party member” (i.e., held an official position in local government) then “people would be afraid/respectful and would have to hear me.” Kiên went on to explain that he does not earn a “salary,” so he does not have money, and this is
another reason no one will hear him. I asked him, “aren’t you all brothers here?”

He replied:

Yes, but you should not be deceived. We are all brothers, but this village is very selfish. If you’re not a party member [an official] or if you don’t have a salary [earn a regular cash income] no one here will hear you. The only choice I have is to use my mouth, but I have to be careful because if I talk too much, too harshly people will hate my face, hate my children. They might not say anything, but in their hearts they will hate me, and then it will be more difficult for me. Now I have to endure and continue talking until someone hears.

Over the next two days, Kiên came to Pão’s house three different times, each time with liquor in hand, and campaigning for help with his broken waterline. It struck me as odd that he was campaigning by himself, rather than enlisting a wingman to help press his cause. Confronting people directly was obviously making those he approached uncomfortable, signaled by the fact that in each of the instances I witnessed, the man or men to whom Kiên was speaking would eventually get up and leave without a word.

The day after Kiên’s second visit to Pão’s house, Pão went visiting after dinner, and I stayed at home. With Pão gone, I took the opportunity to ask Thị about Kiên’s behavior, as I had learned that men were loath to speak with outsiders about internal brotherly affairs that ran contrary to masculine ideals in Dụ Vãng. With interjections from Hùng and Thảo, Thị explained that Kiên’s father, Thiên, and by extension his entire household, was disreputable. She elaborated on what she had told me before about Thiên, who I had invited to drink liquor and was subsequently reproved, telling me that he spends his time drinking or in search of liquor and then behaves badly. Hùng and Thảo then told me that once the old man had gotten drunk and had a disagreement with his oldest son, Kiên. Neither Thị, Hùng nor Thảo could remember the nature of the disagreement, but the three of them recounted that Thiên had grabbed a knife and threatened to kill Kiên. Kiên responded by grabbing a knife and threatened to kill Thiên. As this confrontation escalated, one of the younger sons ran to a
neighbor’s home calling for help and several men came and broke up the impending knife fight.

Such confrontation between patrilineal relatives would result in a severe loss of face, and be an affront to the ideals of masculine solidarity that are espoused in Dụ Vãng. Several people were openly critical of Thiên’s drinking, not for the sake of drinking itself, but because he got “many mouths” and said “bad things” when he was drunk. Perhaps Kiên’s statement that if he talks “too much, too harshly people will hate my face, hate my children” was born of lived experience, in which his father talked too much and too harshly, resulting in other people hating Thiên’s face and his children. What is of further interest is the timing which Kiên chose to enlist his brothers’ help in fixing his broken waterline. Perhaps he felt that during a time when unity and solidarity among brothers was a heightened concern that other men would be receptive to his bids for help. But perhaps this unexpectedly backfired, and during this time of heightened sensitivity to issues of solidarity other men refused to enter into direct negotiations with Kiên in order to avoid the potential for confrontation and the divisive risks such behavior entails, especially with an individual from a household reputed for disunity.

That the maintenance of brotherly solidarity is primarily a concern of adult men was evidenced by the fact that it was children, and to a lesser degree women, who were quite willing to talk about the rivalries and rifts that exist in Dụ Vãng. Besides Kiên, no other man ever spoke openly to me about any behavior or situations that run contrary to the ideals of brotherly equality and solidarity, though I heard several adult men make allusions that particular men were very craftily and wickedly obtaining and concealing excess wealth. On the other hand, children and women, specifically those who belong to Pão’s household, frankly and voluntarily commented at some length about the contradictions and disjunctures they saw between certain social ideals and concrete social practices. Perhaps this was because they found in me an attentive listener to such issues.
Several years before my arrival in Dụ Vãng, the village had undertaken a communal project in which they tapped a spring and piped water to all of the homes. Smaller, secondary lines branch off from the main waterline, and these secondary lines further branch off into tertiary lines that supply each individual home with potable water. Individual households either built large concrete storage tanks of one kind or another, or use large ceramic vessels to store water. The village is divided into different sections, or tổ, that correspond to each secondary branch off the main waterline. The household that is closest to the head of each of these secondary lines is designated as “section manager” and is responsible for regulating the flow of water to each house within his tổ. Typically, the valves at the heads of the secondary lines remain open, and when a household’s water supply diminishes, the household can simply open their individual waterline and replenish their supply of water. However, during the drier summer months, the water flow from the spring decreases, and the secondary waterlines are closed at equal intervals to ensure there is enough water and pressure for the households of each section to fill their water storage facilities in turn.

One hot summer evening, Hùng and I were leaning over the edge of the household’s water storage tank, peering into its nearly empty recesses and debating whether we should take our dirty laundry down to the stream to wash or holdout one more day in hopes that the water would start flowing again. It had been over a week since even a drop of water had trickled from the dry pipe. Besides Kiên’s household, which was trying to make do with a less than adequate patch-job of his broken waterline, I did not know of any other house in the village that was suffering from such a lack of water. Every night for the past week, Pao had gone to Tùng’s house to bathe, and a couple times to wash his clothes. The rest of the family, who were not so privileged, had been bathing and washing clothes in the stream, about a two kilometer hike out of the village and across several rice paddies—a fairly nerve racking jaunt at nighttime, as a variety of venomous vipers that inhabit the paddies at this time of year become more active at night, not to mention the ghosts that would surely be out and about.
Earlier in the week, I had asked Thị why Tùng and others had plenty of water while we had none. She simply told me that, “our house lies at the end of the line.” I soon learned that this was not the case. Staring crestfallenly into the empty chasm of the water tank, Hùng brought up the topic of jealousy and intra-village rivalry.

Hùng told me that the man who manages the water in our tổ is Lộc, Đức’s younger brother. Lộc, along with Đức’s older brother, Đông, are very jealous of Pão. The last time an election for village headman was held, Đông nominated Lộc, who only got ten votes cast in his favor, while Pão received over thirty (each household casts one vote, of which there are sixty in total). Hùng told me that Lộc has exactly ten “blood brothers,” and these are the only people who voted for Lộc. Lộc and Đông were furious and told Pão that they would never support him in anything. Hùng continued, saying that every time there is an election for anything—commune council, lion dance team captain, and so forth—that Đông nominates his younger brother, who seems to desperately want a position of power, but Lộc never gets elected, while Pão often does. (Just before my arrival in Dụ Vãng, Lộc was finally elected to be captain of the culture team.) Hùng told me that Lộc and Đông are very jealous of Pão because I was living in his home. “Ninety percent of the households in the village are very jealous that you are staying in our household. Not because they are all fond of you, its because they all think you sweat money.”

Apparently, Lộc felt that if he had been elected headman then the financial windfall he perceived me to be would have landed in his household. Hùng went on to say that Lộc and Đông do anything they can to cause trouble for his father. Hùng told me that Đức, however, is a different story. “He tells them to stop it because their way is very embarrassing, especially at meetings.” Hùng explained that one way Lộc can cause trouble for Pão is with water. Often times when Pão’s water supply is nearly depleted he will have to go to Lộc’s house and ask him to allow the water to flow, even after the rest of the houses in the tổ have filled their tanks. Hùng told me that Lộc especially enjoys this game when its hot and dry. Hùng described this power struggle as a contest in which Lộc waits for
Pão to go and beg water. Pão, on the other hand, holds out for as long as he can, going to bathe and wash his clothes at his other brothers' homes while he waits for Lộc to give in and do his job. The casualties of the struggle, however, are Pão's wife and children, who are forced to go to the stream to bathe, wash clothes, and fetch water to haul home. Hùng recounted an instance when Lộc, and presumably Đông, had even built a physical block with old plumbing materials in the tertiary waterline that supplies Pão's household. When Pão finally gave in and asked Lộc to open the waterline, Lộc told him it was already open. Hùng and Út were sent up the hillside behind the house, searching through the thick brush that had grown up around the waterline leading to Pão's home to discover any breaks. This is when they found that the line had been cut apart, an old spigot that had rusted shut had been inserted, and the line reassembled. Hùng and Út told their father, who then rounded up a posse of "blood brothers," and in a fairly public display tramped up the hill and destroyed the block. I asked Hùng if any other action was taken by his father, and he simply said, "no." I asked further if his father and posse of brothers went to Lộc's house to ask him about the block, and, a bit exasperated, he said, "No, my father and his brothers went loudly up the hill and destroyed the block!" In Hùng's eyes, such a radically public display of discontent was confrontation enough to communicate a strong message to the perpetrator.

After Hùng's stories of such injustice, and still agitated over the lack of water that was apparently in supply at all the other households, Hùng and I went back in the house, bantering back and forth about a number of unsavory plans we could devise for the rival household. Thị overheard us, and warned us against talking such nonsense. Armed with my new perspective on the water situation, I asked Thị, "Why has Lộc not yet let the water flow down to the house?" Thị, who was also irritated with the prospect of going to bed without a bath and possibly having to haul water from the stream in order to cook, told me that she herself had "visited" Lộc's house to inquire about the water several times. However, each time she had been met with such responses as, "the water has not been flowing", even though Lộc, Đức, and Đông's homes, located directly above Pão's
home, were well-supplied with water, or “oh, we didn’t know you were out of water,” or “oh, I forgot to open the valve to your house.” Thị told me it was easy for Pão to “have a stiff neck” about the situation because he could go to Tùng’s house to bathe, and she was the one who would have to carry culinary water from the stream. Wives are not supposed to even eat at the same table with their male relatives-in-law, so going to bathe at your husband’s brother’s home is definitely out of the question.

Eventually the water did flow. I am not sure what transpired in order for Lộc to allow the water to flow to Pão’s home. Perhaps Lộc finally “gave up,” or maybe social pressure was brought to bear on him by his older brother Đức, who had a positive relationship with Pão. Whatever it was, it took place very quietly and probably involved negotiations with an intermediary to avoid direct confrontation and conflict between brothers. Once the household had water again, this uncomfortable episode of rivalry and disunity between brothers was, apparently, quickly “forgotten,” and no one seemed inclined to talk further of it. When I asked Thị what happened to make the water flow, she told me, “The water is flowing, that’s what happened.”

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The ideology of the patriline (Ahearn 2001), and patrilocal post-marital residence patterns among the Nùng Fản Sling position men from birth in a stable, preexisting social network of agnatic kin. Masculine work practices and the gendered division of labor, reinforced by women’s and men’s relative positions within the patrilineage, afford men with relatively greater amounts of leisure time, which enables greater masculine capacities for establishing, maintaining, and mobilizing social networks. The significance of robust masculine networks of agnatic kin and the ideals of equality and solidarity among brothers, upon which networks are founded, are mutually reproduced through routine masculine social practices, as well as being highly distilled in ritual practices such as grave cleaning and praying for rain. These configurations of gendered social practices, and the cultural assumptions on which they are premised, construct
and reproduce men, ideally, as having greater social capacity than women, or as "players" firmly embedded, though not statically, within close-knit webs of social relationships with other men, which center on the patrilineage and radiate outwards. Rivalries, rifts, and confrontations do occur, but most men avoid these in a studied way, often mitigating direct confrontation by the use of intermediaries. In the absence of a third-party mediator, men often refuse confrontation by removing themselves from, or attempting to ignore potentially confrontational situations: such rivalries and rifts are swept under the rug and simmer just below the social surface in the interest of maintaining the integrity of unified masculine networks.
PLATES

Plates 6.1 and 6.2 Men gathered to eat, drink, and socialize for the sake of eating, drinking, and socializing [Wangsgard]
Plates 6.3 and 6.4 Spontaneous masculine social gatherings [Wangsgard]
Plates 6.5 and 6.6 Crowds at a festival market in a neighboring district [Wangsgard]

Plate 6.7 The author with festival attendees [Pão]
Plate 6.8 Roasting a pig Nùng-style [Wangsgard]

Plate 6.9 The author on his new Minsk motorbike [Hùng]

Plate 6.10 Negotiating with a potential research participant (left) and his wingman (right) [Wangsgard]
Plates 6.11 and 6.12 Preparing a maternal side funeral offering [Wangsgard]
Plate 6.13 Maternal side offering placed at the head of the deceased's coffin [Wangsgard]

Plate 6.14 Cleaning and making offerings at Pão's father's grave [Wangsgard]
Plate 6.15 A congregation of brothers gathered to clean and make offerings at Păo’s grandfather’s grave [Wangsgard]

Plate 6.16 Linh offering a pig’s head in the thổ cúng’s spirit house in supplication for rain [Wangsgard]
Plate 6.17 The tổ cồòng's young descendants bowing in veneration [Wangsgard]

Plate 6.18 Ensuring equal division of the offering among brothers [Wangsgard]
In Dụ Vãng, men are assumed to be possessed of greater spiritual, mental, physical, and social capacities than women. The social positions and practices of men and women, shaped by a patrilineal ideology and animist or traditional beliefs about gendered capacities for human characteristics, reproduce and reify gender difference as one of degree. In this chapter I present a descriptive examination of events in which masculinity, or maleness is widely praised, commemorated, and solemnized. In the contexts of these events the contours of cultural assumptions, as manifest in social practice, which construct men as possessing greater capacity for desirable human characteristics and traits come into sharp relief. Specifically, I examine the masculine practices and the cultural assumptions which premise these in the context of Nẻn [the Nùng New Year], lòng fũ [lion dancing], and áu hòn [calling the spirit home ritual]. I then turn to an examination of the assumptions about and practices of Nùng Fản Sling priests to illustrate by way of hyper-example what it means, at least in terms of dominant ideals, to be a Nùng Fản Sling man. Taken together with men’s social positions within the patrilineage, cultural assumptions about masculinity and male social practices construct men as having greater human capacities than women, and reproduce the primal and dominant status of men.

MASCULINITY CELEBRATED

The New Year

As stated in Chapter Five, the Nùng Fản Sling New Year coincides with the Sino-Vietnamese New Year, it is considered springtime, and carries with it strong notions of new beginnings. Although this is an auspicious time, people
must be very mindful of their conduct and social interactions, as the behavior, fortunes, luck, health, and temperament of a household during this time heavily influences and sets the tone of a household for the entire upcoming year. The Nùng celebrate the New Year for the first fifteen days of the first lunar month. (This does not include any of the days leading up to the first day of the New Year, which entail considerable preparations for the holiday.) Here I will not elaborate details of this holiday in depth. Rather, my focus will be trained on the gendered practices embedded in the grand, ritualized party that is the Nùng Fǎn Sling New Year’s celebration, as I experienced them.

One cold evening I was sitting by the cooking fire at Yên’s house talking with Yên and three other women, Phương, Quý, and Từệt, all three of whom are in their twenties. Our conversation focused mainly on the upcoming New Year holiday (Nèn bünk chiêng or Nèn pi mâu, or abbreviated simply as Nèn). All of the women present agreed that one of the worst things a person could do on the first day of Nèn is go visiting other people’s homes. Yên told me, “Even if someone invites you to visit them on the first day of Nèn you should not go because they will resent you for it.” This seemed rather odd to me because I had received many invitations to visit homes on the first day of Nèn.

Several days later I was having tea with Mr. Định, the president of the commune level People’s Committee and a member of the Tày ethnic group. We were talking about the roles of duy vật [materialism] and duy tâm [idealism] in everyday life. During our conversation he told me that, “You must come visit my home on the first day of Nèn. You are here by my generosity, and I will be offended if you do not come to my home.” I thanked him for the invitation, but I told him that I thought it was taboo to go visiting other people’s homes on the first day of the New Year. He asked me who had told me this, and I told him. He said:

“They are women, of course they will say this because this taboo is only for women; men can go visiting as they please. You are a man and should

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42 The most common Nùng new year’s wish I heard was, “Cúng hỉ phát sòi, Bùng Chiêng pi mâu, Hết lăng tố lì, Chí lăng tố đẩy a, which literally means “Wish happiness wealth, First lunar month new year, Do whatever also OK/able, Desire whatever also OK/able.” In practice, doing “whatever” was actually not OK.
not suffer to hear a woman’s words. Men are strong and healthy so they bring this impression/influence into a home. Especially it is lucky if a strong, healthy, successful man enters a home. The impressions/influences that are brought into a home on the first day of Nèn will remain for the entire year and will affect/influence the household’s health, luck and success. Women are not healthy like men, and a very important thing, they bleed, making them weak and not clean. Bringing a weak and unclean impression/influence into a home is not lucky, so women cannot enter other people’s homes on the first day of Nèn.

These gendered practices of visiting on the first day of Nèn are explained in terms of men and women’s capacities for health and strength and to carry an auspicious influence into a home. Men are assumed to have a greater capacity to carry a positive influence, as they tend to have higher or stronger “numbers,” and therefore greater capacity for health and strength. Women are assumed to have diminished capacity for these, as they tend to have “lighter” or weaker “numbers” and due to their menses, which make them “unclean” and contribute to their perceived spiritual weakness.

On the first day of Nèn, my host family and I had a quick breakfast and then busied ourselves with preparations for the lunchtime celebratory feast. We killed and dressed ducks and chickens and offered these, along with assorted treats, goodies, fresh fruit, rice liquor and joss sticks to the ancestors on the family altar. We sat and chatted, ate treats and drank rice liquor, made New Year’s wishes to one another, and then enjoyed the feast we had prepared (see Plates 7.1 – 7.2). All of this was done with just the extended household members—Pão, Lão, Thị, Yên, Hùng, Thảo, Thủy, Như, Út, and Éng. After the lunchtime feast, Pão lay down for a nap and recommended that I do the same. I was a little confused as to why we were sleeping when there was celebrating to be done on this festive occasion. The ensuing booze marathon made it very clear to me why resting up before hand was a good idea after all.

Pão and I arose from our nap in the early afternoon, and he announced that it was time to go visiting. I went outside to wash my face and saw that a group of women from other households in the village had gathered outside in the courtyard. Although I saw several groups of women congregating outside of
friends’ houses throughout the day, I did not see any woman enter a home that was not her own (see Plate 7.3). The women were talking, laughing, eating treats and drinking rice liquor. It looked like they were having a good time, and I went over to wish them health, luck, and wealth in the New Year. Soon after, Pão came over, took me by the arm and led me away from the group of women saying, “Especially on this day you will not be with women! Men go with men, let the women go with women. We will go visit brothers.” And with that, we left to go visiting.

When we entered a home we would greet the men with a Nèn wish of happiness, health, and wealth, and they would return the greeting. We would then sit and drink rice liquor, smoke cigarettes, eat goodies and make jovial conversation. As we prepared to leave each house the adult male members of the household we were departing would accompany us to the next house. And so it went, moving from house to house, continually growing in number, drinking, eating, smoking and socializing. By evening we were all stone drunk and the group began to dwindle as men made their way to their respective homes. When Pão and I arrived home the family was making dinner preparations and he and I both lay down for a nap.

After passing out and sleeping for about an hour, I was abruptly awoken by someone dragging me out of bed by my arm. I looked up from the floor squinting, trying to make out the identity of the person who was standing over me and yelling my name. As the haze slowly cleared from my eyes, I recognized Không, the old priest. He told me that the day could not end until I had brought my influence into his home. Apparently, his youngest son had come earlier to invite me to dinner, and I had gruffly told him to go away. Refusing a request made by a woman or a man younger than one’s self is a simple, unceremonious matter. Elder men are allowed and take behavioral license when dealing with others (e.g. dragging a sleeping, drunk, adult male off of his bed and onto the floor in order to make a dinner invitation) that would not be tolerated of someone of a lower station. So I rose, brushed the dirt off myself, splashed some water on
my face and accompanied the old priest back to his house for round two of the first day of Nèn.

That men are assumed to have greater capacity for spiritual potency is evidenced by the numerous times that both men and women told me that men have higher, or stronger numbers, and women have lighter, or weaker numbers. A person’s numbers are a direct indication of one’s capacities for spiritual potency, mental faculties, health, and strength. This distinction between masculinity and femininity is not one of kind, but rather one of degree. Note that both men and women have “numbers,” and difference in male and female capacities to embody the human attributes signified by “numbers” were talked about in terms of degree, rather than a dichotomy of kind, or in terms of “absence” and “presence.” As I discussed earlier, in Dụ Vãng there is a deeply held belief of “influence by association.” These cultural assumptions are made distinctly manifest in the gendered social practices during Nèn, the season in which the social die is cast that will shape the fortunes, whether good or ill, for the remainder of the year. That men should avoid unnecessary contact and association with women and their potentially weakening influence was made clear to me when Pão admonished me that, “Especially on this day you will not be with women! Men go with men.” This is further highlighted by the female taboo of entering any home of which she does not belong, lest she contribute to the lesser female influences of that household already present by virtue of its female members, and thus set the stage for a year of increased misfortune. Although several men in Dụ Vãng had no particular fondness for me, several of these individuals were still eager for me to visit their homes during Nèn, simply because I was perceived to be healthy, strong, and wealthy. It was my perceived influence that was sought out, not my company.

The fourteen days that follow the first day of Nèn consisted mostly of visiting and socializing with friends and family. As far as I could tell, both men and women participated, though often separately, in the socializing and visiting that took place in the days following the first day of Nèn. Many people, both men and women, also attend “festival markets” [hội hàng] and “going down to the field
festivals" [hội lồng tổng], that take place during the Nèn season (see Plate 7.4). There are also various rituals that must be performed during this time of year. I will not detail all of these here, but I will describe the masculine practice or performance of the lion dance.

**The Lion Dance**

A popular male practice during the Nèn season is the lion dance (oóc tại sung or more commonly lọng fũ). On the first day of Nèn, not a single young man (late teens to mid-thirties) could be found in the village, as they had all gone lion dancing. Young men begin practicing the lion dance in the twelfth lunar month in order to be ready to perform the dance during the Nèn holiday. The end of the first lunar month marks the end of lion dance performances for the year. On the last day of the first lunar month, the lion is symbolically killed, or in other words, all of the lion dance paraphernalia and accoutrements are packed away and stored. In the village this event is celebrated with a grand feast that is only attended by men, though much of the preparation for the feast is done by women.

Lion dance accoutrements and paraphernalia consist of a lion costume, a lion keeper’s costume, a monkey costume, and a minimum of one gong, one drum and one pair of cymbals used to beat out a rhythm and set the tempo for the dance. The lion costume is similar to the well-known dragon costume of the Chinese dragon dance, only smaller and worn by only one man at a time. The lion’s head is constructed from paper mâché, painted in a wide array of bright, swirling colors, and very stylized in appearance. Many of the lion costumes I saw also had manes of brightly colored yarn glued to the outer rim of the lion’s head. The head of the lion costume is basically round and measures approximately .75 meter in diameter. Attached to the backside of the lion’s head is a rod that the dancer holds in both hands in order to manipulate the lion’s head as he dances. Flowing from the back of the lion’s head is a fabric cape, approximately two meters in length and a meter wide, that drapes over the dancer. The capes I saw varied in color, from bright pastels to dull grays, and could consist of one solid
piece of fabric or several pieces of different fabric sewn together (see Plates 7.5 – 7.7).

The lion keeper’s costume consists of a paper mâché mask that is worn over the head and face of the “lion keeper.” The lion keeper’s masks that I saw were all painted a light pink with rosy cheeks and noses, broad smiles, and made to have very fat cheeks and large ears—lion keepers look to be very jolly fellows. The only other accessory used by the lion keepers is a short length of tree bough, used to guide and keep the lion in check. The lion keeper does not actually dance, but leads the lion from house to house and animatedly walks a perimeter around the lion (at a safe distance) while it dances, keeping the lion contained in one general area (see Plates 7.8 – 7.9).

The monkey costume consists only of a paper mâché mask that is worn over the dancer’s head and face. These masks were mostly painted with reds and yellows, though I did see some greens and oranges also used. The monkey mask is stylized as well, but less so than the head of the lion. The role of the monkey is to tease and antagonize the lion so that it will “dance,” thus expending and radiating its strength and health. The dancers who wear the monkey masks stoop and crouch, make furtive movements, and generally mimic a monkey—running and jumping around and towards the lion, then darting out of its reach (see Plates 7.10 – 7.12).

Starting on the first day of Nèn, young men (anywhere from eighteen-years-old to their mid-thirties) leave the village en mass to go lion dancing. The young men always practiced the lion dance in the village, but never gave performances there (see Plates 7.13 – 7.14). Instead, they would go and perform in the homes of townsfolk, or “people who live out on the paved road,” who were believed to be of greater influence and considerably wealthier than people from the village and thus able to give higher gratuities to the dancers. When the dancers would arrive in a neighborhood, people would come out and invite them to dance in their homes. In exchange for bringing the auspicious, strong and healthy influence of the lion into their homes, people would give the dancers
money that was later pooled and divided among the performers, as well as liquor and goodies that were consumed on the spot.

All of the men I spoke with about the lion dance were keen to emphasize the physical strength and endurance required of an adept lion dancer. I was told that the footwork and arm movements a lion dancer must make to correctly perform the dance are the same movements executed in Nùng martial arts. The ability to perform the lion dance well indicates that the dancer is also an accomplished martial artist, and the two were always practiced in concert during my observations (see Plates 7.15 – 7.16). Young, married lion dancers were expected to abstain from sexual intercourse with their wives during lion dance season. Otherwise, they may absorb weakening female influences and possibly lose some of their strong, healthy male essences to her, which would compromise their ability to perform the dance well and to leave a strong, healthy influence in the homes to which they were invited. It was during the numerous lion dance practices I attended when I heard young men level the highest number of criticisms and taunts at one another about sleeping with their respective wives.

The lion dance troupe from Dụ Vãng had been invited to perform at a festival in the provincial seat, Lạng Sơn City, on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. Later that same day they were competing in a lion dance competition with dance troupes from other villages in the commune at a “going down to the field festival” being held around a popular pagoda near the weekly market (see Plates 7.8 – 7.12). I had been told by several individuals that the traditional mode of transportation to this annual festival was by foot. Groups of friends would make the five-kilometer trek down to the festival, and the journey itself was considered by many to be part of the festivities. Thị and Yên had made me a new suit of Nùng clothes and invited me to join their entourage for the walk down to the festival, where I could debut my new outfit (see Plate 7.17). A suit of Nùng clothes represents a considerable labor investment. Thị and Yên had grown, harvested, pulled, spun and woven the cotton into cloth, then dyed the cloth with indigo, then sewed the cloth into a
pair of trousers and a shirt (see Plate 7.18). I very readily and gratefully accepted their invitation. A few days after I had accepted their invitation, Tống, a married man in his early forties who regularly invited me to his house to visit, invited me to go with him to the festival by motorbike. I told him that I planned to walk to the festival for fun and invited him to accompany me. He told me that there would be a lot of drinking at the festival and riding home on a motorbike would be much more convenient than walking home drunk. I continued to gratefully decline his attempts to convince me to go with him by motorbike, and he then asked me who had invited me to walk to the festival, and I told him. Tống became indignant and exclaimed:

A man who heeds/hears the words of women will wreck himself! Us men go together, ignore the women, let them find their own way there, let them walk, ignore them! If you walk with women people will see you very embarrassed [i.e., it will be very embarrassing for me to be seen walking with women]! Men go with their brothers, ignore the women, let them go alone.

I persisted that I would prefer to walk, that I wanted to have a full experience of the “going down to the field festival,” and again told him that he should join me. Tống shook his head and, looking dismayed, told me that he would be going with brothers by motorbike.

Late in the morning on the day of the festival, Thị and Yên told me it was time to prepare to leave. Yên’s neighbor Bế had already arrived at the house with her pre-teen daughter and son in tow. Next Hiền, Tống’s wife, showed up with her young teenage daughter and several of her daughter’s friends from other households in Dụ Vãng. We set out on the road to the festival and were joined en route by two other married women around the same age as Thị and Yên and a few more adolescents and children. In total we numbered seventeen: six married women, six adolescent girls, four young children, and myself. Only then did it become starkly and shockingly apparent to me that I would be the only man accompanying the group. This made me feel a little out of place and more than a little uncomfortable. Regardless, I decided to accompany the group and see what came of it (see Plate 7.19).
As we made our way to the festival the conversation was light and jovial and the mood festive. We reached the paved road, which was crowded with festival traffic, and turned toward the pagoda. Not long after this, the lion dance troupe from Dụ Vàng, on their way to the festival from their earlier performance in Lạng Sơn City, passed us on motorbikes. A short distance up the road, the lion dancers pulled into the courtyard of a friend, parked their motorbikes and began preparing to make their way to the pagoda and festival grounds. As we passed the home where the lion dancers were congregated, I waved and called a greeting. Whenever I encountered people from Dụ Vàng while outside of the village (e.g. at the market or at a festival) they always seemed very anxious to demonstrate to others their acquaintance and association with me. However, on this occasion not one of the lion dancers returned my greeting, which seemed very odd to me indeed. Rather, upon seeing me in a company comprised only of women and children, they all stopped their activities and stared. Some of them looked confused, some embarrassed and a few laughed uncertainly. After staring at me for a moment, the lion dance troupe continued to gather their lion dance gear and ready themselves for their performance.

After we arrived at the festival grounds, the lion dance troupes began to line up. I went over to where the troupe from Dụ Vàng was gathered to wish them luck. Once again, not one of them attempted to engage me. A few young men glanced my way and gave slight nods, otherwise I was ignored. When I asked the women I accompanied to the festival about the young men’s behavior, I was told to “never mind.” None of the lion dance troupe members ever attempted to explain their behavior to me either. I figured that the lion dancers were very focused on their upcoming performance.

In retrospect, I interpret the lion dancers’ behavior in terms of Tỏng’s prediction: “If you walk with women people will see you very embarrassed.” The masculine avoidance of female company illustrated by Tỏng’s assessment is premised by the assumption that women’s capacities for health, strength and physical endurance are not as great as men’s, and keeping the company of women will diminish a man’s capacity for these through exposure to the
weakening influences of women. As such, the male lion dancers would not want to risk absorption of the weak influence of women, which would have passed to me by accompanying them all the way to the festival. After all, the lion dance is a very masculine act that requires the performers to draw on all of their physical strength and endurance, and embody the strength of a lion, or “heng pên tú tài sung” [healthy/strong like/become lion].

The Nùng men and women I know do not consider women to be bereft of health and physical strength. I was often told that good health, strength and the ability to perform physical labor are very desirable feminine traits. On several occasions Thị boasted to me that she is the only woman in the village who is healthy/strong enough to plow a field with a buffalo, which is otherwise an exclusively male task. The task of plowing the fields is not reserved for men because it carries with it any inherent prestige or status; it is a male task simply because of the physical strength required to drive a buffalo and plow. The fact that Thị could drive a buffalo and plow gave her boasting rights about her physical strength. However, her physical strength also brought less desirable consequences because on exceptionally wet and cold mornings Pão would send her to plow the fields in his stead—after she had made breakfast and accomplished her other morning chores, of course. Furthermore, several young women in the village did practice martial arts, and were considered to be quite accomplished (see Plates 7.20 – 7.23). Despite this, it was widely believed that they did not possess the strength and endurance required to perform the lion dance, or the capacity to embody the strength of a lion. Therefore, the lion dance is exclusively a male practice. This illustrates that the same kinds of strength, health and physical abilities are desirable characteristics of both men and women, but that men possess greater capacity for these.

**Âu Hòn: Calling the Spirit Home**

I was told on various occasions by Không, Linh, and Pão, the three most prominent of Dụ Vãng’s four priests, that people can fall ill for a number of reasons. These include “natural illnesses,” such as common colds, the
mumps, or other common communicable diseases. Most acute illness, however, is often diagnosed as the result of a ghost bite or as the result of being followed closely by a ghost, as in the case of an ancestral ghost that is constantly approaching one of its descendants in order to make requests and/or demands for a certain want or need. Often times, the distinction between “natural” and “spiritual” are blurred, as can be seen in one of Pão’s explanations about sickness:

If a person is sick because a ghost bite, like a bad stomachache or other pain for example, or some kind of natural sickness, but caused by a ghost bite, and they take medicine to get better it won’t work. They have to make an offering to the ghost first and then take the medicine and they’ll get better right away.

Additionally, a person will fall ill if their spirit wanders from their body, though it is rare that a healthy person’s spirit will wander. More often, it is the case that a sick or weak person’s spirit will wander off. Whether the root of an illness is physical or spiritual in nature, bodily illness also indicates spiritual sickness or weakness. Không, Linh, and Pão, along with every other person I know in Dụ Vãng, believe that only when the spirit and the body are intact is a person healthy, strong, and whole. If a person’s spirit becomes damaged or sick then this adversely affects the body, and such bodily illness increases the likelihood that the spirit will wander. When a person becomes sick, there occurs a loosening of the ties that bind spirit to body. Due to this loosening, people’s spirits can wander off from their bodies. This most frequently happens when an ill person is sleeping and dreaming, and their spirit wanders with their dreams. In either case, a wandering spirit will cause illness or exacerbate existing illness in its spiritually vacant host. When this occurs, a person can only be restored to health if their spirit is restored to their body.

Certain priests are adept at divining the causes of illness, and these priests are frequently consulted by people who are not feeling well. If the priest returns a diagnosis that the illness is “natural” then the sick person may seek medicinal treatment, both Western and local. If the diagnosis is that the person
has been bitten or is being followed by a ghost, then the divining priest
prescribes various spiritual treatments that most often take the form of offerings
to appease the offending (or offended) ghost. If the diagnosis is that the ill
person’s spirit has wandered, then the spirit must be called back to the body if
the person’s health is to be restored. I had the opportunity to accompany Păo to
five different áu hòn, three of which he officiated, and two of which Linh
officiated. Drawing from my observations and participation in these rituals and
the information Linh, Không, and Păo provided in response to my inquiries, below
I provide an abbreviated and generalized description of a “calling the spirit home”
[áu hòn] ritual.

Among the Nùng Fản Sling it is widely believed that ghosts are more
active at night, including any wandering spirits of the still-living. Logically, then,
the áu hòn ritual always takes place at night, usually beginning around 10 p.m.
and lasting between four and six hours, as this is the time that a person’s spirit
will likely be up and about. These rituals always take place in the home of the
person on whose behalf the ritual is being performed. The officiating priest
spreads a mat on the floor in front of the household’s ancestral altar, then stands
in the center of the mat, facing the altar. The priest then begins to chant, while
counting on his fingers (see Plate 7.24). The content of this opening chant
consists of the priest introducing himself to the ancestors, informing the
ancestors of the reasons he is calling on them, introducing the person for whom
the ritual is being performed, and recounting the beneficiary’s “numbers” as well
as the year, month, day, and hour in which the ritual is being performed; hence
the “calculating” on his fingers. The priest then holds up his bag of ritual
paraphernalia and accoutrements before the altar, shakes it back and forth,
empties the contents onto the mat,43 dons his priestly robe and headscarf, and
again presents himself before the altar in order to draw the ancestors’ attention to
the fact that he is indeed a priest (see Plates 7.25 – 7.26). The reasons for
approaching the ancestors in this ritual, aside from the fact that the ancestors are

43 The contents of this bag include a yellow, priest’s robe [slừ tào] and headscarf [têu cunt
 tảo/fǎp]; a small, hand-held gong and hammer; a set of divining sticks [phụ cáo]; a “saint’s
hand” [sláu càn]; and a chant/prayer book [sẹc slứ fǎp].
always informed of household matters of any significance, is that wandering spirits will often seek out and follow ancestral kin. Similarly, ancestors are also drawn to spiritual kin and will sometimes “hold” the wandering spirit of a descendant. If this has occurred, the priest asks that the ancestors release, or encourage the wandering spirit to return to its physical body. The priest then sits on a bench with his back to the altar and begins to chant from the prayer book (see Plate 7.27).

At each ău hòn I attended, when the ritual began there were always between three and six men present, in addition to the priest, the beneficiary, and myself. The beneficiary usually occupies one of the beds in the main living room, the priest occupies the bench in front of the altar, and the rest of the men sit around the edges of the mat. At certain points during the priest’s chant, the other men would join in, lending their voices in support of the priest (see Plates 7.28 – 7.29). As the night wears on, more men inevitably arrive at the ău hòn, take a place on the mat, and join in the chanting, as well as the socializing and drinking that accompanies every male gathering I ever witnessed. Though these rituals can be performed on behalf of women, aside from the woman whose spirit has wandered no other women are allowed to be in attendance. It was explained to me that the male friends and relatives of the sick person attend these rituals to lend their support, and bolster the potency and effectiveness of the ritual by contributing their strong, healthy male influence to the effort. The women I spoke with about their exclusion expressed no interest in attending these rituals. First of all, you had to stay up all night and lose sleep. Secondly, if the sick person’s spirit was wandering about, women did not want to be anywhere in the vicinity, as wandering spirits can potentially cause harm and misfortune. Women tend to have weak or light “numbers” and the Nùng women I know are keenly aware of their susceptibility to spiritual misfortunes, and, very reasonably, did not want to put themselves in harms way.

Besides women’s fear of ghosts, born of the assumption that their lesser capacity for “numbers” make them more visible to ghosts and more susceptible to ghost bites, women’s exclusion from this ritual can also be understood in terms
of the influences men and women are assumed to carry. As discussed in the previous chapter, physical contact between men does not pose any threat to masculinity because the influences transferred through such contact are physically and spiritually potent. Likewise, a social concentration of masculine presence creates a positively charged environment, in which the healthy, strong, and spiritual potent masculine influences can be absorbed by the ill person. As well, bringing together a chorus of male voices to persuade a person’s spirit to return to their physical body is assumed to carry a much more convincing tune than if female voices, considered unworthy of heed, were included in the chant.

A MAN’S MAN: PRIESTS AS MASCULINITY EPITOMIZED

The cultural assumptions about masculinity that circulate in Dụ Vãng, which are manifest and reproduced in gendered relationships and masculine social practices, achieve a high resolution in the beliefs surrounding, and the social positions and practices of priests. These beliefs, positions, and practices demonstrate gender differences between the general categories of men and women as differences of degree in human capacities for desirable characteristics and traits, with masculinity as increased or greater capacity. The beliefs, positions, and practices of priests further highlight gendered differences in terms of status, entitlements and privileges as shaped by one’s relationship to the patrilineage. Although there are dominant and widely held beliefs in Dụ Vãng of what a man should be, the positions and capacities of priests illustrate that masculinity or “man-ness” is not a homogeneous male experience. Because the focus of my thesis is on gendered differences between men and women as two general social categories, and ideals of a masculine status quo, I structure my discussion of priests as an exposition of these themes, and only collaterally illustrate the disparities between differently configured masculinities.
**Entering the Priesthood**

My understanding of training for the priesthood is derived from discussions with three of Dụ Vãng’s priests, Không, Linh, and Pão, and one student-priest, Trò. The ability to enter the Nùng Fản Sîng priesthood is passed from father to son. Having a priest as one’s father does not necessarily result in a boy becoming a priest, but if a boy’s father is not a priest then the boy cannot enter the priesthood. Pão told me that the male descendants of priestly lineages have an obligation to perpetuate the priestly roles and practices. “If one of a priest’s sons does not become a priest, does not study to become a priest, then the household will not meet with luck.” I asked him which of his sons would take up priest training, and he told me that they are both still young so he cannot be sure.

I asked Pão when he had started training to become a priest. He told me he was 30 years old:

Training is very difficult. You must stay at home for three months and only study. Others fix your food and bring it to you. You can’t go play and have to be very careful about observing taboos during this time, otherwise it will be very dangerous. I have heard of, and have also seen myself people who go and play during this training period and while they’re eating or drinking, blood will flow from their mouth, or they’ll become sick or even die. It’s very serious business, I’m not joking at all, it has to be done strictly or the spirits will punish you.

I asked what the punishments might entail, and Pão told me, “If you don’t observe the taboos then maybe an animal will fall ill or die, your crops won’t grow well, yourself or your family will get sick, feel exhausted and not be able to work, or your labor will produce no results, not be able to succeed despite your efforts.”

Pão went on to tell me that every priest initiate [slày thà ụng pàng sụ] has to have five teacher-priests, and none of them can be his own father. He told me that each teacher-priest has a role/duty: “one is the father, one the mother.” He then paused, as if unsure what to say. I asked him what the other three roles are, and he responded, “One is a friend. Each teacher-priest [of the five] has a different role.” I again asked what the other two roles are, and he responded, “có
hết bộ phận” [Vietnamese: have all parts]. He seemed reluctant to give specifics, so I changed the subject.

Two days before the above conversation took place, Pão and I were visiting his sister’s husband, who is also a priest, in a neighboring village. On our way home we stopped at the home of Pão’s student-priest, Trò. During our visit, Pão answered Trò’s questions about the demotic Chinese script that all priests must learn in order to be able to read the priestly books of rituals and offerings, and produce the written supplications included in the more elaborate ritual offerings. I asked Pão how long Trò had been his student, and he told me three years. I asked which of the five roles Pão filled with his student, and he told me, “The role of friend because we are close in age. Older priests have the roles of father and mother.” I asked how long a student must study before he enters the three-month training period when he is more or less confined to the bedroom. Pão told me:

It is self-study. Whenever the student has a question he calls one of his teachers to answer, explain. It takes a very long time to learn all the bài [a general term for “lesson” or “written text” and in this case refers to written prayers/chants and ritual practices recorded in priestly books]. When a student and his teachers feel he is ready then he begins the training for three months.

I asked what the three-month training period entailed, and Pão explained, “Those three months are a test, you test yourself to see if you can fulfill the duties and observe the taboos, it is a test of oneself.” I asked if there was a proctor, an invigilator, someone to kiểm tra [Vietnamese: inspect]. He replied:

The ghosts. If you transgress, behave foully, if you don’t fulfill the responsibilities, observe the taboos then the ghosts will punish you, or when you go and do priest work the ghosts won’t hear you, your offerings will not be effective...It is a test to see if you can live by the principles of a priest. It is like when you join the party [the Vietnamese Communist Party], you commit to live by the party’s principles. When you enter the priesthood it is also that way.
Some time after the above conversation took place, Yến was describing her memories of Pão’s three-month training period. She explained that this was a fairly burdensome time for her because:

During the training period the student-priest must stay in the bride’s room [the women’s sleeping quarters that are adjacent to, but partitioned off from the main living room where the men usually sleep]. Pão had to study, eat, and sleep in the bride’s room. Priests, especially priests, do not go with women. When Pão was training to do priest work Thi could not bring him food, so I had to make and bring most of his food for him, because Thi had to stay away.

I found it interesting that when training to become a priest—by my estimation a pinnacle of Nùng masculinity—the student-priest is confined to the women’s sleeping quarters. Several weeks later, I was walking home from the market and encountered Trò, Pão’s student. He invited me to his house for some watermelon, and to take photographs of his family. I began asking him about his experiences as a student-priest. I recorded the following:

When one of my teachers call me to go and assist at a ritual then I go and help. It’s like interning/apprenticing. This part is not difficult because I just go and watch how to do it, and also help do the ritual and after I have been to so many rituals I know how to do them. The hardest part is learning the writing [the Chinese demotic script]. This part I have to do at home and when I go and labor all day then come home and eat dinner I’m exhausted and only want to sleep.

I asked Trò when he planned to undertake his three-month trial period. He told me as soon as he had learned all the writing. I then asked him which of the five teacher-priest roles Pão fulfilled. Trò laughed and said, “husband.” I was a little surprised and said, “I thought Pão was your friend.” Trò replied, “Pão is my friend, but he is also like my husband.” I must have appeared confused, and Trò explained, “A student-priest is like a bride and must know how to respect and hear the words of his teachers.”

Early one morning I was walking back to Dụ Vãng with Linh from a neighboring village. We were returning home from an all night áu hòn ritual, which Linh had officiated. Pão had left the ritual early because he had a meeting
to attend at the People's Committee offices the following day. I had stayed behind so I could see the ritual through to the end. I began asking Linh about training to become a priest. In the course of our conversation, he told me that the student is “like a bride,” and his five teachers are like his mother and father, his mother- and father-in-law, and his husband. He told me that the ceremony of a new priest being initiated into the priesthood [caâi tạọ] after his three-month confinement in the bride’s room symbolizes being born as a priest. He explained that this is similar to the confinement of a woman and her baby in the bride’s room for one month after the birth, but the priest’s confinement is more difficult because it lasts three months. After the student-priest emerges from the bride’s room, upon successfully completing the three-month trial, he is considered a child-priest [lực śây] until he has gained more experience.

That a priest, at least during the training period, has the capacity to embody characteristics of a bride, a status usually reserved for women, demonstrates that masculinity and femininity are not dichotomously exclusive domains of human difference. Priests, as I will further demonstrate below, are considered to be “manly men,” and perhaps this is because they represent the embodiment of the full range of human characteristics, as made possible and constrained by the Nùng Fản Slingen cultural universe. In other words, there is a completeness about priests’ capacities for human characteristics, much like the completeness of the yin-yang compass. Rather than a sequestering of human capacities into categories of kind, human capacities are encompassed by a cyclical continuum of degree. The feminine and masculine do not sit at opposite poles but range across this continuum of capacity.

**Intelligence**

Intelligence, often expressed as wickedness or craftiness, especially in pursuing one’s own interests to successful ends, is aspired to by both men and women in Dư Vẳng. As discussed earlier, men are assumed to have higher capacities than women for intelligence, craftiness, and wickedness. Among men,
priests are especially noted for their intelligence, both in terms of mental capacities and in realizing their own agendas.

Among the Nùng Fản Sling people I know, priests, often referred to as *cân sláy thả hụng* [priest eye bright], or “bright eyed priest,” which denotes intelligence, are the only ones who are able to read and write the Chinese demotic script used in rituals and offerings; they are akin to a class of literati. During one conversation about Western universities, Pão proclaimed, “In this ethnic group, I am a professor.” Priests, and especially those who are adept diviners, have privileged knowledge and insights that are hidden from others. They possess the ability to foretell the future, diagnose, or more accurately divine sickness and prescribe ritual treatment, and are also able to divine the whereabouts of lost, misplaced, or stolen items. Only priests know how to “see” or “read” a person’s “numbers” [châu slổ], and thus play a significant role in determining who marries who. I was often told that I should not heed a woman’s words, which carried the implication that it is men’s words to which a person should listen. Among men, it is a priest’s words that people would do best to heed. I heard numerous testimonies of men and women from Dụ Vãng and neighboring villages about priests properly identifying which ghost had caused an illness, and then successfully determined what was required for recovery. Because of priests’ privileged knowledge and insights about the world, other people tend to listen to them. But these are not the only reasons that priests are renowned for their intelligence.

As discussed in Chapter One, wickedness and craftiness are hallmarks of intelligence, both in terms of cerebral processes and achieving success in one’s doings. It is also assumed that achieving success through one’s intelligence often results in making things easy for the self, and difficult for others. One evening, Không invited me to have dinner at his home with him and three of his sons, Linh, Duy, and Cảo. Linh and Không had just returned from officiating at a funeral in a neighboring district, and had received a substantial quantity of meat as part
of their payment. Pão had accompanied Linh and Không to the funeral to help officiate but had then been called to serve as the head priest at yet another funeral in the same district, so he had not yet returned home. During dinner, Không asked me how much I pay Pão every month for room and board. I told him to go ask Pão (a not uncommon nor rude response). Duy said, “It’s 500,000 a month, isn’t it!” To which Không responded, “No, it’s 600,000!” The old priest and his sons then started debating whether it was 500,000 or 600,000. It was apparently no big secret what I was paying Pão, so I settled their argument and told them it was 500,000. Linh then asked, “But you have to eat whatever Pão’s household eats, right?” I answered, “of course.” Không shook his head wonderingly, and remarked that “Pão is very crafty.”

The dinner conversation then turned to the topic of the two recent funerals in the neighboring district. My dinner hosts explained to me that Không, Linh, and Pão had all gone to officiate the funeral as supporting priests to the man serving as the head priest, who was from the village in which the funeral was taking place. During the second day of this funeral, another person died in that same village. The family of the most recently deceased approached Linh and asked him to come and serve as the head priest for their household’s funeral. Linh declined because he was already engaged in the first funeral. According to Không and his sons, Pão offered to serve as the head priest at the second funeral, and cut his duties short at the first funeral in order to do so; leaving only three priests to share the work. Over the course of dinner, Không repeatedly and variously remarked in Nùng and Vietnamese that “Pão hết ắc lại!” and “Pão làm ắc lắm!” [“Pão does very wickedly!”], and “Pão cả i lải!” or “Pão khôn lắm!” [“Pão is very crafty/clever!”]. These remarks were not leveled as criticisms. Rather, Không was making complimentary comments, though I sensed the comments

44 Typically, people only invite non-household members to dinner if they have food “worth sharing,” in other words some dish that is not everyday or common fare.

45 At a funeral, one of the three to four officiating priests serves as the “head priest,” and has the primary responsibility of directing the ritual activities. As such, the “head priest” is given greater amounts of meat and money for his services than the other “supporting priests.” A priest is forbidden to serve as “head priest” at more than one funeral per month.
were tinged with a hint of envy or jealously. By making things easier for himself, in the sense that through his actions Pão would earn an additional 200,000 VND by serving as head priest (according to Không and his sons), Pão had also made things harder for others: leaving the other priests to take up the slack in his absence. Regardless, he still warranted admiration, even by those he had made things more difficult for, albeit jealous admiration or envy. Likewise, on several occasions Pão told me, almost as if in warning but without any particular rancor, that the old priest and his sons were very crafty and wicked, which seems to be a common characteristic among priests.

During several conversations with Pão’s wife and children, I was apprised of Pão’s tendency for crafty wickedness, and his penchant for khó cho họ, dễ cho mình [difficult for others, easy for self]. However, I also discovered this for myself. One day, around lunchtime, I returned home after visiting and talking to a neighbor. My host family had not yet returned from their morning work so I began cooking rice in preparation for lunch. Soon after, all the members of my host family returned home from their morning work. Thị and Thảo took over the meal preparations and I helped Pão begin preparations on a large batch of rice with which to brew liquor. We hefted the large pot of rice onto a cooking fire and then joined the rest of the family for lunch. After we had finished eating, Thị and the kids went into the kitchen to clean up. Pão told me that he had to go and attend a meeting at the People's Committee that afternoon, and exclaimed that as the headman he is extremely busy. He told me that he had a lot of paperwork to fill out for the meeting, but that he also had to tend to the rice we had started cooking earlier. Pão then instructed me to fill out the paperwork for him, because as a student I am quicker at that sort of thing than he is, and it would allow him to attend to the rice. I said that was fine and got to work filling out the paperwork. Pão then went into the kitchen and I overheard him telling Thị that he had lots of paperwork to fill out in preparation for his meeting that afternoon and commanded her to attend to the large pot of rice that was cooking on the fire. Pão then came back into the main room of the house where I was filling out paperwork, and again exclaimed what a busy man he is. It was a very hot day, as
most summer days in northeastern Vietnam are, so an electric oscillating fan was running, slowly rotating from side to side in an attempt to cool the house. Păo picked up the fan, moved it next to his bed and locked it in position so that it blew directly and only over his bed. He then lay down, again exclaimed what a busy man he is, and promptly fell asleep. I finished the paperwork and then helped Thị heft the large, heavy pot of rice off the fire and onto a bed of coals to allow it to finish cooking at a slow simmer. About an hour had passed and Păo arose from his nap and came into the kitchen to check his wife’s and my progress. When he had made sure that everything had been accomplished to his liking, he announced he had to leave for his meeting. As Păo left, he commanded Thị to go to the fields, saying, “if you want our household to have something to eat go work the fields.” He told me, “If you let the rice cool for too long before you break up the clumps the liquor will not taste delicious.” Breaking up all the clumps in a sixty-kilogram batch of cooked, steaming hot rice by hand is a tedious task under the best conditions; when it is above 30° C outside this task is down right miserable. After Păo left, Thi turned to me and said, “Do you see yet how crafty and wicked he is? He is very clever, he makes things easy for himself and difficult for others. He is truly a man, you need to follow his way [learn from his example].” Thảo, who had been hanging laundry in the courtyard, came into the house after her father had left and started playfully taunting me as I labored over the giant heap of hot, steaming rice, saying, “Honest people eat gruel, wicked people eat rice. You are really getting your fill of gruel this afternoon.”

Priests are reputed for their intelligence, in the broadest sense of the term as conceived by the Nùng Făn Sling people I know. Men, as a general social category, are assumed to have higher capacities for intelligence than women, both in terms of cognitive processes and meeting success in their doings. Among men, priests’ capacities for these achieve an even higher attainment. Not only in the successful doings of priests, which reflect crafty cognition, but also in priests’ embodiment of “scholarly” intelligence and the insights priests have into the workings of the world, both spiritual and physical, as there exists a continuity
between them, the condition of one intertwining with and shaping the condition of the other.

**Spiritual Potency and Taboo**

Most people in Dụ Vãng harbor a deep and abiding fear of ghosts. This fear does not only extend to the various demons or malevolent, wandering spirits, but also includes the ghosts of departed family members. One evening I was asking Thị about “chicken ghosts” *[phi cái]*, which are malevolent ghosts of deceased people that crave blood, but can also be the spirit of a living person that takes flight from the person’s sleeping body in search of blood—either animal or human. Thị spoke of these ghosts in a hushed and tentative voice, obviously afraid. In the course of Thị’s descriptions, Hùng got up and hurriedly left the room plugging his ears, and Éng huddled against her mother with her head buried in Thị’s shoulder. Thị told me that if someone suspects a living person of being such a *phi cái*, the suspecting party will not dare say anything for fear that the *phi cái* will attack the accuser in their sleep. She went on to explain that “only priests can discover and indicate them, because ghosts can’t bite priests.” Although the ghosts of ancestors are not feared and abhorred to the same degree as demons, they are still treated with trepidation. One evening I was out visiting at the homes of Yên and Tổng. On this same evening, one of Yên’s next-door neighbors died. Both Yên and Tổng, as I prepared to depart their respective homes, warned me to take a circuitous route home in order to avoid passing by the home of the recently deceased, as this man’s ghost would still be lingering near his home, and encounters with ghosts should be avoided at all costs. For this same reason, when attending funerals people would often place a piece of a certain plant, called *pố tài xẳng*, in their clothing because this plant was believed to make people invisible to ghosts.

Priests, at least outwardly, do not fear ghosts the way that others do. The only time I ever heard a priest express fear of ghosts was in reference to the retribution a priest can expect from ghosts if he transgresses taboos. The priests I know seem to be most concerned with food and sexual taboos. I was told by the
priests in Dụ Vãng that Nùng Fản Sling priests are forbidden to eat buffalo, dog, and cow. When I asked Pǎo about the reasoning behind these taboos, he initially told me that others would “thấy không hay” [Vietnamese: see no/negative particle good], or others would see the priest’s actions as bad. When I pressed him about the subject, asking what the ghosts would think, Pǎo explained that the ghosts do not eat buffalo, dog, or cow, so if he ate these things his offerings would not be effective: “The ghosts don’t listen to someone who doesn’t do as they do.” On separate occasions, Linh and Không confirmed Pǎo’s explanation.

Linh gave me his perspective on a priest’s food prohibitions one evening while visiting Pǎo’s home. After he had finished outlining the foods he is forbidden to eat and explaining why, Thị brought up the subject of sexual taboos, saying, “This man is also forbidden to hug women.” Linh replied, “No, no, just the eating taboos, I can hug women thoái mái [Vietnamese: in a relaxed manner].” Thị retorted, “But you can’t do it a lot.” Linh said it was no problem, that it was only during certain times he had to observe the sexual taboos. He then detailed the times in which he is forbidden to sleep with his wife, which include the first lunar month, or Nèn, and if he is participating in lion dancing then the twelfth lunar month as well (the month in which men practice the lion dance in preparation for Nèn), but this taboo applies to all men who participate in lion dancing. Linh went on to explain that he could not sleep with his wife from the time he gets invited to make an offering or perform a ritual until thirty days after the offering or ritual has been completed. I refrained from pointing out that I had not seen a month go by in which multiple rituals and offerings had not occurred, from birthdays of the elderly, to weddings, to funerals, to áu hờn, to grave cleaning, to praying for rain, to tức tôn, to the births of children. Linh added that he could also not sleep with his wife for thirty days after she gives birth. Thị pointed out that he had to refrain from sleeping with his wife for four months after the death of each parent, and for forty days after the death of each of his wife’s parents. Linh corrected Thi, clarifying that this taboo applies to everyone, not only priests. After Linh had finished, I sat looking at my notes trying to reconcile the frequency of Dụ Vãng’s priests’ involvement in ritual activity, the sexual
prohibitions that accompany a priest’s ritual involvement, and the possibility of a window of time in which a priest could engage in sex without transgressing taboos. If priests strictly adhere to the sexual taboos, I am amazed that they continue to produce children after entering the priesthood. In Pão’s case, he had not.

That food and sexual taboos are the chief prohibitions priests are concerned with is well-illustrated by a component of the priests’ altar used at funerals. At every funeral I witnessed, hung on the wall directly above the table-like portion of the priests’ altar is an illustrated piece of yellow fabric that measures approximately one meter in length, and a half meter wide. On the left and the right sides of this cloth there are five rows of human figures, each row arranged one above another, with a path that runs between the two sides. The figures depicted in these five rows are priests. The first row represents living priests (only depicted on the right side of the cloth) starting on the difficult, upward path toward sainthood. The four upper rows depict the spirits of deceased priests, and these rows, arranged one on top of the other, represent the different, hierarchical levels of priestly veneration that can be achieved in the afterlife. It was explained to me by Pão, Linh, Không, and Trò that the bottom level or row is representative of the feet, the second level the knees, the third level the groin and hip region, the fourth level the chest and shoulders, and the fifth level the head. At the top or fifth level there are only three “priest-saints” that sit directly in the middle and at the end of the path that runs between the lower levels. These are the oldest, the “gods,” with one being bigger than the other two. Linh explained, “just like there is a head priest who leads a funeral—he is the master.” None of the priests I spoke with were real clear about who the spirit-priests are on the fourth, third, and second levels, except that they represent different degrees of sainthood. However, below the lowest row of priests (i.e., the priests still sojourning in the human world) there are also depicted several other figures, and the priests I spoke with were very clear about these figures. On the left side there is a picture of a buffalo, a couple of demonic looking figures, and a man bound with rope and being dragged by the demons toward a large wok set
over a fire. I was told that this represents priests who did not observe the food taboos, and consequently they get fried in the afterlife. On the right side there is a picture of a fallen priest, a jagged-looking and bloodied saw or knife, and the fallen priest’s severed genitals. I was told that this represents the fate that awaits priests who do not observe the sex taboos. The path that runs down the middle of the rows of spirit-priests is the road a priest should follow. At the bottom, the path that living priests must follow is a difficult, twisting road, with easier paths that branch off from the main path, but these lead to the undesirable fates of being stir-fried and dismembered (see Figure 7.1). If a priest does not endure, and transgresses the principles of the priesthood and follows these other roads then he knows what fate awaits him. If a priest successfully navigates the difficult bottom portion of the road, then a straight and easy path is laid before him in the afterlife, which leads to sainthood.

**Figure 7.1 Sketch Drawing of Ritual Cloth Hung Above Priests’ Altar at Funerals**

Source: Field Journal, July 14, 2005. (Note: not drawn to scale.)
Unlike “regular folks,” priests do not avoid ghostly encounters. By virtue of a priest’s office he is required to actively engage ghosts. In order to come away from these encounters unscathed a priest must possess and maintain a high degree of spiritual fortitude and potency. Priests’ confidence in their ability to not only engage with, but also to persuade, entreat, and even threaten and command ghosts is buoyed up by a widespread belief that priests are impervious to ghost bites due to their high levels of spiritual potency. Priests’ high degree of spiritual potency and fortitude are achieved, I was told, during their three-month test and trial period, and is further increased during the **caài tạo** ceremony, which I never had the opportunity to witness, when extremely potent “priest numbers” are added to the man’s “birth numbers.” Once achieved, this spiritual potency and fortitude must be maintained through the observance of food taboos, or “doing as the ghosts do,” and avoiding the spiritually weakening influences that men are at risk of absorbing through social and physical intercourse with women. Only then will the ghosts listen to a priest’s requests and his offerings be effective. Only then does a priest possess the power to make written and spoken threats and “prayers” of warning into the shirts of young children and the elderly that when seen by an ill-intending ghost will make it “truly afraid.” And only then can a priest effectively employ a “saints hand” [sláu căn] and actually work as a proxy for saintly ghosts, who lack physicality and thus require priests to perform certain physical ritual acts that the ghosts cannot accomplish themselves.

To be a man carries assumptions about high degrees of spiritual potency, and the maintenance of that potency is ensured by masculine social practices. Priests are held to higher standards of masculine “purity.” I spoke to several men who are not priests about eating cow, dog, and buffalo, and was surprised to discover that they all had sampled these meats. However, as Đức was quick to point out, they only dare eat these meats outside their homes, and most often outside the village, away from the prying and disapproving eyes of the household.
ancestors and the harsh thọ côồng.\footnote{Among Tai-speaking peoples in Vietnam, these food taboos seem to be fairly unique to the Nùng. The Tày of Vietnam, widely recognized as close ethnolinguistic relatives of the Nùng, have no such prohibitions against eating cow, dog or buffalo (Vương Toản 2004). Of special note is the Nùng taboo against eating buffalo, which is otherwise a widespread and well-documented practice among Tai-speaking peoples. For the majority of Tai-speakers, the sacrifice of a buffalo is an honorable, and perhaps the most significant sacrifice one can make to the ancestors. David Holm, in his meticulously researched examination of a Zhuang cosmological text that details buffalo sacrifice, \textit{Killing a Buffalo for the Ancestors}, has claimed that the annual “New Year sacrifice [of a buffalo] to the ancestors is a very ancient practice, shared originally by all Tai-speaking peoples, both in southern China and in Southeast Asia” (2003:1). To forbid the sacrifice of any bovine, and to fear punishment from those to whom the sacrifice is made, seems to be a rarity among Tai-speaking peoples.} Also indicative of a priest’s heightened and carefully maintained spiritual potency is that “regular men” will hold a child fifteen days after its birth, believing that the female influences have sufficiently dissipated. A priest avoids contact with a newborn child for at least one month to ensure the child is completely free of female influences. To be a priest carries assumptions about hyper-degrees of spiritual potency, and thus entails a heightened awareness in attending to the maintenance of that potency through hyper-masculine social practices.

\textit{Patrilineal Permanence}

Every man in Dụ Vãng, as a permanent member of the patrilineage, has at least some sense of connectedness to one another, to the patrilineal ancestors they share in common, and to the direct patriline of an individual’s household. This masculine connectedness is continually emphasized and reaffirmed through ritual practices discussed earlier, regular offerings made to the patrilineal ancestors in each individual household, and the experiences and representations of male relationships as brotherhood. As the keepers of the patrilineal genealogies, and with higher obligations to patrilineal ancestors, I argue that priests have a heightened awareness and sense of patrilineal connectedness.

Traditionally, priests constituted a class of literati among the Nùng (Barlow 2005). Priests were, by and large, the only persons trained in reading and writing the Chinese demotic script used in offerings and rituals. Beyond its use in offerings and rituals, the priests employed, and still employ this script in recording
family genealogies. Whenever a new house is built and the new ancestral altar established in the new house, a priest is enlisted to produce a written history, or genealogical recounting of the household’s family name (i.e., the patrilineage), including the specific genealogy of the given household. These genealogies are written on large sheets of red paper in the Chinese demotic script, and hung above the family altar (see Plate 7.30). In Dụ Vằng, only priests know how to decipher the script. Không told me that he and the other priests maintain books of genealogies, or “family name books” that contain general genealogies of all 120 Nùng Fản Sling family names. Whenever a potential marriage is brought before a priest, he not only determines the couple’s astrological appropriateness, but also ensures that the potential bride and groom are sufficiently un-related (seven generations between paternal kin; three generations between maternal kin). Having access and making frequent reference to genealogies that are written specifically to demonstrate patrilineal connections would tend give a person a heightened awareness and sense of such connections.

The priesthood, as mentioned above, is passed from father to son. This results in a priests’ direct, male patrilineal ancestors (i.e., father, grandfather, great-grandfather, etc.) consisting entirely of priests. Every time a priest is requested to perform an offering or officiate a ritual he must present himself at his ancestral altar and make an offering to his own ancestor-priests and invite their spirits to accompany him. Pão explained to me that each time he “goes to work as a priest, my ancestors go with me.” In this context, “ancestors” specifically refer to the male members of his patriline. In this way, the spirits of his ancestor-priests lend their own spiritual potency to Pão’s priestly endeavors. Pão further explained that after he has finished his priest work and collected his payment, in the form of meat and money, he must first make an accounting of his material gain and offer these things to his ancestor-priests before using them himself. Regularly communing with and keeping the company of one’s patrilineal ancestors’ ghosts would tend to foster a sense of close connectedness to them.

Every year, before the end of the first lunar month, or the month of Nèn, each priest must make an “end of Nèn offering.” Both Linh and Pão invited
me to observe their individual offerings. Pão explained that this offering is not made to the ancestors, or to the thú côống, but specifically and only to his ancestor-priests. The priest places a small “ground altar” on the floor in front of the ancestral altar. The ground altar must be minimally supplied with a chicken, rice liquor, and burning joss sticks. The priest then uses a burning joss-stick and bowl of water to cleanse the ground altar, the offering, and the area immediately surrounding it. The priest then burns some paper money as he begins a rehearsed chant, in which he calls to his ancestor-priests and invites them to descend from the ancestral altar and join him around the ground altar for food and drink. After Pão had completed this part of the offering he told me it was finished and had me take the chicken into the kitchen. However, when I came back from the kitchen Pão was still seated at the ground altar with the rice liquor and burning joss-sticks, and was speaking. But his speech was made in a conversational manner, rather than the timed cadence of a chant. I later learned that what had actually concluded was the formal, ritualized part of the offering, which is performed to call the ancestor-priests down from the ancestral altar. I quietly sat down, off to one side and listened. Pão filled several cups with rice liquor and placed them around the ground altar as if inviting others to drink, and then took a drink himself. Pão’s speech, made in a conversational tone, consisted of giving an accounting of his household’s comings and goings over the past year to his ancestor-priests. When he had finished he poured another cup of liquor, dumped a little on the ground, dipped his fingers in the cup and tossed a splash over each of his ears, then drank the remainder. When I observed Linh make his end of Nèn offering, he went through the same motions, beginning with the very practiced, ritualized steps, and then shifting to a conversational mode (see Plates 7.31 – 7.35). When each of the village priests had completed their individual offerings they gathered for dinner and invited me to join them. I asked about the dumping and throwing of the rice liquor. Together they explained that after they had met and spoken with their own ancestor-priests, they then offered liquor in all directions, inviting all priests who had gone before to join them for a drink.
In this ritual instance, a priest literally communes with the deceased male members of his patriline. Other men in Dụ Vãng regularly reaffirm their patrilineal connections with their living brothers through everyday social interactions premised on assumptions of brotherhood, and through ritual practices such as grave cleaning, but they do not engage their patrilineal ancestors in direct social interaction. Sitting down over a drink with one’s entire patriline and “catching up on news” was the most concrete and overt display of patrilineal connectedness that I witnessed during my research. It was also a clear demonstration of a priest’s expansive masculine networks, which not only extend beyond the village, hamlet, and commune, but also extend beyond ți dâ [the human/physical world].

**Socializing and Networks**

As elaborated in the previous chapter, the masculine practice of socializing, through which social networks are established, maintained, and mobilized is a prominent social practice by which masculine identities, and assumptions about masculinity are reproduced. The practice of mobilizing these networks also features the key role of intermediaries in pursuing one’s interests to successful ends. The more influential the intermediary, the greater the degrees of success in realizing one’s goal. These aspects of masculine practice, as with many others, seem to take on a greater intensity and heightened resolution when considering the networking practices and capacities of priests.

The work of priests entails a great deal of mediation. Priests are often called upon to broker social negotiations, such as marriage arrangements. However, priests are not the only men who ever fill the role of intermediary. From my observations and experiences, most men in Dụ Vãng enlist the help of intermediaries, most often choosing close friends and “blood brothers,” during all kinds of social negotiations. Rituals and offerings also take the form of a negotiation, in which priests serve as intermediaries between the living and the ghosts. An interested party (e.g. an individual or household) makes its interests or request known to a priest, whether the request be made to household ancestors to illuminate the cause of an illness, to release a wandering spirit of the
living, or made to Án Và to protect a child, or made to the thờ cồống so that it will rain. The priest then presents the request to the ghosts and attempts to persuade the ghosts to make the request a reality. In negotiations between two human parties, the intermediary must be influential and persuasive if the negotiations are to be successful. Thus men, rather than women, are called upon to intercede so that the intermediary’s words will be heard. In negotiations with ghosts, it is priests, rather than “ordinary men” who must intercede, as it is their words that carry an even greater worthiness of being heard. When a priest intercedes between the human world and unseen, spiritual forces, his position and role as intermediary takes on an extraordinary quality relative to the otherwise commonplace masculine practice of intermediation.

In addition to increased capacities for extraordinary, or hyper-masculine intermediation, priests also possess heightened capacities for social networking. The establishment, maintenance and mobilization of priests’ masculine networks, which networks tend to exceed those of non-priest men, begin during a priest’s training period. As mentioned previously, each student-priest requires five teachers. Dụ Vãng is well-known among other Nùng Fản Slìng villages in Lạng Sơn for its relatively high number of priests, which totals four. That Dụ Vãng boasts the highest number of resident priests of all Nùng Fản Slìng villages in the province necessitates that every student-priest look beyond his own village for potential priestly pedagogues in order to meet the requirement of having five teacher-priests. In short, a student-priest must establish and cultivate close relationships with priests outside his own village. Such an arrangement requires a priest to begin fostering inter-village social networks during the gestation period of his priestly career. After a student-priest has mustered an adequate network of teachers, he also begins to establish an inter-village network of relationships that extends beyond relationships with other priests. During a student-priest’s apprenticeship, he often accompanies his teachers as they attend to the households who request priestly services. And as the work of priests always entails a social element, the accompanying student-priest is presented with
opportunities to broaden and deepen his intra- and inter-village social networks on a more regular basis than would a non-priest man.

Once a student-priest has completed his training and trial period and is born into the priesthood, his opportunities for social work will, generally speaking, increase. The priests of Dụ Vãng did not want for opportunities to practice their craft, and they were very often engaged in priestly work, whether in Dụ Vãng or elsewhere. On multiple occasions, Thị explained to me that one reason Pão's parents chose her as his bride is because she is hearty and able to labor well. She explained to me that as the wife of a priest she had to be able to “labor wickedly” because her priest husband would often be away from home, sometimes for five to six days at a time. In these instances, Thị had to pick up the slack in the household’s agricultural labor.

Pão was frequently gone from home, whether on social business, priestly business, or official headman business, the latter two inherently encompassing and overlapping with elements of the former. One evening, a household in Dụ Vãng asked Pão to make an offering of a pig (considered a very substantial offering) and a bài [a written prayer or request] to the thổ côồng on behalf of a sick family member. After he had completed the offering, Pão returned home to rest for a bit while the household on whose behalf he made the offering prepared dinner. Pão told me that he must go back to this particular house and have dinner with the family, because if he did not, “the ghosts will think, ‘why isn’t the priest eating here? He offered this pig to us, but he doesn’t think it is good enough for him to eat?’ Or the ghosts might think, ‘this priest truly doesn’t care for this family,’ so the ghosts won’t accept the offering and won’t listen to my request [i.e., the bài].”

Socializing is a mandate of a priest’s position. The services of the priests of Dụ Vãng are frequently requested throughout the district in which the village is located and in neighboring districts as well. Working in the capacity of a priest requires one to socialize with the people to whom services are provided in order to make one’s offerings more effective and to maintain positive relationships with one’s patrons to ensure continued patronage. As a result, the priests I know are
well-traveled, and well-connected. During my trip with Păo to a festival market in a neighboring district, he demonstrated to me the breadth and depth of his social networks, stating that he could stop at any house in the district and be well-received as a welcomed guest. The capacities of priests to establish and maintain social networks to a greater degree than most does not simply result from a mandate of their positions and practices, but their capacities to establish and maintain such networks are enabled by their positions and practices.

In Dụ Văng, there is a widely held belief that the personal inclinations and characteristics of ghosts parallel those of living humans. During various conversations with Păo, Không, Linh, Đức, Thị, Yên, and others, it was explained to me that the conditions, circumstances, characteristics, and social practices of a person’s ghost in the spirit realm reflect the conditions, circumstances, characteristics, and social practices of that person at the time of death. The ghosts of those who die violently are believed to be in pain because they died a painful death, as Thị explained, “that's the reason they cry out when they wander, they often call for their mothers because people call for their mothers when they're hurt.” Păo told me that during a funeral, the priest sends the ghost of the deceased to an appropriate place in the spirit realm. If a young person dies their ghost is sent to a place where there is a market and other youth, because youth only desire “chơi bời.” Thị, who was present during Păo’s explanation, added that in the spirit realm:

[Youth] go to the market with other youth and flirt and play—they may even marry each other, we can’t know for sure because we can’t see them. You only have to leave some food for them outside the window because the ghosts of youth only come eat, and then they're off again to go play. Middle-age women are sent to a place where there is lots of work to do, lots of fields to work and forests to collect firewood to keep them busy so they don’t return to their home very often. If not, mothers would come home and try to talk to their children, ask them how their studies are going like living mothers do. If parents’ ghosts come home and talk to their children the children will get sick or won't be able to eat. So mothers have to be sent where there are lots of fields to be worked and firewood collected so they don’t come home...When husbands die they’ll come home and try to talk to the wife, ask where dinner is, and such...When old people die they become the ancestors. These ghosts can come home and
are allowed in the house, because when they do come home they reside in the altar and that is where you make offerings to their ghosts. If you make the offerings then these ghosts don’t bother people while in the house and they can be asked for help.

Păo, who was less inclined to elaborate than Thị, summed it up as follows:

When people die they are sent to the place that ghosts gather according to their age. It is the priest that helps send them there, he sets them on the appropriate road and sends them on their way. Youth go to play, middle-age go to work and the old go to an easier place where there is less work because they’re old. All the spirits can meet one another during their comings and goings but they have different gathering places according to age. During Nèn spirits often return home to eat and celebrate with the family.

Priests’ ghosts also continue to behave in ways that parallel the behavior of priests in the human world. When Út was eight years old, he was having serious health problems. His grandfather, a priest, had recently died, and Út had been extremely fond of his grandfather. Thị told me that Út used to “follow his grandfather everywhere.” The family enlisted the services of a priest renowned for his skill in divination to diagnose Út’s malady. During the divination ritual, the divining priest discovered that Út’s spirit had wandered after his grandfather’s ghost, following his grandfather deep into the spirit realm. This was a dire state of affairs because the combination of Út’s spirit having ventured so deeply into the spirit realm and the fact that his spirit obviously preferred to follow after his grandfather meant that an áu hồn would probably not succeed in returning Út’s spirit. The family determined that a bà then should be summoned and sent into the spirit realm to retrieve Út’s wayward spirit.

Bà then are ethnic Tày, female spirit mediums, renowned among Tày-Nùng groups for their ability to travel into the spirit realm and engage ghosts. The ability of a bà then to contact and converse with ghosts within the spirit realm is premised upon the assumption of her “light numbers” rather than upon an assumption of “strong numbers.” Because of her “light numbers” a spirit horse is able to support her spiritual weight and bear her into the spirit realm where she will be very visible to ghosts. That she is able to engage the ghosts and come
away from such encounters without spiritual damage being inflicted is accomplished by the intercession of a “spirit-teacher,” a potent, male spirit who serves as her mentor, spiritual intermediary, and protector. Nonetheless, I was told that such work is spiritually taxing and if proper safeguards are not in place then the bà then puts herself at considerable spiritual risk. Before a bà then undertakes any spiritual mediation, she invokes her spirit-teacher, who precedes her to the village and household in which she will work, making introductions and receiving permissions from the thổ cống and household ancestors on her behalf.

When Pão’s household enlisted the services of a bà then, she encountered Pão’s father (Út’s grandfather) during her journey into the spirit realm. She reported that the ghost of Pão’s father was very happy in the spirit realm, that he spent his time going to many different villages, socializing and playing and had plenty of food to eat and money to spend as a result of receiving Pão’s offerings of his priestly earnings.

“This is doing/being a man, this is leading a carefree/playboy life!” Hào’s statement, recounted in the previous chapter, which he made to me during one of the many exclusively male gatherings I attended, indicates that such pursuits and practices are masculine aspirations. It would seem that assumptions about priests and their concrete social practices, not only in this life but also in the next (if they observe the taboos), position them to more fully realize such masculine aspirations to their fullest degree.

One of Pão’s many acquaintances from a neighboring commune stopped by the house one day to invite Pão to serve as the priest at the man’s son’s wedding. After the man had departed, Pão complained to me that he was very tired, and all of his headman duties, priest work, and agricultural chores were exhausting him. I asked him why he did not simply tell the man “no.” Pão seemed to resign himself to the situation, saying, “That man has come to ask me several times, so I cannot refuse him.” However, Pão then seemed to stop and reflect on what awaited him if he did accept the invitation, saying, “Besides, I go and do a little priest work and for that I’m given roasted pork, a little money, get respected
and get to chơi bơi for three days. Why wouldn’t I go?” I said the work of a priest must be very enjoyable. Pão just laughed.

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Men, relative to women, are assumed to have higher capacities to embody desirable human characteristics and traits. Positioned as primal members of the patrilineage also enables men to pursue social practices that highlight and reify masculinity as heightened capacity for human characteristics and social practices. Increased capacity must be maintained through avoidance of women, and keeping the company of other men. In the company of other men, masculine capacities and privileged positions are emphasized and reinforced through celebration. The positions and practices of men, and the assumptions which underlie these, take on a distilled quality in an examination of priests’ positions and practices as gendered. Among men, priests represent the epitome of masculinity, both in terms of personal traits and characteristics, and social positions and practices. The social positions of priests provide them greater opportunities to engage in social practices considered to be masculine, or the province of men, which in turn work to reinforce the assumptions about and positions of priests as “hyper-masculinity” and lends support to the dominant ideology of what it is to be a proper man.
Plate 7.1 Păo's ancestral altar loaded with New Year's offerings [Wangsgard]
Plate 7.2 Enjoying the festive New Year’s atmosphere with my host family [Hùng]

Plate 7.3 Women and girls socializing in a courtyard on the first day of Nèn [Wangsgard]

Plate 7.4 Crowds at a hội lòng tổng during Nèn [Wangsgard]
Plates 7.5 and 7.6 Young men practice dancing with lion costumes [Wangsgard]
Plate 7.7 Dụ Vãng’s lions [Wangsgard]

Plates 7.8 and 7.9 Lion keepers keep their unruly beasts in check [Wangsgard]
Plates 7.10 – 7.12 Monkey dancers antagonize the lions then furtively dart out of reach
[Wangsgard]
Plate 7.13 A lion dance team going to perform for "people who live out on the paved road" [Wangsgard]

Plate 7.14 Dancers and their accompanists practice in the village [Wangsgard]
Plates 7.15 and 7.16 Practicing martial arts in concert with lion dancing [Wangsgard]

Plate 7.17 The author and Pão wearing newly-made men’s suits [Thào]
Plate 7.18 Thi putting the finishing touches on my new suit of men's clothes [Wangsgard]

Plate 7.19 Two Yao men stop to say hello to the group of women and children I accompanied to a hội lồng tông [Wangsgard]
Plates 7.20 – 7.23 Adept female martial artists from Dụ Văng performing at a hội lồng tống
[Wangsgard]
Plates 7.24 and 7.25 Pão introduces himself and the beneficiary to the ancestors at an áu hòn ritual, then empties the ritual contents of his priest's bag onto a mat [Wangsgard]

Plates 7.26 and 7.27 Pão, wearing his priest's garb, presents himself to the ancestors (left), and holding a siâu cân, he chants from a prayer book (right) [Wangsgard]
Plate 7.28 A group of male áu hòn attendees look on while Pão makes a prayer into the beneficiary's shirt [Wangsgard]

Plate 7.29 An all-male chorus lending their voices in support of Pão's chant [Wangsgard]
Plate 7.30 A family's genealogy displayed above the newly established ancestral altar of a recently completed house [Wangsgard]

Plate 7.31 Pão preparing to cleanse his end-of-the-year ritual offering to his ancestor-priests [Wangsgard]
Plate 7.32 Pão cleansing his ritual offering, the ground altar, and the surrounding area [Wangsgard]

Plate 7.33 Pão calling to his ancestor-priests to descend from the ancestral altar and join him for food and drink [Wangsgard]
Plate 7.34 Linh performing the cleansing of his ritual offering to his ancestor-priests [Wangsgard]

Plate 7.35 Linh converses and shares a drink with his ancestor-priests while his youngest son looks on [Wangsgard]
8. A LOCALLY ENGAGED THEORY OF GENDERED IDENTITY

The conceptual frameworks with which I entered the field could not be made to account for the narratives and dialogues, imbued with cultural assumptions and ideas about gender, nor the manifestation of these in the concrete social practices that I encountered in my research. My ethnographic data refused many of the categories and assumptions embedded in Western gender theory. Although several brands of feminist thinking, within and without masculinity studies, psychoanalysis, and schools of thought variously labeled postmodernism and poststructuralism have provided me with some useful insights as jumping-off points for thinking about gender and masculinity as general abstractions, these also proved unsatisfactory and inadequate to the task of explicating a Nùng system of gendered relations, gendered identities in general, and masculine identities in particular. However, my conceptual frameworks do range over broad intellectual terrain, raiding into these various domains to scavenge for useful theoretical bits and pieces.

Gendered relationships, in and by which gendered identities are constructed and reproduced, are often marked by gender difference; whether in terms of characteristics, practices, entitlements, or power. The primary topic of this ethnography is masculinity, but as I have attempted to demonstrate, identity, which is always gendered, “is not fixed in advance of social interaction, but is constructed in interaction” (Connell 2005:35). Masculine identities are reproduced in and by systems of gendered relationships, which systems of relationships also reproduce, and are reproduced by feminine identities. Thus, I frame my discussion in terms of gender and gendered relationships, but with an eye toward masculinity.
The frameworks I employ in my own interpretations and explanations of Nùng Fản Sling gendered identity are guided by the concept of “locally engaged theory” as an overarching principle. Anna Tsing refers to locally engaged theory as “Transcultural conversations [that] make use of fragments of whatever theories are available…Locally engaged theory can take various pieces of classic approaches and apply them in addressing particular intellectual challenges. Theory is situated as it engages with locally specified puzzles” (1993:32).

The question of Nùng masculinity is only a locally specific puzzle in that I took it up as an intellectual challenge in a particular locale. Most of the people I interacted with in Dụ Vãng thought “masculinity” to be a thing worthy of description. Although what it means to be a proper man (or a proper woman) among the Nùng is not impervious to negotiation, debate and disagreement by the Nùng, most people did not consider masculinity to be a phenomenon that necessarily warranted questioning or analysis. Among my research participants there are particular practices and ideas recognized as feminine or masculine. But people’s recognitions were typically not explicated, they were tacitly assumed. These assumptions are realized and reproduced as lived realities through configurations of masculine and feminine practices within a system of gender relations. We humans interpret the world by drawing on our cultural assumptions about the world, thus our interpretations reflect our assumptions. Our interpretations become our reality and reaffirm our assumptions about the world as true, as natural, as real.

NUGIN FÀN SÌNG CONCEPTS OF SELF AND DIFFERENCE

The most general reference to human beings in the Nùng Fần Sling universe is the term tú cân; tú being the classifier for animate beings, including animals, and spirits, and cân meaning person. Tú cân literally means “person animal,” and can be interpreted as human being, member of the human species, or humankind in general. Most often, when referring to a person or people, human species membership is assumed, and thus tú is dropped and cân is used
to specify a certain kind of person or people, such as cân ać (wicked person/people), cân thì thät (honest person/people), cân heng (healthy/strong person/people), or cân Kéo (Kinh person/people). Or, to comment on a person’s or people’s perceived humanity as informed by Nùng cultural assumptions, such as in the proverbial phrase: Tô chéng kin năm cắt mi pên cân [each other dispute/argue consume water cold not/negative particle become person/human], interpreted as, “To argue over cold drinking water is un-human.” Cân, in and of itself is an asexual and gender neutral term referencing humanity. This term can be used in concert with an adjective to describe a person’s or people’s nationality, ethnicity, personality, or some characteristic or trait that could be commonly ascribed to, or potentially embodied by any human, male or female.

The Nùng Fản Slìng concepts used to denote selves and others are framed in terms of two general categories: hau,47 and hâu. The term hau can most simply be translated as “self.” However, this term does not simply refer to an exclusive, singular, individual self, but also refers to an inclusive “self and we,” or “you and I.” The term hâu denotes others, as in “they,” “other people,” “someone else.” For example, Hâu mi sen páy hàng ślub ślub khấu mầu kin Nèn, hau pô mi sen, âu ślub khấu câu mi khạt ma lụng cúng dầy [they/others have money go market buy clothes new celebrate New Year, self/we-inclusive not/negative particle have money, take/get clothes old not/negative particle ripped bring wear also able/OK], interpreted as, “Others have money so they can go to the market and buy new clothes to celebrate the New Year, we do not have money, so wearing old clothes that are not ripped will be fine.”

The category of hau encompasses first and second grammatical persons, both plural and singular, in which there are overlapping categories of “selves,” or overlapping degrees of inclusivity. This category also includes the entire array of Nùng gendered kin terms, and can be seen below in Table 8.2. Here I will only outline more general categories and concepts of “self” and “difference.” Within the category of hau there are two forms of singular, gender neutral, first and

47 Hau is sometimes spoken as lau in Nùng Fản Slìng, and always spoken as lau in other Nùng dialects and Tày.
second grammatical persons. These are **ngô-ni**, and **cáu-mưng**. The **ngô-ni**
terms of address are very informal, where **ngô** is the familiar “I,” and **ni** is the
familiar “you.” I most often heard husbands and wives, siblings, and close friends
refer to one another as **ngô** and **ni**. The terms **cáu** and **mưng**, which also mean
“I” and “you,” are most typically used by elders when addressing juniors who are
not one’s own offspring, and thus carry a sense of hierarchy based on age.
Because of the implied hierarchy in **cáu** and **mưng**, when used appropriately
these terms denote propriety, and thus a degree of politeness or formality, or, at
least, do not connote rudeness.

These forms of address are not hard and fast rules. Elders may refer to
themselves and their juniors by the gendered kin terms appropriate to each
situation. Husbands and wives may refer to one another as the father or mother
of their first born child. A younger brother may address himself to his older sister
as **cáu** and may address her as **mưng** in order to show impoliteness; on another
occasion he may address his sister by her given name, and address himself as
“younger sibling.” Friends may refer to one another by their given names, or by
the “big names” they give each other. Although the terms **ngô** and **ni**, and **cáu**
and **mưng** define the interlocutors of a dialogical interchange as an exclusive “I”
and “you,” both of these categorical dyads denote a degree of familiarity; they
presume the general inclusive category of “self/we,” or **hau**. Because of the
degree of familiarity signaled by the use of **ngô** and **ni**, and **cáu** and **mưng**, I think
it is safe to argue that the interlocutors’ genders are assumed.

The category **hâu** refers to the grammatical, plural third person. Like the
category **hau**, **hâu** also encompasses overlapping categories of “others,” or
different degrees of exclusivity. Taken by itself, **hâu** refers to an undefined, distal
“they.” This third person plural is obviative (sometimes called fourth person) and
gender neutral, in which the person or people are less topical, or the referents

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48 The terms **ngô** and **ni** can be, and are used during verbal exchanges with strangers, but only if
the speaker wishes to express condescension, disrespect, disregard, impoliteness, or
animosity towards the stranger; using a familiar pronoun to address an unfamiliar person
seems to indicate an absence of a human relationship, which relationships are always marked
by mutually constituted positions between people. Thus, implying that no relationship exists
between interlocutors suggests an absence of humanity.
are generic and indefinite. Situated within this hảu category is the term mun, which means “he/she/it.” When used alone, mun does not specifically designate the referent as gendered. However, mun is more proximate than hảu; it is a term with which the person becomes more topical, more distinct, but is still excluded from the “I” and “you” of the inclusive hau.

Hau and hảu can be employed at different levels of generality; both concepts are dependent on the level of inclusivity and exclusivity being referenced by the two terms in any given context. For example, while preparing to attend a festival market with Pào, Thị and Yên explained to me that the festival attendees would all be Nùng Fản Slìng hau, or “only us Nùng Fản Sling.” Thus hau can be made to reference all those who identify as Nùng Fản Sling, implying that all those who do not are categorized as hảu, or “other.” On a different occasion I was told, Cân Kéo hết ựn, hảu pô mi thì thật pên Nùng hau [people Kinh do different, they-indefinite not/negative particle have honest become/like/are Nùng we-inclusive], translated as, “The Kinh do things differently, they are not honest like us Nùng.” Hau can also refer to all sub-groups encompassed by the category “Nùng,” while categorizing all Kinh as hảu. On another occasion I was told Cân Việt hau pên tốt thà, cân Khẹc hảu pô mi chắn [people Vietnamese (referring to nationality rather than ethnicity) we-inclusive become/like/are honest, people Chinese them-indefinite not/negative particle have truthful], interpreted as, “We Vietnamese are honest, Chinese are deceitful.” Hau can also be extended to include all those of Vietnamese nationality, and hảu used to denote the exclusion of a distal group of people (e.g. the Chinese) from this category. Yet on another occasion, the same people, also drawing on the concepts of the “inclusive we,” and an excluded but more proximate “them,” told me that, in reference to other Nùng Fản Sling villages, dự bàn ượn ki ở mun hết cớp, tô họn, hết lão, pô mi thì thật pên bàn hau [at village different/other they (masculine) do steal, each other hit, do impolite, not/negative particle have honest become/like/are village we-inclusive]; interpreted as, “In other villages, they [masculine] steal, fight, and are rude, they are not honest like our village.”
Hau can also be used to make exclusions within the single ethnic category “Nùng Fản Sling,” indicating divisions between different Nùng Fản Sling villages.

Other people can be conceptualized as more distinct when specifying a particular inter-sexed group, such as the people of another village, with the term *ki cân mun* [several/few person he/she/it], which is a more proximate “they.” This can refer to, for instance, people who the speaker has actually interacted with, or of whom the speaker has more concrete and immediate knowledge. This more proximate rendering of “they” is often articulated in gendered terms: *ki ὂ mun* [masculine they], or *ki tú mun* [feminine they]. The gendered distinction between the two concepts and terms, *ki ὂ* and *ki tú*, is important to an understanding of masculine identities among the Nùng. The term ὂ comes from the word ὂ ἐch, which means “whole ancestor clan,” or “entire family lineage.” The term tú, as discussed above, is a general classifier for animate beings. Thus, the term *ki ὂ mun* literally means “several/few lineage members he/she/it,” while the term *ki tú mun* literally means “several/few animate beings he/she/it.” The masculine is signified by membership in a lineage or clan, ὂ. The feminine is indicated by the general classifier tú, which bears no affiliation or association with any particular group of people.

The terms ὂ and tú are also used to refer to gendered selves, with different formulations referencing an inclusive and an exclusive “self/we.” *Ki ὂ hau* refers to an inclusive, masculine “we.” *Ki ὂ cáu*, or *ki ὂ ngô* refers to an exclusive, masculine “we, not you.” Likewise, the *ki tú* formulation can be use to reference an inclusive and exclusive feminine “we” in the same manner.

As indicated in Chapter One, there is no term equivalent for “masculinity,” “femininity,” or “gender” in the Nùng language. The majority of Nùng Fản Sling personal terms of address denote maleness or femaleness, and a person’s sex is explicitly indicated by sex/gender specific terms that also indicate a person’s relative position within the Nùng system of relationships, which positions are inextricably gendered (see Table 8.2).

Among the Nùng, the English concepts of “sex” as reference to one’s reproductive equipment, and “gender” as the social meanings ascribed to bodies
with similar genitals, or the social condition of being female or male, are inextricably bound up together; there is no linguistic distinction made between “sex” and “gender.” The Nùng Fàn Sling terms that specifically refer to anatomical sex are toi mê [female], and toi pộ [male], with toi being the classifier for sex, and mê and pộ specifying which one. The closest Nùng correlates for the English terms “masculine” and “feminine” are pên pộ [become/like/are male] and pên mê [become/like/are female]. To be male is to be a man (or boy, depending on the stage of life), and to be a man carries with it assumptions about personal characteristics, social relationships and practices, which assumptions attend to a person’s observed anatomical sex. The degree of masculinity achieved by a man is referenced and conceived in terms of the characteristics and practices that are assumed to attend to and signify maleness.

I never heard the terms toi mê [female] and toi pộ [male] used to explicitly refer to a singular person as sexed or gendered, such as, “that person is male” [căn té pên toi pộ], or “that male person” [căn pộ té]. Rather, when a speaker wanted to refer to a person as gendered or sexed, then he or she would simply employ the appropriate gender and age specific kin term, which is how people most often addressed and referred to one another. When people refer to others without positioning them within in a system of relations then the referent’s gender and sex is not specifically indicated, and they would be referred to as mun [proximate he/she/it], or hâu [obviative they/them]. Referring to “others” simply as mun or hâu would also make other features of identity, besides gender/sex, disappear as well. These terms do not locate the “other” within any particular social relationship with the speaker, but rather places the referent outside of a distinct social relationship and thus erases any distinct defining human features.

The terms bạo and sláo also indicate maleness and femaleness, respectively, though without the explicit overtures of anatomical sex. The terms bạo and sláo do indicate “gender,” but they only do so in terms of social relationships. For example, pị bạo [older brother], lực bạo [son], pị sláo [older sister], lực sláo [daughter]. The terms đếch sláo [young woman], and đếch bạo [young man] do refer to people, in the third person, as gendered without
specifically positioning them within a system of kin relations, but these still frame people in terms of hierarchical social relations based on relative age.

Nùng personal terms of address are unquestioningly gendered, and these gendered terms cannot be separated from anatomical sex. For instance, the term for “husband and wife” is pó mệ [male female], indicating that joining a male and female together is what constitutes proper human pair-bonding. The term used to reference one’s parents collectively is pó mệ thâu, where thâu indicates parentage. When people are referred to by terms that highlight their anatomical sex it still implies a social relationship. Women are only called mệ in reference to their social position as mother, wife, or female relative-in-law, and not to isolate or specify them as females, though femaleness is inseparable from these social positions. Likewise, men are only called pó in reference to their social position of father, husband, or male relative-in-law, and such social positions are dependent on the assumption of anatomical maleness (see Table 8.2). Even when I was insulted by being called mệ it still placed me within a system of social relationships. Although it was based on an implication of female anatomical sex, this was not the real sting of the insult. The reason this is considered an insult is because of how it positioned me socially—implying that I could only occupy the positions of daughter, wife, female relative-in-law, or mother. Identifying a man with these provisional, marginal, subordinate and devalued social positions is considered an affront to the social positions that should attend to maleness.

When people are referred to as singular, with terms that do not specifically frame them or identify their position within a system of relationships, then gender neutral terms are invoked, like mûn, Ngô and ni, and cáo and mûng. Ngô and ni are typically only used between interlocutors who are intimately familiar with one another, or between those who consider themselves to fall within the general “self/we” category of hau, and thus gender and social position are taken-for-granted. Cáo and mûng do denote a hierarchical relationship marked by age, and thus status difference, but in which a person’s sex is not a primary organizing feature of the relationship, as all juniors are expected to defer to their elders regardless of sex. Terms of address become explicitly gendered, or refer
to sex difference, when individuals are situated within a system of social relationships, and it is these social relationships that frame people in gendered terms.

Nùng Fản Sling concepts and representations of “self,” and the system of Nùng Fản Sling terms of personal address (i.e. kin terms) well-illustrate the problems of framing identity as a coherent, bounded, singularity that can be characterized by a key cultural concept. Among the Nùng Fản Sling, representations of selves, and, I would venture, experiences of selves are continually shifting in relation to the particular individual with whom a self may interact at a given moment. Self-representations and self-experience are constantly being dialectically and differently interpreted and constituted in relationships and interactions with, for example, younger males, younger females, older males, older females, paternal relatives, maternal relatives, and so on. A self also shifts depending on the degree of inclusivity or exclusivity invoked by the different categories of “self/we” and “others.” A self (as well as “others”) may be experienced and represented in relation to one’s same-sexed peer group, one’s extended kin group, one’s ethnic group, and so forth. The Nùng Fản Sling concept of an inclusive self can encompass the experiences and representations of “self” as a Vietnamese national, as a member of the Nùng nation, as a member of a particular village, as a member of a particular patrilineage, as a group of men or women within a particular patrilineage, and so on. As gender is implicated with identity, and identity is shifting from one situation, context, and interaction to another, then so too the way that people experience, interpret and represent their gendered selves, whether masculine or feminine, also shifts.

With regards to masculinity, C. L. Pearlman (1984) describes a practice of “code switching,” in which young Mazatec men represent and enact different patterns of masculinity depending on the person with whom a young man is interacting (e.g. an older woman versus another young man), and in what context the interaction takes place. This is axiomatic among the Nùng, but it does not take place as a conscious practice of switching between “codes” of masculinity.
Rather, these shifts in self-orientation and representation are unreflected upon
givens, as everyone in Nùng Fần Sling society continually finds themselves on
shifting ground; not only when an individual transitions between one sociocultural
context to the next (e.g. from Nùng society to Kinh society), but also within the
context of the village, or even within the immediate family. The notion of code
switching conjures up gendered identity and the cultural contexts which shape it
as sets of codes or rules. This does not fit well with my formulation of identity as
ongoing and synthesizing experiences and representations drawn from and
constructed within social relationships that are shaped by tacit assumptions
about the world, rather than by a set of codified roles one must follow in order to
be recognized as a masculine member of a given society.

Furthermore, I do not conceive of these shifts in identity as
fragmentations, ruptures, or fractures. That a person’s experiences and
representations of self may shift rapidly from one utterance to the next (e.g. in a
conversation that includes a young man, his older paternal uncle, and his
younger maternal niece) does not turn people into “heaps of fragments” with no
sense of historical or future continuity from one moment to the next. Rather,
these shifts are manifestations of different aspects of multifaceted, continually
synthesizing, shifting, whole selves, of which only certain parts are brought to
bear at any given moment of any given experience, representation, and
interaction. I argue that people’s multiply positioned and shifting selves form a
complex network of differently configured relationships that do not rupture
people’s sense of self, but firmly embeds the Nùng people I know in a
sociocultural system of relationships that not only evoke a very real sense of
historicity and connectedness with the past, but also outlines possible future
selves constituted in future relationships; relationships that have a continuity with
the past and the present.

I now turn to the construction of identities as gendered by examining
cultural assumptions that premise gendered practices and shape how these are
interpreted and represented within a social system of relationships.
YIN-YANG THEORY

Research on Asian masculinities is sparse, and studies concerning Southeast Asian masculinities, in particular, is even more so. With regards to Vietnam, Jack Harris has noted:

Vietnamese men, their attitudes and behaviour, and the practical relation of Vietnamese men’s lives and identity in relation to women’s lives and identity has disappeared from the data except as allusions or abstractions. There is actually very little documentation about the world of Vietnamese men, their relationships with their families, and their relationships to men and women in both private and public spheres...Vietnamese gender scholars have assiduously avoided studying men as gendered beings. (Harris 1998:54)

As discussed in Chapter Two, much of the research on Southeast Asian gender issues has been approached through an unsatisfactory framework of sex role theory, whether implicitly or explicitly. In searching for theoretical insights I have had to cast my net quite broadly. The studies I have found most useful in shaping my own thinking around Nùng Fản Slìng masculinities within contexts of gender relations have focused on East Asian masculinities. These studies are relevant because I consider Vietnam, and much of southern China for that matter, to sit at a crossroads of East and Southeast Asia. Additionally, the Nùng Fản Slìng have their ethnolinguistic and geographic origins in what is now southern China, which many consider to be part of East Asia.

Rather than employing a functionalist framework of sex role theory that takes masculinity and femininity as polarized and discrete sets of characteristics, perhaps a more appropriate framework for understanding gender difference among the Nùng Fản Slìng, with regard to human characteristics, can be found in or adapted from, at least in part, yin-yang theory. Kam Louie (2002) argues that Western theorists often superficially understand yin-yang theory as a binary opposition, similar to Pythagorean oppositions. Respectively, yin-yang are very frequently represented as cool-hot, feminine-masculine, weak-strong, passive-active, yielding-firm, and so on. When applied to an analysis of gender by a mind
accustomed to organizing the world into binary opposites, the yin-yang concept can easily be reduced to fixed essences of woman and man. In Asian contexts, however, both yin and yang essences are “regarded as being in constant interaction where yin merges with yang and yang with yin in an endless dynamism. This suggests that every man and woman would embody both yin and yang essences at any given moment” (ibid:9).

Gender difference among the Nùng Fản Sling cannot be reduced to the simple understanding that men embody yang essence and women embody yin essence. A single individual, whether male or female, is assumed to naturally embody both yin and yang. In other words, masculinity and femininity are not conceptualized as discrete and exclusive categories corresponding exclusively to either yin or yang, but “overlap and constitute differences of degree” (King and Wilder 2003:262). After all, completeness is represented by the yin-yang compass, where both are equally present and eternally merging into one another. This approach assumes that men and women do not necessarily posses qualitatively different characteristics (a sociocultural construct recognized by numerous researchers working in Southeast Asia), but rather both have capacity for the same kinds of characteristics—keeping in mind that all men and women do not posses equal capacity.

Using fragments of yin-yang theory is appropriate to theorizing gender difference in a system of Nùng gender relations, as many Taoist concepts are assumed within the imaginative universe of the Nùng (Abadie 2001; Saul and Gregerson 1980; Schrock et al 1972). Elements of Taoist philosophy, at least as it is practiced by the laity, are quite apparent in Nùng religious practices and beliefs: the widely held belief that spirits pervade and continually interact with the human/natural world; religious practitioners or priests [cân sláy, laào sláy] intervene in and mediate between the spirit and human/natural worlds; revered spirits are waited on and supplicated like people of high status or station in the human world; evil spirits or demons are bribed, threatened, tricked and cast out of homes or the community like human thugs and outlaws would be (Wolf 1974). Furthermore, the Nùng people I worked with migrated from the southern Chinese
province of Guangxi roughly 200 years ago (see Howard and Howard 2002). Taoism was sanctioned by the Chinese state in the year 440 as an official religion. State support for Taoism in China ended in 1911 (Wolf 1974). The ancestors of the Nùng with whom I worked were undoubtedly exposed to Taoist, as well as Buddhist and Confucian philosophies. In many of my conversations with Nùng priests and lay people, as well as my observations of and participation in various ritualized ceremonies and everyday social life, I saw and heard elements of all three schools of thought jostle and mix with a cult of ancestor worship and animist beliefs. All this said, I will not be attempting to elucidate Nùng gender by clinging dogmatically to Taoist yin-yang theory and its accounts of femininity and masculinity. Rather, I will appeal to shreds and patches of yin-yang theory as I feel it will help make sense of the gendered realities I encountered during the course of my research.

In considering the applicability of a yin-yang framework for understanding Chinese masculinity and gender difference, Louie submits that, “since both sexes can be either or both yin and yang, the performance of sexual difference is not wholly explained by yin-yang theory” and therefore he advocates abandoning yin-yang theory because its “interminable interactiveness…prohibits gender specificity. Incisive theorising of masculinity is inhibited by the fluidity of the yin-yang binary because each statement should equally be applied to femininity as well” (2002:10). I disagree with this move, at least in the Nùng Fản Sling case, for a number of reasons. In his argument, Louie theorizes gender as “the performance of sexual difference,” which carries strong notions and runs into the

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49 I will forego a discussion of Buddhism here. There are some elements of Nùng ritual practices and offerings that have recognizable similarities with various forms of Chinese Buddhism and Vietnamese Buddhism (e.g. various funeral practices and offerings, offerings made to household ancestors, and offerings made to the principle ancestor of the village). However, it can also be argued that these beliefs and practices are Taoist in origin (as well as influenced by Confucian precepts; see Ủy ban nhân dân tỉnh Lạng Sơn 1999:555-6). When Buddhism was first introduced into China it shared sufficient similarities and compatibilities with Taoism that many Chinese Taoist scholars regarded it as a hitherto unknown branch of Taoism. It has been convincingly argued that the similarities between these two religious traditions is, at least in part, what facilitated the widespread acceptance of Buddhism in China, which was variously incorporated into local Taoist and animist beliefs and practices (Chen 1964). An attempt to tease apart what in Nùng religious belief and practice is Buddhist and what is Taoist would be a moot exercise for the purposes of this dissertation.
same pitfalls of sex role theory discussed in Chapter Two. Secondly, he claims that *yin-yang* theory is insufficient for isolating general categories that can serve as coordinates for masculinity, which is equated with biological maleness in his argument. In other words, he is attempting to isolate the pure essence of “man,” or what is essentially male, and *yang* essences cannot be made to account for these, as *yang* is not confined to biological males only. Noting the social relationships prescribed by Confucian ideology, resulting in a gender hierarchy that places men above women, Louie argues that gender fluidity and mutuality implied by the *yin-yang* cyclical continuum must be counteracted by another sex-specific discourse, which is not to be found in either Confucian or *yin-yang* paradigms, and which naturalizes the gendered imbalance of power in Chinese society. He identifies this paradigm as the *wen-wu* dyad (*wen* referring to civil and mental ideals revolving around literary and cultural attainment; *wu* referring to physical and martial ideals revolving around valor and power). Louie argues that only the ideals of *wen-wu* can be made to account for Chinese masculinity alone because “while men and women can both be discussed in terms of *yin* and *yang*, the *wen-wu* dichotomy is applied to women only when they have transformed themselves into men” (ibid:11). I am somewhat skeptical of this claim. It has been shown that a world ordered by the *yin-yang* paradigm is a widely held cultural assumption in Chinese, as well as other Asian sociocultural contexts. If this is the case then *wen* and *wu* could be interpreted through a *yin-yang* framework as *yang* characteristics, and as Louie states, “both sexes can be either or both *yin* and *yang*.”

Several scholars have argued that traditional Asian masculinities have been constructed around the intertwining ideals of *wen* and *wu* (Louie 2002; Louie and Edwards 1994; Taga 2005), or their various local correlates, such as Kenneth Henshall’s (1999) characterization of Japanese masculinity as

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50 Although not explicitly stated, Louie’s historical accounts of *wen-wu* do demonstrate that *wen-wu* operated as cultural ideals of masculinity in Chinese society before the advent of Taoism as an organized body of philosophical and psychological knowledge (Lao-Tse, the widely accepted founder of Taoism, lived from 604-531 B.C.), and before the advent of Confucianism as a canonized philosophical corpus.
intertwining “soft” and “hard” ideals, which closely correspond to the *wen-wu* dyad. Achieving a balance between *wen* and *wu*, though the proper balance has pendulated through history with one ideal being emphasized over the other at different times and in different places, is supposed to result in the epitome of masculinity. Whether or not this is the case in Chinese or other Asian sociocultural contexts is debatable, however, cultural ideals of *wen-wu* cannot be made to account for masculinity as a discrete category among the Nùng Fản Sling.

Among the Nùng Fản Sling there are cultural ideals that are parallel, though not exactly, to *wen-wu*. These are the ideals of *heng* (strength and health) and *caài* (intelligence). The term *heng* is similar to the Chinese ideal of *wu* in that it is made to reference physical strength and endurance in regards to such things as martial arts and lion dancing (see Wangsgard 2007). Physical strength is also referenced in terms of valor, or *tàng đầy*, which describes a person who, because of their strength, is not afraid of anything. However, *heng* is also used in reference to a person’s ability to perform physical labor, a person’s ability to eat and drink heartily, or a person’s “numbers,” which determine their imperviousness or susceptibility to illness and ghost bites.

The Nùng Fản Sling ideal of *caài*, though similar to *wen* in that it refers to cerebral activity, rarely embodies the traditional Chinese notions of mental ideals associated with literary scholarship and civil, or “cultural” refinement. Rather, the ideal of *caài* most commonly references cleverness and craftiness, manifest in a person’s doings, and more accurately in the degree of success a person’s doings achieve.\(^{51}\) *Caài* does refer to literary scholarship with regards to Nùng Fản Sling priests, who must be adept at reading and writing a Chinese demotic script used in ritual prayers, chants and offerings. But this aspect of *caài*, especially where priests are concerned, is additive to its more popular aspects of successfully

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\(^{51}\) Intelligence carries with it strong notions of cleverness and craftiness, and is often referenced by such terms as *slìng slac* (clever, aware), *dổí* (cleverness manifest in one’s ability to do) and *hết kính laái* (to be clever at doing something). A crafty, clever person is one who can calculate their self-interest to successful results. Those people who achieve self-interested ends less often, to lesser degrees, or rarely at all are considered less intelligent or even stupid, and are not viewed as “good” men or women.
achieving one’s self-interests, an ability for which Nùng priests are widely acclaimed. Also, a more recent deployment of the caài ideal as scholarly achievement is with regards to school-aged youth who excel in Vietnam’s public education system. Nonetheless, caài is most commonly referenced in terms of promoting and realizing one’s own interests (and one’s own interests often encompass the interests of one’s kin group).

Unlike the Chinese ideals of wen-wu, as represented by Louie (2002; Louie and Edwards 1994), the Nùng ideals of heng-caài are not solely available to, or embodied by men. The Nùng men and women, as well as boys and girls, who I know all aspire to heng-caài ideals, and both men and women are described in terms of heng-caài. As such, an appeal to human characteristics that are exclusively masculine or feminine is inappropriate for understanding gender among the Nùng Fân Sling, and, I would venture, Southeast Asia, where many researchers have described gender difference as a non-discrete, fluid difference of degree rather than type.

As I mentioned above, approaching gender via a framework of yin-yang highlights that men and women are not assumed to possess qualitatively different characteristics, or at least, men and women both have capacity for the same kinds of characteristics, though capacity is not evenly distributed among men or women. Rather than discarding yin and yang because of their “potential for interminable interactiveness,” the mutuality of yin and yang is key, as it highlights that neither men, masculinity, or yang essences can be understood in isolation from women, femininity, or yin essences. Attempting to confine certain human “essences,” or characteristics exclusively to humans who have similar reproductive equipment is a fundamental shortcoming of functionalist sex role theory, or any interpretive framework that defines men and masculinity as a set of discrete ideals and/or practices in isolation from women and femininity; that is, without regard to the social relationships in and by which gendered identities are constructed. Masculinity is not an object or subject, natural or social, that occurs in isolation and then comes into contact with femininity. As I have argued,
gendered identity does not simply arise in an isolated individual, but is a social
construct and is only reproduced in and by social interaction.

The Nùng gender system is a binary one in that it consists of, indicates, or
involves two genders. However, it is not a dichotomous or polarized system of
binary opposites because the categories of men and women are not divided into
two mutually exclusive, or contradictory groups that manifest opposite, or
contrasting characteristics or tendencies. That Nùng masculinities and
femininities are not conceived of or reproduced in social practice as categorically
different or discrete characteristics belonging exclusively to either men or women
does not abolish gender difference (difference in terms of characteristics, as well
as difference in terms of power, status, and entitlements). The presence or
absence of attributes such as *heng-caài* is not what signals masculinity or
femininity. All humans, whether men or women, have the same kinds, but
different degrees of capacity for desirable human traits. Thus, *yin-yang* theory
can account for the mutuality and fluidity of masculine and feminine
characteristics found in the Nùng Fản Sling gender system. But the Nùng cultural
assumption that men and women are categorically possessed of different
capacities for desirable human characteristics (women having diminished
capacities and men having greater capacities for these) cannot be accounted for
only by reference to an overlapping and cyclical continuum of *yin-yang*. Thus,
there must be another gendered assumption also operating in the Nùng cultural
context, and which does not necessarily run contrary to, or in opposition against,
but that operates in concert with and tempers the gender mutuality of the *yin-
yang* paradigm. In an attempt to unravel, or at least shed light on this puzzle I
look to Nùng animist beliefs about spiritual potency and influence by association.

**SPIRITUAL GENDER**

The Nùng Fản Sling are animists, or practice what Max Weber calls
“traditional religion” (1951). In other words, they believe that natural objects (e.g.
humans, animals, trees, water, the earth and sky), and natural phenomena (e.g.
thunder, lightning, rain, wind) are possessed of spirits, and it is these spirits which animate the universe. In Dụ Vãng, it is widely assumed that there exists very real continuity and interchange between the spirit realm and the human world. The Nùng people I know do not conceive of their beliefs as “beliefs,” but as given realities of everyday life. I was often told that, “Here we do not have religion, we only have ghosts.” Social practices and spiritual beliefs are inextricably interwoven into a reality where the spiritual realm guides and influences the stream of everyday existence, with human activity determining to some degree the shape of that guidance and influence.

If the spirits are happy then people meet with fortune, good luck, and health. If the spirits are unhappy then people meet with misfortune, bad luck, and illness. But the spirits can also be entreated, or petitioned for blessings and favors through appropriate sacrifices. The spirits can also be provoked to cause harm or misfortune through acts of impropriety, or behaving in a way that displeases the spirits. Those people with the greatest ability to shape the influences that the spirit world exercises on the human world are priests. A Nùng priest is a person who acts as an intermediary between the human and spirit worlds, and who has power and knowledge to mobilize spiritual forces to cure illness, foretell the future, and also has access to insights about the present that are hidden from others. Because great spiritual potency is required to sustain and leave unscathed those who regularly come into contact with things spiritual, priests must be men.

In the cultural context of Dụ Vãng, a person’s spiritual potency is determined by his or her “numbers,” or slô. As noted in Chapter Three, a person’s “numbers” are calculated from his or her birth year, month, day, and hour; each “number” corresponds to an astrological sign in the Nùng zodiac and plays a determining role in the shaping of human characteristics, capacities, and fates. A person’s slô, also referred to as mìng, slô fưuơn, or slância fặn [fate/destiny], are popularly conceived of in terms of these signs rather than as actual numerical denominations (see Table 8.1). Certain configurations of these signs are more auspicious than others, and the more auspicious a person’s
configuration of signs then the higher or stronger their “numbers” or “fate,” and thus the greater their spiritual potency and other human capacities. This said, none of the Nùng people I know carry around a tally of people’s slô in their heads. A person’s slô are calculated at birth by a priest, and if the configuration is conspicuously weak then ritual steps can be taken in various phases of a person’s life to “add numbers” to the fate or destiny with which a person is born. Or, a child’s parents can entreat a priest to “hold” the child’s slô until he or she has reached adulthood. Besides priests, people are unaware about the specifics of calculating slô and interpreting their configurations. It is popularly assumed that those people who frequently fall ill, are physically weak, of lesser intelligence, or generally meet with misfortune suffer from inauspicious slô. Conversely, those who are typically in good health, pursue their own projects to successful ends, and so forth, are considered to have strong, or auspicious slô.

Table 8.1 Nùng Zodiac Signs of the 12 Year Lunar Cycle, or Slíp Nhi Sli

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nùng Time Periods and Zodiac Signs</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – Chỉ sli</td>
<td>1st time period, year of the rat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – Sù sli</td>
<td>2nd time period, year of the buffalo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – Dên sli</td>
<td>3rd time period, year of the tiger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – Maạọ sli</td>
<td>4th time period, year of the crow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 – Slăn sli</td>
<td>5th time period, year of the dragon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 – Sị sli</td>
<td>6th time period, year of the snake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 – Ngôọ sli</td>
<td>7th time period, year of the horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 – Mị sli</td>
<td>8th time period, year of the goat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 – Slăn sli</td>
<td>9th time period, year of the monkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 – Đụụ sli</td>
<td>10th time period, year of the chicken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 – Slút sli</td>
<td>11th time period, year of the dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 – Hai sli</td>
<td>12th time period, year of the pig</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It becomes apparent that a woman could be born in a year, month, day and hour that results in a more auspicious configuration of slô than a man, which,
it could be argued, would result in some women being more spiritually potent with
greater human capacities than some men. When I pursued this line of inquiry
with the village priests, as well as with women in the village, it was explained to
me that by simply being born female diminishes the auspiciousness or strength
of a person’s $slō$. This made me wonder if there were discrete sets of potential
$slō$ for men and women, or if points, or $slō$ were deducted for being a woman.
Things get a little vague for me here because as I probed deeper into this
question the responses I got grew more vague. I do not know if this was because
people were not willing to share certain information with me, or if people simply
did not have answers to all of my questions. In fact, one of the most common
replies to some of my more searching questions was, “because that’s the way it
is here.” Most people simply told me that women’s $slō$ are just always weaker
than men’s $slō$. A few people, all of whom were men, explained it to me further by
referencing female reproductive biology, or the fact that women menstruate. A
woman’s reproductive organs are assumed to be a font of femininity (anatomical
sex and gender are conflated), and a source of her lesser spiritual potency,
strength, and health. Coming into contact with female genitalia will drain a man’s
strength and health. I was cautioned by men and women on several occasions
about the dangers of sex, and sexual moderation was an ideal espoused by most
of the men and all of the women I knew in $Đụ Vãng$.

Not only do women’s weaker $slō$ result in diminished capacities for
desirable human characteristics, as well as making women more susceptible to
malevolent spiritual influences, but also cause them to carry a weak influence
with them. If a man spends any length of time in the company of women this
weak influence will rub off on him, diminishing his spiritual potency and making
him more susceptible to ghost bites and other misfortunes. As noted earlier, after
giving birth a woman must undergo a thirty-day period of confinement. During
this time she is prohibited from entering other people’s homes, lest she defile
them with her weakening female influence, which is especially potent after
childbirth—the apex of femininity/femaleness, in which the female reproductive
organs hold center stage. Men will not hold a baby until at least fifteen days after
the child’s birth; a priest will not hold a newborn until at least a month after the birth in order to allow the weak female influence to dissipate from the child, or “until the child is clean.” Likewise, keeping the company of and coming into physical contact with healthy, strong, and spiritually potent men can only bolster one’s own health, strength and spiritual potency.

Yin-yang theory provides an interpretive framework for understanding gender among the Nùng, in terms of masculine and feminine characteristics, as fluidly overlapping differences of degree rather than kind, and an understanding of Nùng beliefs around spiritual potency helps to shed light on unequal female and male capacities. As well, Nùng cultural assumptions of influence by association help to explain gendered practices that tend toward the masculine avoidance of women, gendered social distance, and exclusivity of gendered social spheres. An examination of these cultural frameworks helps to facilitate an understanding of Nùng assumptions about gender in terms of women’s and men’s different capacities for the same kinds of human characteristics, and male-female relationships as marked by avoidance and distance. However, neither yin-yang theory, nor Nùng animist beliefs, taken separately or together, give an adequate accounting of gender difference as inequality in terms of power, status, and entitlements.

Although yin-yang theory does not provide much in the way of an account of gendered inequality, its emphasis on the interactiveness of masculinity and femininity sets in motion a consideration of the relational, or social nature of gendered identities. If we are to take gender as a social construct, we would do well to pay attention to the sociality of gender. Following this theoretical trajectory, I turn to the Nùng system of Confucian-type prescripts for the proper ordering of social relationships, which are framed in terms of kinship and prescribe an individual’s social positions relative to other men and women. It is within this context of prescribed hierarchical social relationships, in concert with Taoist and animist assumptions, that gendered identities are constructed, and gender difference—in terms of different capacities for desirable human characteristics and in terms of power, status and entitlement—is reproduced.
CONFUCIANISM

In the sociocultural context of Dụ Vãng, Confucian-type prescriptions outlining male-female interaction, which interaction reproduces male dominance and female subordination, are prominent in Nùng gender relations. Regardless of the fact that most people in Dụ Vãng never made any direct reference to Confucius himself, Confucian-type prescripts are manifest in various aspects of social life in the village.\(^{52}\)

The focal topic of the traditional Confucian textbook *Li-chi* (Book of Ritual Propriety) is, of course, *li*. A.S. Cua defines *li* as rules of proper conduct, ritual rules, or ritual propriety, taking "ritual" in its broadest sense "as inclusive of any practice or set of action guiding prescriptions that stresses formal procedures for proper behavior" (1983:1). *Li*, with regards to social relationships, references assumptions of proper social conduct, or social propriety, and prescribes that proper social relationships should be ordered as follows:

Kindness on the part of the father, and filial duty on that of the son;
gentleness on the part of the elder brother, and obedience on the younger;
righteousness on the part of the husband, and submission on that of the wife;
kindness on the part of elders, and deference on that of juniors; with
benevolence (*jen*) on the part of the ruler, and loyalty on that of the minister. These ten are the things which men consider to be right. (*li yün*, 1:379-380, c.f. Cua 1983:3)

The emphasis here is on social relationships. These social relationships, however prescriptive, are taken-for-granted as the reproductions of the natural functioning and ordering of human society.

In specific reference to relationships between men and women, the *Li-chi* further dictates “that the woman must practice the art of ‘following’—following her father as a daughter, following her husband as a wife, and following her son as a mother” (Taga 2005:130). The coexistence of the social strictures embedded in

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\(^{52}\) It is not necessarily the case that various Asian traditions of prescriptive relationships are the result of Confucianism. It could just as well be the case that these traditions predate Confucius, and influenced his philosophies, which found widespread acceptance because they resonated with antecedent cultural assumptions and social practices. Indeed, Confucius represented himself as "a transmitter who invented nothing" (The Analects 479-221 B.C., 7.1). Confucius, however, can be credited with canonizing these relational prescriptions.
Confucian ideology with the Taoist assumptions of gender mutuality and fluidity embedded in the *yin-yang* paradigm produces a sort of social friction. Women may have the capacity to embody the same kinds of human characteristics as men, but women are constructed and understood as subordinate and unequal to men in terms of social relationships—relationships with fathers, with husbands, with sons, with brothers. And though female subordination and inferiority are assumed by men and women, women do not always passively accept their subordination, but in an active way grudgingly, and antagonistically participate in its reproduction. Likewise, men are constructed and understood as superior and dominant in contexts and terms of their social relationships. But at the same time they see the very characteristics and qualities to which they aspire reflected and manifest in those they dominate. Although male superiority and dominance is assumed, it is not necessarily secure, but in need of continual reassertion and reaffirmation. This, I think, is what reproduces the friction, or tension that I observed and was told that exists in female-male relationships. Even the male-female interactions engaged in during flirtatious encounters are somewhat antagonistic and adversarial.

It has been argued that gender relations have historically been more egalitarian among the popular classes in Asia. Taking China as a broad and general example, Brugger (1971) claims that relationships between peasant men and women have been more egalitarian than those found among the gentry. He argues that gender relations among peasants who engage in subsistence agriculture are more influenced by economic necessity than Confucian ideology. In subsistence agricultural economies, both women and men often participate in physical agricultural labor and domestic management activities, making the boundary between men’s and women’s work vague, or even absent, which results in gender distinctions that are also vague. This is not the case, however, among the Nùng Fản Sling people I know—unisex work activities do not result in, or even approximate egalitarian gender relations, and a strict Confucian-type ideology still holds sway. Most Nùng Fản Sling people do practice subsistence agriculture, and both men and women perform physical labor and participate in
managing household affairs—from cooking, washing and cleaning to tending to the household garden and livestock. However, the Nùng Fản Sling cultural logic of female provisionality and male permanence socially position women within the patrilineage in a way that tends to yoke them with the lion’s share of this work. While men, especially once their children are old enough to labor, are enabled by this same cultural logic and system of relationships to focus their energy on less physically taxing work, such as establishing, maintaining, and mobilizing social networks.

GENDER AS HIERARCHICALLY ORDERED SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

...kinship and gender are most profitably understood both as mutually determined and in relation to everyday social process…
-Michael Peletz (1994:136)

An examination of the Nùng Fản Sling system of kinship is necessary to an understanding of the ordering of hierarchical Nùng Fản Sling gendered relations. Below I provide a table (Table 8.2) with basic Nùng Fản Sling kin terms and personal pronouns to help elucidate my discussion of the hierarchical and gendered system of Nùng kinship.

In Dụ Vãng, the proper ordering of social relationships is referenced by the term đaạo, which can be translated as “the ethical way of acting,” “social doctrine,” or “social propriety.” The most important relationships among the Nùng Fản Sling are with one’s kin, and these relationships are strictly guided, however tacitly, by đaạo. The men in Dụ Vãng do distinguish between “blood brothers” [pi noong to tem, or pi noong tem tap tem slay] and “cousins” [pi noong hdo hang]. Here I should point out that the English concepts of “blood brothers” and “cousins” are not accurate correlates for the Nùng concepts of pi noong to tem
### Table 8.2 Nùng Fản Sling Basic Kin Terms and Personal Pronouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nùng Term</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>podrá mệ thàu</td>
<td>parents (collective); third person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kê thàu</td>
<td>father; third person formal, where kê designates male (not paternal) kinship and thàu indicates parentage; can also be articulated as pó thàu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dạ thàu</td>
<td>mother; third person formal, where dạ designates female (not maternal) kinship and thàu indicates parentage; can also be articulated as mệ thàu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ý</td>
<td>mom (a daughter-in-law who does not yet have children refers to her mother-in-law as ý); second person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>té</td>
<td>dad (a daughter-in-law who does not yet have children refers to her father-in-law as té); second person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>puù</td>
<td>paternal grandfather; also paternal great-uncles (a daughter-in-law who has children refers to her father-in-law as puù)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>công</td>
<td>generally means grandfather, or “old man” (respectful), and can be used to address males approximately the same age as one’s grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kê công</td>
<td>third person reference used to designate a particular “old man” (respectful) as one’s paternal grandfather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thọ công</td>
<td>principal ancestor of a family clan or village; this is the paramount spirit in the village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laao</td>
<td>paternal grandmother; also paternal great-aunts (a daughter-in-law who has children refers to her mother-in-law as laao)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laao dạ</td>
<td>generally means “old woman” (respectful) and can be used to address females approximately the same age as one’s grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taă</td>
<td>maternal grandfather; also maternal great-uncles; also mother’s older brothers; also wife’s father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tài</td>
<td>maternal grandmother; also maternal great-aunts; also mother’s older sisters; also wife’s mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>đê</td>
<td>father’s older brother; also husband’s older brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paă</td>
<td>father’s older sister; also husband’s older sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>đê khorói</td>
<td>husband of father’s older sister; also wife’s older brother; khorói indicates a male relative-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>paă luù</td>
<td>wife of father’s older brother; also wife of husband’s older brother; luù indicates a female relative-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xúc</td>
<td>father’s younger brother; also husband’s younger brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>á</td>
<td>father’s younger sister; also husband’s younger sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xúc khorói</td>
<td>husband of father’s younger sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>á luù</td>
<td>wife of father’s younger brother; also wife of husband’s younger brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nà</td>
<td>mother’s younger sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khâu</td>
<td>mother’s younger brother</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8.2 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nả luù</td>
<td>wife of mother’s younger brother; also wife of wife’s younger brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khẩu khoái</td>
<td>husband of mother’s younger sister; also wife’s younger brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lán</td>
<td>grandchild/niece/nephew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lucr</td>
<td>child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mê luù</td>
<td>daughter-in-law who does not yet have a child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mê…</td>
<td>daughter-in-law followed by her first child’s name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pó khoái</td>
<td>son-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noọng</td>
<td>younger sibling, general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noọng ao</td>
<td>younger brother of male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noọng khảo</td>
<td>younger brother of female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noọng á</td>
<td>younger sister of male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noọng nả</td>
<td>younger sister of female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noọng khảo</td>
<td>husband of younger sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noọng luù</td>
<td>wife of younger brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lán luù</td>
<td>granddaughter-in-law/niece-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lán khảo</td>
<td>grandson-in-law/nephew-in-law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pị bao</td>
<td>older brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pị sláo</td>
<td>older sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pị khoái</td>
<td>husband of older sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pị luù</td>
<td>informal you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ni</td>
<td>informal me, or I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ngô</td>
<td>informal me, or I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>câu</td>
<td>polite first person me, or I; typically used by elders when addressing juniors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mưng</td>
<td>polite second person you; typically used by elders when addressing juniors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and *pi noọng hô hang*, which terms signal different degrees of brotherhood. I will attempt to clarify this below.

The term *pi noọng* can be translated as “siblings,” *pi* being the classifier for older siblings, and *noọng* being the classifier for younger siblings. However, only males are considered to be permanent members of the patrilineage, with females always occupying the provisional positions of either daughters, who are sold as wives and become provisional members of other households, or wives, who are daughters bought from other households; I will elaborate on this below. When the term *pi noọng* is invoked it carries an implicit reference to men only, and it was the married, adult men who invoked the term most often; all of the adult, married women in Dụ Vãng came from other villages, other patrilineages. Thus, I translate *pi noọng* as “brothers.”

The terms *pi noọng tô tém* and *pi noọng tém tắp tém slày*, which I translate as “blood brothers,” can be broken down as follows. *Tô* denotes togetherness, and *tém* refers to parentage in terms of lineal descent. Thus, *pi noọng tô tém* can be translated as siblings (i.e., brothers) of the same parents, or more accurately, of the same patriline. *Tắp* means liver, and *slày* means intestines, but these terms are often used metaphorically to reference such things as bravery, strength of character, feelings, and so forth; much in the same way that the English term “heart” is used as a metaphor for intangibles rather than the organ itself. The term *pi noọng tém tắp tém slày*, however, is a combination of the literal and the figurative; indicating that “blood brothers” are of the same biological stuff, descended from common livers and intestines, but that they are bound together by something more. And though that something (e.g. strength of feeling, common experiences, spiritual and material connectedness through filial duties and obligations to the living and the dead) may arise because of common descent, it also transcends common biological ancestry.

The term *pi noọng hô hang* can be translated as “siblings of the family clan,” where *pi noọng*, again, means siblings (implicating brothers), and *hô hang* means family clan. Within a family clan, although members all share a common surname and can trace their lineage to a distant, common ancestor, there are
also sub-lineages that are traced back to more proximate ancestors. In Dụ Vãng, men who share a common great-grandfather are considered “blood brothers,” while men who are more distantly related are considered “cousins.” However, I rarely heard people make these distinctions in everyday speech (typically this distinction was made only when I was asking specifics about kinship and genealogy); relationships between men were most often referenced simply in terms of being brothers, or *pi noọng.*

With regards to paternal male relatives, the personal terms of address that men, who are close in age, use to address one another change over the course of their lives, at least in particular contexts. For example, I would address my younger brother, or my younger paternal male cousin as *noọng or noọng aọ.* However, once my younger male relative has a child, and assuming that I too have children, I would refer to him as *xúc* [father’s younger brother], often followed by the name of his first child. If my male relative is older than me, I would refer to him by the name of his first child preceded by *dé* [father’s older brother]. This is also the case with paternal female relatives. I would call my younger sister, or my younger paternal female cousin *noọng or noọng á.* Once she had a child, I would refer to her as *á* [father’s younger sister], often followed by her first child’s name, or if she is older than me I would refer to her as *paà* [father’s older sister]. It was explained to me that these forms of address are used to teach one’s children propriety, or *đaạo* by way of example, i.e., addressing my children’s, nieces’, and nephews’ paternal relatives in the same way as these children should address them. But in the case of men, these terms of address are typically dropped when only in the company of other adult men, in which cases kin terms are used that reference the age difference of the specific interlocutors. Also, depending on the closeness in age, or depending on the

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53 Some men in Dụ Vãng did spend the majority of their time socializing with their “blood brothers,” but this is by no means a general rule, as other men spent their time equally with “blood brothers” and “cousins.” However, men have greater social obligations, as prescribed by *đaạo,* to “blood brothers” than they do to “cousins.” A man will mobilize his network of “blood brothers” if he is vying for a political position in the village, as they are obligated by *đaạo* to lend their support. It is always men with the largest network of “blood brothers” who attain the most influential political positions within Dụ Vãng. There are also certain ritual practices in which “blood brothers” must come together and make offerings to their common ancestor.
closeness of friendship, men may forgo the use of kin terms and simply refer to
one another by their “big names,” or “adult names”: names that are given to men
by close friends and kin, which names are said to capture or reflect certain
qualities of the person. Although explicitly gendered kin terms are dropped in
these cases, these “big names” are implicitly gendered, as they are only used to
refer to men.

The general rule is that all paternal male and female relatives of your
children’s generation, with the exception of your own children, are addressed as
though they are your siblings’ children; all paternal relatives of your own
generation are addressed as though they are your siblings; all paternal relatives
of your father’s generation are addressed as though they are your father’s
siblings (you use the same term of address for your father’s siblings as you
would your father’s cousins, in the Western sense of the terms “siblings” and
“cousins”); and all paternal relatives of your father’s parent’s generation are
addressed as though they are your father’s parents (great-uncles and
grandfathers are addressed by the same term, as are great-aunts and
grandmothers). For example, Păo’s grandfather and Sơn’s grandfather were
brothers, therefore, Păo and Sơn both addressed the two older men with the
same kin term, puủ [grandfather/great-uncle]. Păo addressed his own father as té
[father], and addressed Sơn’s father as xúc [father’s younger brother]. Sơn also
addressed his own father as té, and addressed Păo’s father as dế [father’s older
brother].

Maternal kinship is reckoned, and maternal kin are addressed differently
than paternal kinship and kin. The term used to collectively refer to maternal
relatives is bông láng; bông meaning “side” and láng meaning “behind/after/in
back.” If your mother addresses a maternal relative by a particular kin term, then,
according to đaạo, you must address the children of that maternal relative with
the same kin term your mother uses to address their parents, regardless of
relative age. For example, a woman addresses her mother’s younger brother as
khâu. This woman’s children would then address this same man as taạ, and
would address his male children as *khẩu* and his female children as *nà* [mother’s younger sister], regardless of relative age.

Unlike the use of kin terms for paternal relatives, as illustrated above, is that parents do not refer to maternal relatives with the same kin terms as their children should use. Less emphasis is placed on teaching one’s children social propriety with regards to maternal kin, or, at least, that social propriety with regards to maternal kin has fewer strictures relative to paternal kin. Maternal kin terms are also less distinct than paternal kin terms. For example, there is no terminological distinction made between one’s maternal grandfather, one’s maternal great-uncles, one’s mother’s older brothers, or one’s wife’s father, all are called *taạ*. Likewise, there is no terminological distinction made between a person’s maternal grandmother, great-aunts, mother’s older sisters, or one’s wife’s mother, all are called *taại*. Furthermore, whereas paternal relatives whose relative distance is seven generations or less are still referred to as “brothers,” maternal relatives only recognize each other as kin for three generations. In other words, people who are related through common maternal great-grandparents do not refer to one another as kin, and correspondingly they can be eligible marriage partners.

Less emphasis on social propriety and the higher degree of generality, reflected by maternal kin terms and their usage, indicate that maternal kin are identified by their relative distance. Paternal kin terms, referencing brotherhood, are more familiar and indicate relative closeness; regarding even distant paternal kin, at least by Western standards, as immediate family members. Relative closeness and familiarity, according to *đạo*, demand higher degrees of filial piety and carry heavier obligations, responsibilities and duties, not only to living paternal relatives but also to the deceased for at least a span of seven generations. Whereas filial piety, obligations and duties to one’s maternal kin only extend as far as one’s maternal grandparents, and to a lesser degree, one’s maternal great-aunts and uncles. The point being that relationships with and obligations to one’s patrilineage are paramount in Nùng Fǎn Sling society.
This is germane to an understanding of gender difference because men and women, or masculine and feminine identities are reproduced differently by their relative positions within the paramount social relationships constituted in and by paternal kinship. Women are only provisional members of any patrilineage (except, perhaps, in the eyes of their children and grandchildren), occupying a position somewhere between their father’s patriline and their husband’s patriline. As daughters, females are viewed as future members of other families, for whom a woman will labor, potentially produce male offspring, and regularly provide for the needs and wants of her future household’s deceased ancestors.54

Female offspring do not inherit any property. If a husband and wife do not have any sons they will adopt a son rather than passing their property on to a daughter, because a daughter is not a permanent member of her parents’ household. I was told that most people preferred to adopt a son from a close patrilineal relative, in order to keep wealth and property in the family, i.e., the male members—females are, after all, only provisional family members. If close patrilineal relatives do not have a second or third son available for adoption, then a sonless husband and wife may adopt the husband of one of their daughters. This is not the preferred method of acquiring an adopted son, and it had only occurred thrice since the village was established.

As wives or luù, women do not transcend the position of provisional family member. Once a woman becomes a wife, she addresses the member’s of her husband’s patrilineage using paternal kinship terms appropriate for relative age and sex differences. A wife, however, is always addressed by members of her husband’s patrilineage (with the exception of her own children and grandchildren) with kinship terms that indicate her luù status (see Table 8.2). Before a woman has a child, her husband’s parents refer to her as mệ luù, and her husband may refer to her as mệ. After she has given birth, her husband’s parents refer to her as mệ followed by the name of her first child, and her husband will often refer to

54 An emphasis on the importance of relationships with and obligations to one’s patrilineal kin has also been well-documented in Vietnam’s dominant Kinh society by researchers such as Jamieson (1995), Luong (2003b), and Ngo thi Ngan Binh (2001).
her as the mother of their first child (ý followed by the name of the first child). A man’s patrilineal relatives will also regularly refer to his wife as ý followed by the name of her first child. The provisionality of a wife’s membership in her husband’s patrilineage, that she is an outsider living in a close-knit community of “brothers” is continually emphasized in that she is always referred to with a term that indicates her relative position in that patrilineage as a wife and mother.

Furthermore, once a woman has born a child, she always referentially and directly addresses her husband’s patrilineal relatives with the same kin terms as her children use. A married woman’s identity (and all women are viewed as either wives/ luù or potential wives/ luù) is reproduced with reference to her most immediate link to her husband’s patrilineage: her child. However, the connection to her husband’s patriline through her relative position of mother-of-herhusband’s-child, like her relative position of wife, is also tentative. Although women are responsible for much of the physical, agricultural labor in the village, it is the men who own and control the land, as well as the produce thereof. Likewise, women bear the responsibility for the bulk of childcare, however, the children belong to the husband and his patriline. Both men and women explained reproduction in agricultural terms, but also in terms of ownership: “the man plants his seed in the woman, like he would plant a seed in his field...children are from the seed of the man, and they belong to the man’s household.”

As daughters, girls and women are only provisional members of their parents’ households, one day to be sold as wives, they cannot inherit or lay claim to any of their parents’ resources, property, or wealth. Once married, women become provisional members of “strange” households, where they are constantly reminded that they are outsiders being sustained by resources that do not belong to them. It is in the contexts and terms of these social relationships that women are reproduced as marginal, subordinate and unequal to men in terms of power, status and entitlement.

As permanent members of households and the patrilineage, sons are born into a relatively stable social network of “brothers,” or a network of consanguineous patrilineal relatives, characterized by permanence, unity,
solidarity, and continuity. Routine masculine practices, such as daily work and leisure time activities, enabled by men's primal and preeminent positions within the patrilineage, and ritual practices that encourage, reaffirm and emphasize male connectedness engender a strong sense of brotherhood in and among the men of Dụ Vãng. Brotherhood, underscored by permanence, unity, and continuity, and reproduced in and by masculine practices and social relationships prescribed by đạo, is a hallmark of Nùng Fản Sling masculine identities.

NỮNG FẢN SLÌNG GENDER RELATIONS AND MASCULINITY

There is no interpretive framework that can perfectly or entirely explain every configuration of gendered social practice, or every instance of gendered relations or masculine identification. However, as alluded to in Chapter One, I did see, hear and experience patterns of gendered social practices, relationships and identifications during my research in Dụ Vãng. I conclude this ethnography with an interpretive reprise of gender relations and masculinity by way of prototypical features, or abstract categories that characterize gender relations and masculinity based on thematized elements that these social phenomena share in common: namely, tension and imperviousness, respectively. I then turn briefly to unknown futures.

Tension

Relationships and interactions between Nùng Fản Sling men and women appear to me to be marked by distance, both social and physical. Flirting practices, structured around repartee singing, are carried out from a distance and often take the form of adversarial contest. If and when the physical distance is closed between two flirtatious antagonists, men and women still framed their talk about such encounters and exchanges in terms of “testing,” whether testing for intelligence through crafty talk, or testing sincerity through the exchange of gifts. This distance carries over to and is maintained in the context of marriage relationships as illustrated by the separate social spheres of married men and
women in the realms of socializing, ritual practices, work, and even eating arrangements. This distance also pertains to physically intimate relationships between married men and women. Although this distance is closed periodically and briefly, men and women’s talk around the topic was always marked by the themes of “avoidance,” and “conservatism.” Furthermore, as discussed above, social distance is even prescriptively organized, according to đa asshole, between paternal and maternal kin. Like relationships between men, patterns of reckoning and terms for addressing paternal kinship are marked by closeness. Whereas relationships between paternal kin and maternal kin are structured in a way that reproduces distance between the maternal and paternal sides of the family.

The ideology of the patriline (Ahearn 2001), the cultural logic underlying the provisionality of women and primacy of men, and the Confucian-type prescripts, or đa asshole, which structure relationships between men and women as a gendered hierarchy, reproduce the social positions of men as preeminent and dominant, and the social positions of women as marginal and subordinate. Within this structured social inequality, both men and women are assumed to have capacity for the same kinds of human characteristics. In other words, gender difference is not conceived or reproduced as dichotomously opposed human characteristics exclusively embodied by masculine or feminine selves, though men are assumed to have greater capacity for such unisex characteristics. It seems to me that the social and physical distance maintained between men and women, structured gender inequality, in combination with desirable human characteristics available and aspired to, and embodied by both men and women reproduces a gendered social tension that characterizes relationships between men and women.

**Imperviousness**

Nùng Fân Sling cultural assumptions about males, which premise and are reproduced in the social relationships and practices of men, it seems to me, revolve around a theme of “imperviousness,” or constructing and reproducing one’s masculine self as impervious. In making this argument I am not implying
that femininity is constructed and reproduced in polar opposition to masculine imperviousness, such as characterizing femininity as “susceptibility” or “vulnerability.” The cultural assumptions that women draw on to reproduce themselves in social practice, and which assumptions they draw on to interpret and represent their experiences as gendered selves, also tend towards making the self impervious. However, men and women both work from the assumption that male degrees of imperviousness are greater than those of females. Here I will address the masculine.

Men are assumed to have higher “numbers” than women, thus men enjoy higher levels of spiritual potency and are less susceptible to spiritual misfortune. Premised on cultural assumptions around spiritual potency and influence through association, men exhort one another to remain impervious to women’s words and to avoid prolonged social and physical intercourse with women. In addition to avoiding the weaker influences of women, men bolster their own spiritual potency, health and strength by keeping the company of other men. Such practices, it is claimed, make men more impervious to malevolent spiritual influences, illness, and misfortune.

In this same vein of spiritual imperviousness, there is an emphasis placed on the importance of sons in Dụ Vãng. This local “ideology of the patriline” is premised on the assumption that it is sons who will remember the self after death and provide for the needs and wants of the self in the afterlife. In other words, making one’s ghost impervious to spiritual neglect, hardship, or poverty is explicitly oriented towards the social reproduction of male selves.

Men aspire to intelligence, or wicked craftiness in order to make themselves impervious to being taken advantage of. Women, too, have such aspirations and endeavor to make themselves impervious to being taken advantage of. However, it is men who are assumed to have greater capacity to successfully achieve these aspirations, and indeed they are socially positioned in a way that presents them more opportunity to do so.

Masculine work practices, as social work, tend towards making oneself impervious to difficulty, exemplified by the proverb of, “easy for self, difficult for
others.” As well, social networking practices and the employment of intermediaries in social negotiations can be framed and understood in terms of imperviousness: employing intermediaries to make oneself impervious to loss of face; drawing on a network of brothers to make oneself impervious to physical harm, to make oneself impervious to economic destitution, to foster brotherly solidarity and unity to make the inclusive self impervious to bad luck, misfortune, or punishment by the ancestors. If I had to sum up Nùng Fản Sling masculinity in a word, I would use “imperviousness” because constructing one’s masculinity often consists of making oneself impervious.

Transitions?

On the second day of Nên, Păo’s entire household was out visiting, including myself. What had begun as a sunny day was quickly turning cold as a storm started to blow into the mountains. I returned home to fetch a jacket and while I was there Đúc’s new son-in-law, Túc, showed up for a visit. I had met Túc a month and a half earlier when I attended the portion of his wedding that took place at Đúc’s house, where I served as the “wedding photographer.” I had then met him again at Ven’s, his new bride, thọi hòi, or “bride returning ceremony.” Túc and I sat and chatted over tea and rice liquor, and I asked him how he found married life. He told me that it was not much different from his pre-married life, as Ven had not moved into his household yet, and most likely would not do so for several years to come. I asked Túc if he and his new wife were “lovers” before they got married, or if it was completely arranged by their parents. Túc responded, almost as if he was offended that I would think otherwise, “Of course we’re lovers! Just like other people elsewhere. If you’re not lovers then you don’t get married.” I then asked, “But aren’t your parents the ones who make the arrangements, who choose your wife, who go and ask, and have to agree on who you marry?” He said, “Of course it is from the parents, they have to agree.” I looked at him confusedly, and he added, “But me and my wife are still lovers.” Túc seemed to be getting a bit flustered in his attempts to reconcile his
statements in a way that I would understand, so I turned the topic to the Nèn celebration.

At first glance, it would seem that gender relations are on the move in Dụ Vằng. Every parent I spoke to about the arrangement of a child’s wedding commented, some more grudgingly than others, that nowadays parents are beginning to take their children’s wishes into account when arranging their marriages—otherwise it can turn into a social fiasco. Thị commented to me that young girls’ understanding is expanding, resulting in fewer reservations about interacting with boys. Young men and women in Dụ Vằng are regularly exposed to mainstream Vietnamese gender norms and practices, via television and other forms of popular media, and through the public education system. In these media’s various representations, men and women are depicted as entering marriage relationships for reasons of romantic love, not practicality. During several conversations, Thảo and Thủy fantasized about falling in love with and marrying an “ideal man,” and Thảo even expressed interest in “trying out kissing.”

During my time in Dụ Vằng, young men and women expressed gendered ideals different from those of their parents, but these ideals are running headlong into traditional social structures of the family, gender, and the patrilineage. Even though Tục and Ven expressed “modern” ideals about love and marriage, the structure of their relationship looked very much like that of their parents’ generation. Although Tục and Ven may have given input as to who they wanted to marry, their “numbers” still had to match, Ven still returned to her parents home after the wedding, occasionally going to her new husband’s home to help with agricultural labor, and will eventually relocate there once she becomes pregnant. Ven was finishing her final year in high school and once briefly told me that she had aspirations of taking up a nghề nghiệp [occupation/profession], i.e., wage or salaried employment outside of agriculture. But even with a relatively high education, during our infrequent conversations Ven had a difficult time articulating a future that did not entail production, both social and agricultural, in service to her husband’s patrilineage. Hùng, Thảo, and Thủy also expressed to me their desires of not working as agricultural laborers, but in pursuing a nghề nghiệp
nghĩa. However, many of the young people I know were vague as to what kinds of occupations these might be. Whenever I spoke with Hùng about his future he would talk of inheriting his father’s land, getting a wife, and working his land. Thảo and Thủy fantasized about occupations, but were also very aware of their impending futures of being “sold” as wives.

I recently received an email from Thảo, sent from an email cafe on the outskirts of Lạng Sơn City. During my time in Dụ Vãng, Thảo had expressed interest in becoming an English teacher, and had high hopes of attending a teachers training college after graduating from high school. Although she is a very capable student, the demands of agricultural labor often took precedence over her studies. Regardless, I spent many a night tutoring Thảo in English. She was a dedicated, determined, and very bright student. This, combined with the fact that she had a native English-speaking tutor living in her household, resulted in her being one of the top two students in her high school English classes. In her recent email she gave me the depressing news that she had “failed” to be advanced to the “higher tier” English class, which is necessary if one hopes to teach English in the public education system. In her own assessment, Thảo excelled beyond a majority of the wealthier students who were advanced to the top tier English class. She attributed her failure to her family’s inability to pay the required “fees” for her to attend her teacher’s private, after-hours tutorials. Despite her education and changing ideals about gendered social relationships, she has resigned herself to being luù.

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The impetus of this dissertation has been to generate understanding of the Nùng Fân Sêng gender relations and masculine identities I encountered during my research. However, these things are not static objects that exist in a sociocultural vacuum, but are continually reconstructed and reproduced in dialogue with external sociocultural flows. Despite Dụ Vãng’s relative remoteness within an otherwise densely populated country, the village and its residents are inextricably caught up with extra-local forces of sociocultural, political and
economic change; all of which have gendered consequences. Key vectors of such changes are discourses\textsuperscript{55} of modernity and development as interpreted and represented by state policy makers and mainstream Kinh cultural assumptions, values, and social practices, both of which dialogically inform one another (Luong 2003a; Rambo and Jamieson 2003).

State policy and rhetoric impinge upon the lives of every Vietnamese citizen:

In the politico-administrative sphere, every village, no matter how remote, has its People’s Committee, its party cell, its Women’s Association, and other mass organizations...This complex administrative apparatus serves to transmit a stream of instructions from the central government to the people...[and] plays an important role in guiding the livelihood activities of upland villagers. (Rambo and Jamieson 2003:151-152)

In addition to the dissemination of state policy and rhetoric through administrative apparatuses, official and popular notions of modernity and development are transmitted via the mass media.\textsuperscript{56} Over half of the households in Dụ Vãng own televisions, and consuming television broadcasts has become a very popular form of entertainment in the village. In Vietnamese society, broadly speaking, “local knowledge is increasingly considered to be secondary to, and often inferior to, national culture as it is processed and distributed by the mass media” (ibid:152).

During my time in Dụ Vãng I viewed numerous televisions broadcasts, including popular dramas and educational programs, all of which were state-sanctioned. For example, I viewed two educational programs produced by the Ministry of Culture and Information in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Training. One program featured the Mường ethnic group’s traditional dance and drum ceremony, which also highlighted traditional costume and drum-making. Another program described and illustrated Hmong weaving and textile

\textsuperscript{55} Here I use the term “discourse” in reference to ideas, values, and ways of thinking about and seeing the world, which are conveyed by means of multifarious representations and have felt consequences in people’s everyday lives.

\textsuperscript{56} For further discussion of the Vietnamese state’s official notions of culture, development, civilization and modernity see Wangsgard (2008).
traditions. What struck me about these programs is that ethnic minority cultures were represented as observable features in the forms of performances and material objects. Tacit cultural values and assumptions about the world were not explicitly addressed, but they were implicitly evaluated as to the degree they conformed to modern society (i.e., mainstream Kinh society). These television programs also highlighted particular individuals and families considered to be exemplars of development and modernity. These included a family that became rich from importing and raising goats, and a family that abandoned subsistence farming in favor of cash crops.

In addition to progress in the development of industry and market-oriented economic activities, individuals were also highlighted for other modern practices, such as following “modern patterns” of marriage (i.e., mainstream Kinh practices), which entail marrying later in life (after completing public education and securing gainful employment in the modern market economy), marrying for love, properly registering the marriage at the commune level People’s Committee, and producing only two children. The couples who “properly” married were represented as prosperous and modern in juxtaposition to couples engaged in backward or old-fashioned marriage practices, such as arranged marriages at a young age, which practices were identified as a cause of poverty and hardship. I found it interesting that in regard to modernity and development, the Mường ethnic group was painted in the most favorable light. This group was commended for its ease of assimilation into modern society (no doubt facilitated by their many similarities, linguistically and culturally, to the Kinh), as many members of this particular village held such modern occupations as government officials and cadres, educators, businesspeople, goods manufacturers, and so forth.

I also viewed a popular television program that dramatized the role of Nùng priests in community health and healing. This particular dramatization vilified Nùng priests by depicting them as underhanded, backward, and opposed

57 The Mường and the Kinh belong to the same Vietic ethnolinguistic sub-family (Chamberlain 1998).
to modern medical practices. The heroine of the story was a young, metropolitan cultural studies student from Hà Nội, who was living in a Nùng village in order to study its culture. One of the friends she made in the village became seriously ill. The village priests, who only administered healing by way of chants and superstitious spiritual practices, were depicted as jeopardizing the sick friend’s life by barring her from access to modern medicine, which is contrary to my experiences with Nùng priests’ healing practices and views on modern medicine. The young heroine finally triumphed by outwitting the unsophisticated priests and helped the sick woman access modern medicine, which ultimately saved her life.

The message that the above television programs convey are quite clear: to be modern, developed, and prosperous one must subscribe to the cultural assumptions, values, social practices, and market-oriented economic activities of the Kinh ethnic majority.

It could be argued that claims, such as Rambo and Jamieson’s, that Vietnam’s ethnic minorities are “victimized by negative stereotypes that portray them as backward, superstitious, and conservative,” and that ethnic minority people “judge themselves by lowland [i.e., Kinh] standards and...internalize their inferiority” (2003:154-155) are overgeneralized. However, during my research I saw and heard a concrete reality to such claims in the lives of Dụ Vãng’s residents.

One evening, Thị’s uncle, Chiến, came to Dụ Vãng to visit Pão’s household. Pão and Thị explained to me that Chiến is very educated, civilized, and modern. Chiến had attended a trades school and studied engineering. He currently works as a mechanic/technician in a factory in Thái Nguyên, and has assimilated into mainstream Kinh society. After dinner, Chiến explained to me that:

This ethnic group is basically a bunch of savages. They are uneducated and therefore lack reason/faculty. They will not hesitate to talk poorly to civilized people, to swear at them, and chew them out. They will even grab a knife, without thinking, and cut someone else. Basically they lack civilization.
Throughout my fieldwork, I often heard the Nùng men I worked with apologize to visiting government cadres and officials, researchers, and myself whenever some social interaction or event took place that did not measure up to mainstream Kinh standards, saying, “Please sympathize/be understanding; here we are country people and lack civilization.” It appears to me that the negative stereotypes about ethnic minority culture and social practices, and the validation and valoration of Kinh culture and social practices as the standard of modernity and development are very influential in how the residents of Dụ Vãng experience, interpret, and represent themselves and their social world (Wangsgard 2008).

Many of the Nùng men who participated in my research aspired to emulate the social and economic practices of Kinh men, as articulated in discourses of modernity and development, and interpreted through a lens of Nùng cultural assumptions. These men’s aspirations mostly revolved around fuller integration and participation in mainstream Vietnamese society’s market-oriented economy. Being a modern, developed man in Dụ Vãng includes such things as: the consumption of modern goods (e.g. a new, or “appropriate” style of motorbike, a television, a DVD player); adopting Kinh-style clothing; building modern, Kinh-style concrete houses; and being knowledgeable about modern technology. The men who shared their aspirations with me believe that the means to achieving popular Vietnamese notions of modernity and development are to be found in wage employment or other cash generating activities; becoming Party members or otherwise participating in village, hamlet, and commune governance; receiving the required education to gain entrance into wage employment and local politics; and expanding their social networks with
other men of import and influence.\textsuperscript{58} What all of these activities share in common is an orientation away from agricultural and domestic labor coupled with an orientation towards extra-village public spheres. Interfacing with public spheres and “social work,” as discussed earlier, are considered masculine domains among the Nùng. If men increase and intensify their social work, women and older children will bear the burden of increased agricultural and domestic labor.\textsuperscript{59}

Rambo and Jamieson have demonstrated that, “largely as a consequence of the lack of educational opportunities in the uplands, only a handful of minorities can meet even minimal academic standards for employment” (2003:155). Because the public spheres of wage employment and the perceived necessity of establishing and expanding social networks to facilitate such employment are considered to be masculine domains “many families preferentially devote scarce cash to educating sons while daughters are kept at home to provide labor for household-operated farms” (ibid:142). As men become more oriented away from domestic and agricultural labor through the processes of becoming “modern,” women will likely become increasingly oriented towards and associated with domestic and agricultural labor, which will increase and intensify the unequal opportunities for social and economic “modernization” along gender lines. As well, because “modernity” and “development” are valorized

\textsuperscript{58} Some residents of Dụ Vãng often spoke wonderingly about how Kinh people get rich but “don’t do anything.” There is a widely held assumption in the village that Kinh people with expansive social networks simply socialize (i.e., network) all day, and somehow the cash mysteriously appears. This perspective was shared with me by several of Dụ Vãng’s residents as well as an official from Lạng Sơn Provincial Department of Culture and Information, who gave me her frank assessment of Nùng misunderstandings of how society works, which misunderstandings she attributed to the lack of intelligence among the Nùng. “Getting ahead” economically and socially in Vietnamese society does depend on one’s social networks, but it also entails more than this. Perhaps the reason this misunderstanding of Vietnamese society circulates among the residents of Dụ Vãng is because many of the cadre in the uplands are “lowland Kinh assigned against their wishes to remote areas, people who have little motivation to do their jobs well. Not surprisingly, problems of corruption and bureaucratic inertia are widely evident” (Rambo and Jamieson 2003:159).

\textsuperscript{59} Compounding this unhappy prospect is the rapid population growth in Dụ Vãng, in particular, and in Vietnam’s uplands, in general. As alluded to earlier, with each succeeding generation the amount of available agricultural land decreases. “[f]In the context of an already severely degraded environment” the gendered results of this situation are that “[f]armers, primarily women, have to work longer and harder for ever-decreasing yields” (Rambo and Jamieson 2003:147-148).
within broader Vietnamese society if these notions are largely associated with the masculine, Nùng women may suffer further devaluation. The “modernization” of Nùng masculinity could likely result in increased gender inequalities and marginalization of women.

Conversely, granting Nùng women freer and more open access to such traditionally male public domains as education, non-domestic and non-agricultural economic activities, politics, and the “social work” that these pursuits entail does not offer any panacea with regards to gendered inequalities. Luong has shown that within the Kinh ethnic majority there has been a resurgence of male-centered social patterns and organizations, such as patrilineages and patrilocal post-marital residence, despite the Vietnamese “state’s ideological emphasis on gender equality” and the policies put in place to promote gender equality (2003a:23). State policy has successfully increased Kinh women’s participation in public life, education, non-domestic economic activities, and even politics. However, these increases have been accompanied by a general increase in women’s burdens because they must juggle the new duties, practices, and economic contributions to the household that are now expected of them with the more traditional duties of not only caring for their own nuclear families’ wants and needs, “but also their husband’s parents and even the latter’s nonadult siblings” (Luong 2003b:209).

The hegemonic form of Nùng Fản Sling masculinity makes men unquestioningly dominant in the context of the village. However, as I have briefly and cursorily touched upon above, within the context of broader Vietnamese society Nùng masculinity is marginalized, and Nùng women, perhaps, even more so because of the androcentrism that exists in both societies. The interactions between Nùng men’s gendered selves, their experiences and interpretations of modern Kinh masculinity, and the ways in which members of dominant Kinh society interpret Nùng masculinity will all convene in the continued shaping of gender relations, gendered social practices, and the construction and reproduction of gendered identities in the context of Dụ Vãng. A deeper understanding of this complex interplay and inevitable change requires further
inquiry, but will prove, I believe, to be a fruitful and worthwhile topic for future research.
APPENDIX 1: VIETNAMESE ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS

The largest sub-national administrative units are provinces [tỉnh], totaling 59, and centrally-controlled municipalities [thành phố trực thuộc trung ương], of which there are five: Cần Thơ; Đà Nẵng; Hải Phòng; Hà Nội; and Hồ Chí Minh City. These centrally-controlled municipalities are further subdivided into districts [quận] and wards [phường]. Provinces are subdivided into provincial municipalities [thành phố trực thuộc tỉnh] with districts [quận] and wards [phường] like the centrally-controlled municipalities, but also include townships [thị xã]. Outside of the provincial municipalities, provinces are divided into rural districts or counties called huyện, then towns [thị trấn], which are often more densely populated, economic and political centers of the huyện. Outside of these more densely populated centers, rural districts/counties are divided into communes [xã]. Communes are further subdivided into hamlets [thôn], which consist of several villages (làng in the lowlands; bản in the highlands).
April 26, 2004

Mr. David Wangsgard
Graduate Student
Sociology & Anthropology
Simon Fraser University

Dear Mr. Wangsgard:

Re: Identity construction in a Nung Phan Sinh village

I am pleased to inform you that the above referenced Request for Ethical Approval of Research has been approved on behalf of the Research Ethics Board. This approval is in effect until the end date of April 26, 2007.

Any changes in the procedures affecting interaction with human subjects should be reported to the Research Ethics Board. Significant changes will require the submission of a revised Request for Ethical Approval of Research. This approval is in effect only while you are a registered SFU student.

Your application has been categorized as ‘minimal risk’ and approved by the Director, Office of Research Ethics, on behalf of the Research Ethics Board in accordance with University policy R20.0, http://www.sfu.ca/policies/research/r20-01.htm.

“Minimal risk” occurs when potential subjects can reasonably be expected to regard the probability and magnitude of possible harms incurred by participating in the research to be no greater than those encountered by the subject in those aspects of his or her everyday life that relate to the research.

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Please note that it is the responsibility of the researcher, or the responsibility of the Student Supervisor if the researcher is a graduate student or undergraduate student, to maintain written or other forms of documented consent for a period of 1 year after the research has been completed.

Best wishes for success in this research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director
Office of Research Ethics

c: Dr. Michael Howard, Supervisor

/jmy
APPENDIX 3: TITLE CHANGE APPROVAL LETTER

David Wangsgard  
Graduate Student  
Department of Sociology  
& Anthropology  
Simon Fraser University

June 9, 2009

Dear David:

Re: Here We are all Brothers: Gender Relations and the Construction of Masculine Identities in a Nung Fan Sling Village - Appl. #36022  
Title Change

In response to your request, I am pleased to approve, on behalf of the Research Ethics Board, the title change amendment in the research protocol of the above referenced Request for Ethical Approval of Research originally approved on April 26, 2004.

If there is an adverse event, the principal investigator must notify the Office of Research Ethics within five (5) days. An Adverse Events form is available electronically by contacting dore@sfu.ca.

All correspondence with regards to this application will be sent to your SFU email address.

Please notify the Office of Research Ethics at dore@sfu.ca once you have completed the data collection portion of your project so that we can close this file.

Best wishes for continued success in this research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Hal Weinberg, Director  
Office of Research Ethics

c: Dr. Michael Howard, Supervisor  
/jmy
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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