Weaving Women’s Spheres in Vietnam: 
An Introduction

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Vietnam and Beyond

This volume examines the complexity and potential of the agency of women in the Vietnamese context by focusing on the effect of the public/private divide. We analyze the agency of women and the representation of womanhood in the realms of the family, local community, and religious activity from historical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives. Our aim is to contribute to a comparative study of the reconstruction of the public and private spheres in Asian perspectives. The chapters in this volume compare Vietnamese cases with gender issues in other societies regarding, for instance, women’s status in traditional East Asian societies, the effects of socialism and industrialization on women’s education, the effect of modernist discourse on marriage, the effect of socialistic collectivization on the reconstruction of women’s community, as well as the experiences of diaspora and their struggle to reconstruct an ethnic identity.

Vietnam is a junction of various values, ideologies, and systems, as the locus where East Asia meets Southeast Asia. More specific to this volume’s context, Vietnam is where the East Asian male-centered patrilineal family system meets the comparably flexible Southeast Asian bilateral-kindred system. Historically, Vietnam has experienced drastic social changes common among developing countries, including colonization, struggles for national independence, total wars, socialistic reforms, and national divisions. Further, Vietnam experienced an “uncertain transition” from a socialist regime to a libertarian one (Burawoy and Verdery, eds. 1999) right in the middle of the extreme historical time of the “short twentieth century” (Hobsbawm 1994), though at the periphery of the world system.

This work provides an analytical description of the agency of Vietnamese women in order to understand how people at the crossroads of often contradictory values and institutions have struggled to interweave, or in some cases have unconcernedly interwoven, their lives and places of belonging. In this respect, this volume serves not merely as an introduction of intergrading between East Asia and Southeast Asia, nor does it describe the Vietnamese culture and women’s status in it.

The key focuses of this volume are the agency of women and the effect of the public/private divide on gendered practices. The volume’s most important
contribution to gender studies is to shed light on the dynamics of women's agency that enable them to interweave their lives between various public norms and institutions, particularly between the official realm of the public sphere and the informal realm of the private sphere. The chapters in this volume reveal how the distinction between the public and private spheres has maintained existing gendered structures and has regulated women's lives, how the agency of the symbolic representations of womanhood problematizes this divide, and how gendered agents’ practices of appropriating and transgressing the divide have reconfigured the boundary of the dominant, often repressive, gendered structure and interwoven alternative spaces for living between these boundaries. The chapters in this volume focus on the suppressive family structure upon Vietnamese women and the active agency of women appropriating and transgressing the structure. The volume also reveals the possibility of other institutions outside the family, such as school, religious organizations, and mass organizations, as a basis for mutual support and for women to actively reconnect themselves to society, ethnicity, and national identity.

Necessarily, what is described in this volume is not a static picture of women's status in Vietnam, but a more dynamic potential of women's agency. To approach the topic, this volume describes concrete cases and life stories of Vietnamese women rather than general trends regarding women's status in Vietnam. While several chapters refer to grand narratives, such as the conflict between the modernizing process of women's liberation and traditional norms obstructing this trend, most of the chapters concentrate more on case studies in which people assemble the fragments of plural norms from tradition and modernity, East and Southeast Asia, and public and private spheres.

The Agency of Women

In this volume, we use the phrase “the agency of women” in a wider sense. The concept of agency basically indicates individuals who have the capacity to act effectively on the world and their lives. However, agency can be embodied not only by persons but also by nonhuman things and symbols. In this volume the contributors consider not only the agency of individual women but also that of symbolic representations of womanhood, such as gender-transgressive males (or male spirit mediums) who embody female deities (Kirsten W. Endres’s chapter), and the Vietnamization of statues of Virgin Mary (Thien-Huong Ninh’s chapter). I use the concept of agency to refer to the potential of individuals and symbols that behave as active actors but are influenced by other actors around