

Chapter 2

Changing Residence Patterns and Ancestor Worship in a Northern Vietnamese Village

Misaki Iwai¹

Abstract

Based on the field research in a village which is about 100 km far from Hanoi, the author examines some aspects of changing residence patterns and ancestral ritual performances in *Đổi Mới* era.

Key Words: residence patterns, patrilocality, multi-household compound, ancestor worship, family ritual, northern Vietnamese village

1. Introduction

This short article reviews varying residence patterns and family relations in a northern Vietnamese village of the *Đổi Mới* era.

Since the admission of Vietnam in the World Trade Organization in 2007, numerous foreign-funded enterprises built industrial parks not only in major metropolitan areas such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City but also in provincial cities. Under the slogan of “industrialization and modernization throughout Vietnam,” several industrial parks were constructed in various places, employment opportunities for young workers from rural areas increased rapidly, and the rural society in northern Vietnam underwent a major transformation.

This study aims to examine the changes in family relations and residential patterns in agriculture villages because the change in employment structure and labor force movement accelerated with globalization. We will focus on residence patterns of newly married couples and the transformation of rural society in northern Vietnam.

In Southeast Asia, bilateral families are common: this residential pattern is

¹ Professor, Kanda University of International Studies.

Minoru Teramoto, Nguyen Duc Chien, Misaki Iwai, Bui The Cuong. *The Vietnamese Family During the Period of Promoting Industrialization, Modernization and International Integration*. Chiba: IDE-JETRO, 2017.

widespread in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, where newlyweds often follow the matrilocality system. On the contrary, in Vietnam, the patrilocal pattern of family, which is common in East Asia, is also popular; this residential pattern is similar to that of China and Korea, and newlyweds often adopt patrilocality².

According to Todd (Todd 2016:162–165), similar to Japan and Korea, Vietnam’s patrilocal pattern is similar to that of China: one of the married sons lives with his parents. In this article, I show how Vietnamese families implement the practice of patrilocality.

To determine the characteristics of the patrilocal family, we also examine rituals of ancestor worship in the family. The kinship system of Vietnam clearly distinguishes the paternal family, referred to as “*bên nội* (inside),” from the maternal family, referred to as “*bên ngoài* (outside),” and membership in the “*bên nội*” kin group is also more emphasized. I will consider how residence patterns and ancestor rituals have changed.

2. Research site and methodology

2.1 Research site

Map 1: The Red River Delta Region in Vietnam



Source: University of Michigan website

<http://www.umich.edu/~csfound/545/1997/kim/paper.htm>

² According to Pham Van Bich, numerous western scholars have assumed that in rural northern Vietnam, patrilocal residence is rare, but the nuclear family households account for an overwhelming majority. However, there are considerable flaws in their surveys and data analysis methods along with a danger of overlooking the real image of family relations (Pham Van Bich 2016:56-67).

The survey site is the village of Bach Coc in Thanh Loi Commune, Vu Ban District, Nam Dinh province, located 100 kilometers south of Hanoi (see Map 1). Regional administrative units in the Red River Delta of Vietnam include province, district, commune (administrative village), and hamlet (*xóm*) (from the largest to smallest).

Bach Coc village was a unit of administrative organization before the 1945 revolution. However, after various transformations thereafter, it almost completely corresponds to the Coc Thanh agricultural cooperative (hereafter referred to as the cooperative) and comprises eight hamlets.³ The hamlet is the smallest administrative and social organization where branches of each mass organization and the Communist Party are located and has about 150 households. As of 1998, the population of the cooperative was 3,827 (Sakurai 2006: 107). All the households in the village are also members of the cooperative. In this article, the subject area is Bach Coc village; if necessary, the concrete hamlet name is indicated.

Map 2: Bach Coc Village



Source: Google Earth

Bach Coc is an agricultural village located 15 kilometers southwest from Nam Dinh city and its main industries are rice, vegetable, and potato cultivation. The vegetables cultivated in the village are primarily herbs and are eaten raw. Vegetable cultivation and

³ Coc Thanh agricultural cooperative comprises the following hamlets: Duong Lai Trong (DLT), Duong Lai Ngoai (DLN), Xom A (XA), Xom B (XB), Xom C (XC), Xom C+ ap Phu (C+P), Phu Coc (PC), and Trai Noi (TN).

Minoru Teramoto, Nguyen Duc Chien, Misaki Iwai, Bui The Cuong. *The Vietnamese Family During the Period of Promoting Industrialization, Modernization and International Integration*. Chiba: IDE-JETRO, 2017.

sales are the main source of income for elderly women who sell wholesale at local markets and the Nam Dinh city fruit market.

In recent years, an industrial park has been constructed in the area and young people in their 20s to 30s work there in factories. As a result of the sudden increase in salaried employees, the socioeconomic life of the village is undergoing major changes.

2.2 Research methodology

The survey period in Bach Coc village lasted for nine days from December 23 to December 31, 2016.

During the study period, we were able to visit 25 households. Interviews with each household member were conducted at the respondents' residences. The interview timespans were about 60 to 90 minutes.. The respondents mainly comprised elderly men and women aged 65 or over. They were questioned in detail about their daily lives since the time they were newly married in the 1960's to the present time.

3. Formation of patrilocal multi-household compound

3.1 Living space of the main house

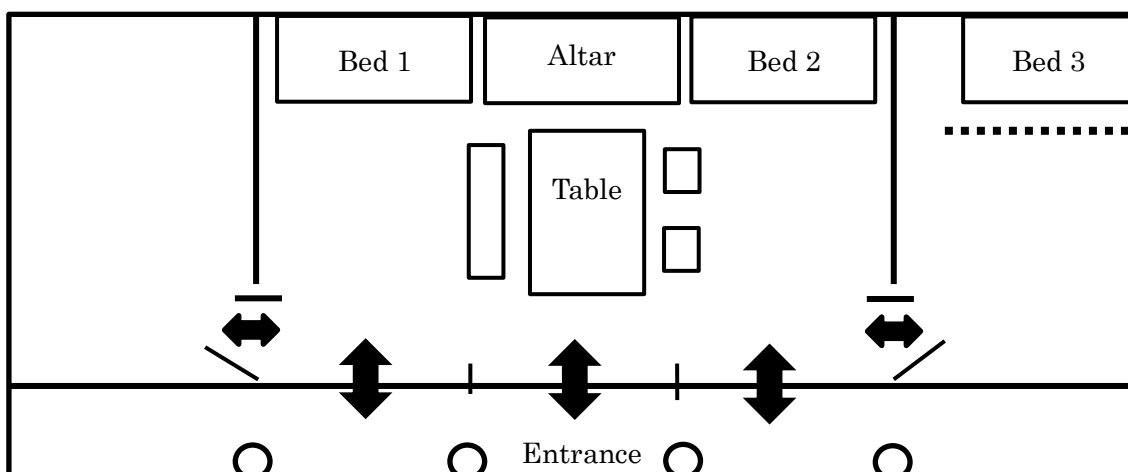
In rural northern Vietnam, houses built as flat buildings called "*ba gian hai chái*" (which means three spaces and two rooms) are common. In the layout of the main building, there is an open space in the center, and on both sides it is common to have semi-independent small rooms (partitioned without doors) called *chái*. Recently, urban-type two-story houses are also being constructed frequently, and the number of traditional houses is decreasing. Separate from the main building, there is a cooking area and a toilet/bathing place within the compound. There are some simple stoves in the cooking area, and firewood and straw after harvest are used as fuel.

As shown in Figure 1, two beds are placed next to the ancestors' altar, which is placed in the center of the open space of the main room.⁴ It is common for the husband and the wife to sleep on beds 1 (to the left) and 2 (toward the other side), respectively

⁴ The house type of "*ba gian hai chái*" varies from region to region. In addition social stratum belonging also plays a role. Suenari (Suenari 1998:229) has introduced a house type in the village near Hanoi. Although the social stratum of the house owner described by Suenari is not clear, we need to keep in mind that the house type greatly varies depending on economic situation. Gourou pointed out this in rural northern Vietnam during the French colonial period (Gourou 2003:259-283).

and vice versa. While the children are still small, the small rooms are used as the children's study, bedroom, and storage; however, when the children have grown and the eldest son is married, one room becomes a private space for the newlyweds (that is, bed 3 is used by the new couple).

Figure 1: Residence and Spaces of Families in Everyday Life



Indeed, the house types I observed in Bach Coc village were not necessarily “*ba gian hai chái*”; there were many variations. For example, there are the types “*ba gian*” and “*ba gian + một chái*.”

Picture 1: The “*ba gian+một chái*” (left) and “*ba gian*” (right) types



3.2 Steps in the patrilocal residence pattern

According to a survey conducted by Suenari in a suburb of Hanoi, newly married couples stay with the husband’s parents for a certain period after marriage. Before being completely independent, they eat separately while living with the parents (Suenari 1998:229–231).

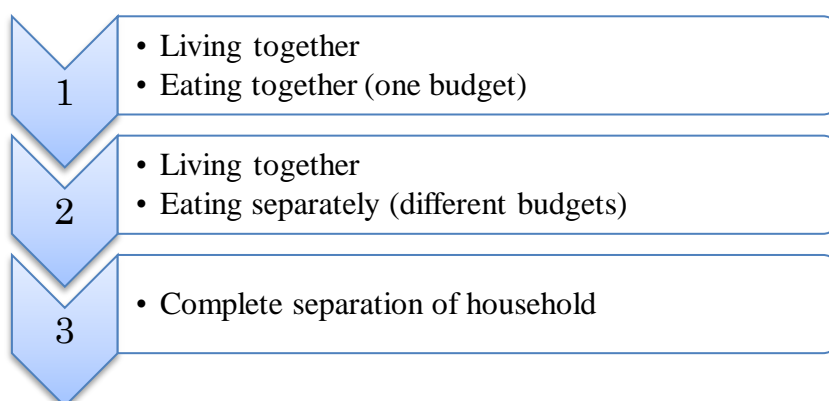
In the Bach Coc village too, it is common for the sons’ families to go through similar stages and become independent. In my interview with 25 households, when I asked why

the son and his wife temporarily live together with their parents after marriage, many elderly cite mainly two reasons.

- Patrilocality is a traditional family system. By learning the manner and lifestyle of the husband's family, the daughter-in-law will familiarize as early as possible with her new life as a family member.
- It is usual for a newly married couple to depend on the son's parents for some time just after marriage, but they aim to be economically independent as soon as possible.

Thus, due to cultural and economic factors, the husband's parents and the newlyweds form an extended family for several years. The temporarily extended family period has undergone two phases, as shown below in Figure 2. The first stage is living and eating together and the second stage is living together but eating separately. After a certain period, the newly-wed couple stops living with their parents, and in most cases, with the permission of the boy's parents, they build their own small house in the compound. This completes the household division (third stage).

Figure 2: Steps of Residence Patterns



(1) The first step: living together and eating together

A son and his wife live together with the husband's parents for a certain period after marriage. During this period, the household budget is managed by the husband's parents (especially the mother), and the newly married couple are the parents' dependents. During the period of eating together, the bride must learn and memorize the methods of general housework in accordance with the instructions of the mother-in-law and should shop at the market.

According to my interviews with many elderly people, couples who got married during the Vietnam War spent a considerable time in this stage. For example, we can examine the case of Mrs. G (81 years old, C hamlet). After their marriage, her husband served in

the Vietnamese army during the Vietnam War. She lived and ate together with her in-laws in their house for four years until her father-in-law passed away (her mother-in-law had passed away before her marriage). Mrs. G was a dependent family member of her husband's parents for four years and was responsible for the care of her old father-in-law, who was in control of the household budget.

(2) The second step: living together and eating separately

After eating together with his parents for several years, the son and his wife start eating separately. At this step, the kitchen is shared, but the young couple uses separate stoves and prepares its cook pots separately. It is extremely easy to maintain the use of separate stoves. There are cases where the parents and the son and his wife separate cooking time-periods without dividing the ovens. For example, recently, electric rice cookers have popularized; hence, people tend to use the kitchen only to cook side dishes and soup.

For example, Mrs. T (80 years old, C hamlet) lives with the family of her second son who is 42 years old. The eldest son has built a house in the compound and lives with his family. The main house where Mrs. T is living will be inherited by the second son's family.

As seen in Pictures 2 and 3, electrical appliances such as a refrigerator and an electric rice cooker are placed in the dedicated space of a couple, next to their bed. To make effective use of space, they also make a mezzanine floor to expand the area occupied. Mrs. T has two grandchildren: a granddaughter used to sleep on the same bed with her from the age 5–6 and her grandson sleeps with her son and his wife. Therefore, grandchildren freely come back and forth between the main space and the small room.

“Living together fosters family affection, but having separate meals nurtures economic independence,” Mrs. T told me.

Picture 2: The kitchen shared by the parent's household and the son's household (left) and the contents of the son's household pan (right)



Picture 3: Household goods are found in the son's family room



(3) The third step: complete household separation

Sons and their families build houses in the parents' compound or residential lands prepared by their parents and live independently. For example, in the case of Mr. B.H.D. (81 years old, A hamlet), three sons and their families built their own houses, forming a "multi-household compound."⁵

Picture 4: Mr. B.H.D's multi-household compound



As mentioned above, the three stages of patrilocality from (1) to (3) are basically repeated from the marriage of the older son to the younger one. In other words, the parents' household forms a multi-household compound while repeating the form of the extended family and the nuclear family. Newly married couples rarely live and build new houses in the multi-household compound without going through the patrilocal period, unless the son is able to get a job in a distant place.

Consequently, most sons who remain in Bach Coc village share the experience of living with their parents after marriage. In recent years, although some newly married

⁵ This concept is used by Dr. Mizuno. In northeast Thailand, where matrilocality is common, parents form a multihousehold compound together with their daughters' families (Mizuno 1988: 109-110).

couples often omit the step of eating together with the husbands' parents, the brides and the mother-in-law for a certain period live together and divide domestic housework. Patrilocality is a condition for building a cooperative relationship where sons' families mutually help each other in their daily lives, centering on the husbands' parents.

4. Changing ancestor worship

4.1 Family rituals and the altar

In the rural areas of northern Vietnam, ancestor worship is a foundation of the family system, and the ancestral rituals, such as the death anniversary celebration (*giỗ*), which occur in each family, contribute to the stable continuation of the family system. As family members participate in the ceremony, the sense of belonging is strengthened, and the organization expands to a wider paternal kin group, called "*dòng họ*."

In general, the altar for each immediate family is a shrine for worshiping its ancestors up to three generations back (grandparents). There is a rule according to which co-residents in the multi-household compound share the "only altar to worship the ancestors" (Suenari 1998: 243) and the altar is installed in the parents' house. While the parents are alive and healthy, the sons who have already established their independent households will also create altars in their own houses, but at the altar, they worship only the local god.

Newly deceased family member's portrait and incense bowl are set up elsewhere, not at the altar, which is at the center of the main house. It is only after the exhumation and reburial (*cải táng*) 3–5 years later that the incense bowl of the deceased is transferred to the altar.

After the parents pass away, the eldest son, called "*trai trưởng*," is responsible for performing the ancestral rituals. There are several death anniversary rituals annually. For each ancestor's death anniversary ceremony, costs may be shared between siblings. There may often also be a division by which each son is responsible for celebrating one parent's death anniversary. For example, the eldest brother is financially responsible for the anniversary of his father and the second son is responsible for that of his mother.

Picture 5: Mr. T.X.T.'s ancestral altar and his wife's altar (DLN hamlet)



On the contrary, it is common, even in the houses of sons who live far away, for the parents' portraits to be installed and a mini altar to be placed near the ceiling. "Wherever I reside I worship my late parents (*con đâu bố mẹ ở đấy*)," it is said, and this cult is called "*thờ vọng*" (cult from afar). According to this type of worship, a son living in a distant place returns to his native village, takes some of the burned incense stubs that remain in the incense bowl of the parents placed on the altar, and brings it with him to his home, placing it in the incense bowl of the parent's new altar.

4.2 New ways of performing the family ritual

In Bach Coc village, when the elderly are asked how to actually take care of the ancestral altar, they state the following two methods are adopted⁶

(1) Turning the parents' house into a worship space (*nhà thờ*)

Numerous elderly people who live alone as couples state: "Our wishes are that after our death the house will become a worship space (*nhà thờ*) so that our sons can perform rituals together." This way, when children living far away come home someday, there is space enough available for them to stay.

(2) Removing the altar to the house of the eldest son

When the parents (or only the fathers) pass away or fall ill and are unable to perform the rituals, the altars are removed to the house of the eldest son. The house and the altar do not necessarily establish an inseparable set. In other words, even if the eldest son has

⁶ There are exceptional cases as well. For example, if a wife is the only child, both altars for the inside (paternal) ancestors and outside (maternal) ones are installed in the house after her parents' death. In the cases that I actually observed in the Bach Coc village, the following two methods are adopted: 1) installing the husband's ancestral altar and the wife's ancestral altar separately in two different houses in the same compound, and 2) installing incense bowls for the husband's ancestor and the wife's ancestor at one altar in the main house.

set up an independent household and the youngest son remains in the parent's house, the eldest son can move the altar and the ancestral incense bowl to his own house.

4.3 Generation gap and its impact on family relations

According to the elderly people interviewed in the Bach Coc village, there is a saying that goes "the younger generation is completely different from our generation." The younger generation, which grew up in the *Đổi Mới* period (mainly after the 1990s), prefers to work in the industrial park to farming.

There are two broad categories of new job opportunities as follows:

- They migrate and find jobs in companies in industrial parks near Ho Chi Minh City (Dong Nai, Binh Duong). As their workplaces are far from home, often they find marriage partners where they work (through the introduction of friends or coworkers). They settle there and return to their native village only once every couple of years.
- They may find jobs in a company in industrial parks in the Nam Dinh province. They commute between their parents' home and their workplaces and are economically independent. Marriage partners are often found in the village, but since both the husband and the wife commute to work, they are not at home during the daytime on weekdays. The grandparents take care of the grandchildren.

As a consequence, a great change has taken place in family relations, especially with regard to marriage. The fact that the son's family can go home only a few times a year means that it is impossible for the parents-in-law to ask the bride to support them in daily life, such as nursing them when they fall sick and assisting them in household work. Moreover, it is difficult to transfer important work, such as preparing banquets for the ancestors' ceremonies, from the mother-in-law to the bride. In the parent's generation, marriages were often arranged and young couples resided close to their parents, but in the younger generation, couples mostly choose love marriages.

Moreover, even while living together or staying close to the parents' house, the lifestyle (such as sense of time) of the young couples who are factory workers is considerably different from that of the old generation that has been engaged in agriculture for such a long time.

For elderly women, the relationship between their mothers-in-law and them had been

different from how it is now. In the *Đổi Mới* era, even in rural areas that are considered more conservative by some, it seems that daughters-in-law are enjoying a relatively free and independent position compared with the time when their mothers and mothers-in-law were young.⁷

5. Concluding remarks

On the basis of this research, the changes in living patterns and family relations in rural villages in Vietnam can be summarized as follows.

First, in today's rural areas of northern Vietnam, newly married couples live with the husband's parents (maintaining a patrilocal pattern) after marriage. However, they have a strong tendency to have separate meals (step 2) avoiding the period of eating together (step 1) or significantly shortening this step. Couples commuting from Bach Coc village to the industrial park are an example. Some may think that they do not need to depend on their parents after marriage because they earn a stable income through working outside the agriculture sector. By contrast, for people who got married during the Vietnam War, due to economic hardship and the husbands' absence from home, wives lived with their husbands' parents and ate together for a long time. In other words, the market economy after *Đổi Mới* has enabled the economic independence and household division of the newly married couples.

However, it is necessary to be aware that patrilocality is still being maintained as a traditional family form in modern times. Cohabiting with the husband's parents helps the newly married couples maintain a constant family relationship. The division of households and the formation of a multi-household compound show that the marriages of all sons from the firstborn to the youngest repeat the same pattern of patrilocality. Nevertheless, we need to remember that for many sons, this pattern is temporary, which means that for the wives, their stay with their husbands' parents lasts only for a certain period.

Second, it was common in the past for the eldest son to inherit the altar from the parents and to be responsible for performing the ancestral rituals. However, nowadays, there are increasingly cases that do not conform to the norm due to various

⁷ Before *Đổi Mới* problems related to family relations, in particular between the bride and the mother-in-law, arose, and had been subject to arbitration of dispute resolution organization called reconciliation group (*tổ hòa giải*) (Kato 2010 : 60-62)。

Minoru Teramoto, Nguyen Duc Chien, Misaki Iwai, Bui The Cuong. *The Vietnamese Family During the Period of Promoting Industrialization, Modernization and International Integration*. Chiba: IDE-JETRO, 2017.

socioeconomic factors. Households with old parents living alone are not unusual after all children have become independent. As we have seen, ancestral rituals are held at the altar of the main building while parents are alive. There are mainly two possibilities after the death of the parents: (1) turning the parents' house into a worship space and (2) removing the altar from parents' house to the house of the eldest son. In the case of sons who migrate and have families in distant places, opportunities to return home for ancestral rituals are limited, so the joint foundation of families is weakening.

Finally, there are some problems that could not be fully clarified in this survey. First, it is necessary to further investigate the meaning of not going through the time of eating together (step 1) in the patrilocal pattern and how this affects family relations. Next, I wish to examine more deeply how sons who migrated to distant places are involved in ancestral rituals. Furthermore, I wish to consider how relations between sons who have formed multi-household compounds change after their parents' death. I hope to respond to these questions in my next study.

References

- Gourou, Pierre. (2003) *Người Nông Dân Châu Thổ Bắc Kỳ - Nghiên Cứu Địa Lý Nhân Văn* (Les Paysans du Delta Tonkinois: Études de Géographie Humaine). Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh: Hội khoa học lịch sử Việt Nam Viện Viễn Đông Bác Cổ Pháp và Nhà xuất bản Trẻ.
- Kato, Atsufumi. (2011) "Kindai no purojekuto toshite no sonraku choutei (Village Accommodation as Modern Project)," Yuki Konagaya and Masanori Goto. (eds.) *Shakaishugiteki Kindaika no Keiken* (Experiences of Socialized Modernization). Tokyo: Akashi shoten.
- Malarney, Shaun Kingsley. (2002) *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*. London: Routledge Curzon.
- Mizuno, Koichi. (1981) *Tai nouson no Shakai soshiki* (Social Organizations in Rural Thailand). Tokyo: Sobunsha.
- Phạm Văn Bích. (2016) "Nơi Cư Trú Sau Hôn Nhân Của Người Kinh Ở Đồng Bằng Sông Hồng Và Cách Xác Định Nó" (Postnuptial Residence of the Kinh People in the Red River Delta and Ways to Identify it). In: Minoru Teramoto, Bùi Thế Cường, Phạm Văn Bích, Misaki Iwai . *Gia Đình Việt Nam Trong Thời Kỳ Công Nghiệp Hóa, Hiện Đại Hóa, Hội Nhập Quốc Tế* (Vietnamese Families in the Period of

Minoru Teramoto, Nguyen Duc Chien, Misaki Iwai, Bui The Cuong. *The Vietnamese Family During the Period of Promoting Industrialization, Modernization and International Integration*. Chiba: IDE-JETRO, 2017.

Industrialization, Modernization and International Integration). Chiba: IDE-JETRO.

Sakurai, Yumio. (2006) *Rekishi chiikigaku no Kokoromi–Bakkukokku* (Trial Study of Historical Area Studies). Tokyo: Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology, University of Tokyo.

----- (2010) “Kiều Lao Động Sáng Đi Tối Về - Ly Nông Nhưng Không Ly Hương Khu Công Nghiệp và Nông Thôn (Morning Leaving–Evening Coming Back: The Type of Labor Movement between Industrial Zones and Rural Areas).” In: IWAI Misaki and Bùi Thế Cường chủ biên. *Kỷ Yếu Tọa Đàm: Di Dân ở Việt Nam Trong Thời Kỳ Hiện Đại Hóa, Công Nghiệp Hóa* (Population Movements in the Period of Modernization and Industrialization in Vietnam). Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh: Nhà xuất bản khoa học xã hội.

Suenari, Michio. (1998) *Betonamu no sosen saishi–Choukyoku no shakai seikatu* (Ancestral Rituals in Vietnam–Social life in Trieu Khuc Village). Tokyo: Toyo bunka kenkyujo, University of Tokyo.

Todd, Emmanuel. (2016) *Kazoku shisutemu no kigen* (L’origine des systèmes familiaux, tome 1: L’Eurasie). Tokyo: Fujiwara Shoten.