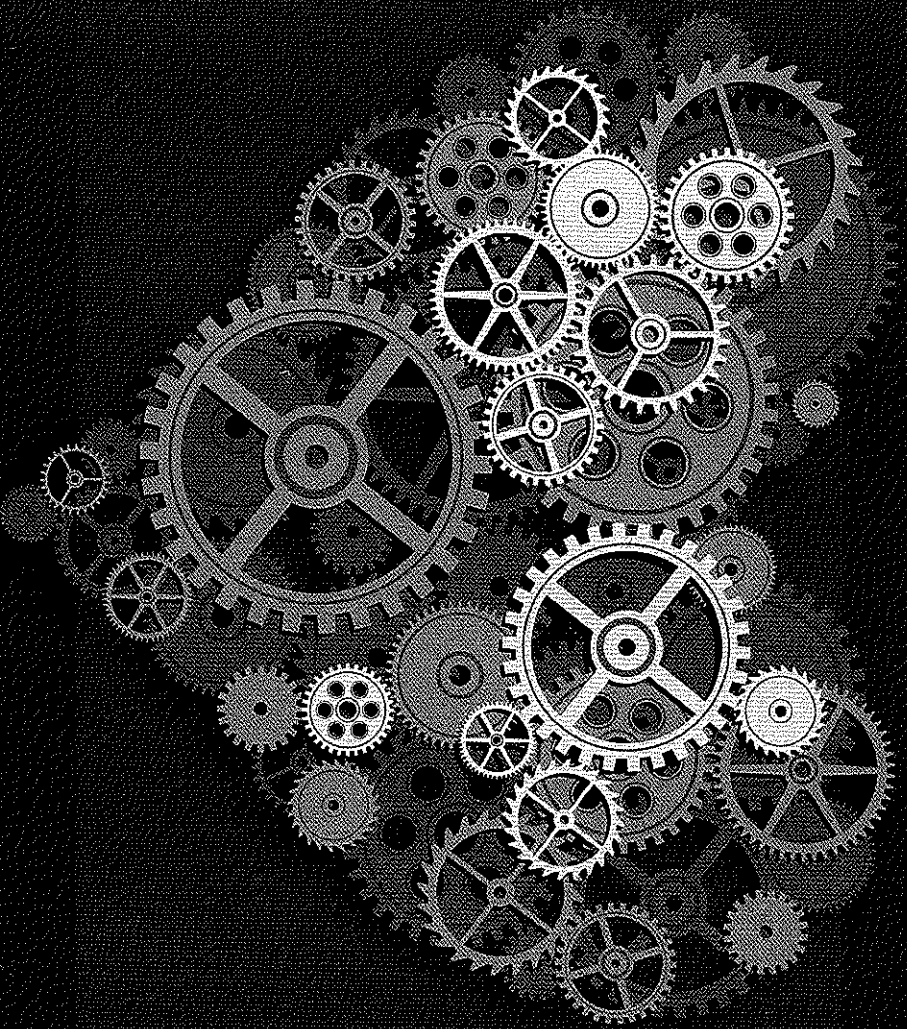


AT THE HEART OF WORK AND FAMILY

Engaging the Ideas of Arlie Hochschild



EDITED BY Anita Iltis Carey AND Karen V. Hansen

Families in Focus Series

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CHAPTER 20



Homeland Visits

TRANSNATIONAL MAGNIFIED MOMENTS AMONG LOW-WAGE IMMIGRANT MEN

Hung Cam Thai

This chapter examines the complex transnational dimensions and trajectories of Vietnamese low-wage immigrant men and reflects on the ways in which return visits to their homeland alter or highlight these men's sense of masculinity and social class. Homeland return visits—the occasional or recurring sojourns made by members of migrant communities to their homeland—offer an important window into understanding how immigrant men make sense of their family and work as they organize transnational lives, forming relationships linking together their country of origin and their country of settlement, a process that has been given much attention among scholars of migration since the early 1990s (Brettell 2006; Guarinizo, Portes, and Haller 2003; Guarinizo and Smith 1998a; Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Stanton 1992; Vertovec 2004). Although a lively body of research in recent years has paid significant attention to the emergence of transnational cultures, there is currently little attention given to the role of masculinity within this body of research. A central point I make in this chapter is that the related categories of social class and masculinity need to be expanded globally. This is because much of what we know about both concepts in the West are still nation-specific, despite the enormous increase in transnational flows of capital and people in recent years (Connell 1995; Wright 1997).

Globally expanding research on the related concepts of social class and masculinity is particularly relevant to the lives of immigrants whose low wages take on different social and economic meanings when they make visits to their homeland in developing countries. For some immigrants, as Mary Waters succinctly points out, “their sense of self is tied to the status system in the home country”

(1999, 102). That status system is often reworked in complex ways as immigrants take on transnational lives. Moreover, the relationship between return visits and men's sense of masculinity and social class provides a basis for understanding how immigrant men understand their gender ideologies and practices across international borders—for example, their desirability as a husband and as a family man. This focus is particularly important because immigrants continue to work in the lowest sectors of the U.S. formal and informal labor markets (Chiswick 1982). Vietnamese American men, for instance, earn on average 30 percent less than their white counterparts, and they are one of the lowest income-earning ethnic groups in the United States (Yamane 2001). The issue of work, gender, and marriageability among low-wage Vietnamese immigrant men is also worthy of exploration, because, unlike the general population, research has shown that among Asian American immigrants in the low-wage labor market, especially in California, women tend to get jobs more easily, work longer hours, and earn more money than men (Espiritu 1999).

My analysis of homeland return visits as a social practice among immigrant Vietnamese men is inspired by Arlie Russell Hochschild's concept of “magnified moments.” As Hochschild defines them, magnified moments are “episodes of heightened importance, either epiphanies, moments of intense glee or unusual insight, or moments in which things go intensely but meaningfully wrong. In either case, the moment stands out; it is metaphorically rich, unusually elaborate and often echoes” (1994, 4). The notion of “return” has been conceptualized in the scholarly literature primarily as “return migration,” which refers to “the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle” (Gmelch 1980, 136). *Return visits*, distinct from return migration, allow migrants to “maintain multiple, yet socially meaningful, identities in both their current place of residence and their external homeland” (Duval 2004, 51). Return visits are what Hochschild might call “magnified moments” in the transnational activities of immigrants. Much of Hochschild's empirical work centers on magnified moments of social life. In a study of overworked parents, for example, we learn about the moment when parents drop their children off at day care centers (Hochschild 1997). These moments magnify the social organization of time and the unequal relations between children and adults within and between the care center and the outside world. It is a moment that tells us about an entire way of viewing a culture of care (Hochschild 1995).

MAGNIFYING MOMENTS IN THE VIETNAMESE DIASPORA

In this chapter, I tell the stories of two men whom I met in the course of conducting a larger study on the emergence of a transnational marriage market linking women in Vietnam and Vietnamese men living and working in Vietnamese immigrant communities in the United States (Thai 2008). During fourteen months of fieldwork done in distinct intervals in Vietnam and in the United

States from 1997 to 2001, I got to know a total of sixty-nine transpacific marriages in the Vietnamese diaspora. In this distinct and emergent global marriage market, the immigrant Vietnamese men typically go to Vietnam to marry through arrangement, subsequently returning to their places of residence in the Vietnamese diaspora (most are from the United States, Canada, France, and Australia) to initiate paperwork to sponsor their wives. During this waiting period, I came to know them by first entering the lives of the brides in Vietnam and later the U.S.-based grooms (Thai 2008). In the process of these marital arrangements, most of the grooms had returned to Vietnam for the first time since their emigration from Vietnam. That is, the first time they met their wives was also the first time that many of them returned to their home country after some years of being away.

Return migration in order to resettle in their homeland is rare for the overseas Vietnamese population, making the return visit an important social practice. Compared to the situations of other Asian immigrants, it is relatively difficult for immigrants in the postwar Vietnamese diaspora to reintegrate and resettle back to Vietnam. Most postwar Vietnamese immigrants left Vietnam as political refugees during the last quarter of the twentieth century (Long 2004). For these return migrants, it is complicated to buy land and property, as well as to obtain paperwork for long-term residence. In fact, return visits have only recently been made possible due to changes in national policies by the Vietnamese government and recent international diplomatic relations among nation-states, particularly between the United States and Vietnam.¹ In 1986, after having no contact with most of the outside world for over a decade, the government of Vietnam adopted a new socioeconomic policy called *Doi Moi* (renovation), which did not end state ownership or central planning, but moved the country from complete state-sponsored socialism to partial free-market capitalism (Bhushi 1997; Morley and Nishihara 1997). The normalization of economic and social ties by 1995, the year when U.S. President Bill Clinton established full diplomatic relations with the country (Morley and Nishihara 1997), gradually increased the number of individuals from the Vietnamese diaspora who returned to Vietnam to visit family members or to vacation. Return visits, therefore, are an important social practice that enables migrants to sustain transnational family ties. It is a crucial magnified moment for Vietnamese emigrants who begin to take on transnational identities. The Vietnamese government estimates that there are currently more than one million overseas Vietnamese who return to visit annually, a dramatic increase from 87,000 in 1992 and 8,000 in 1988 (Thomas 1997).

The analysis in this chapter is based on the *first* return visit to Vietnam that the men took to meet their future wives as well as subsequent trips they took while their wives waited in Vietnam for paper clearance to migrate. Indeed, these are not just moments of meeting their wives-to-be, but are also extraordinary moments of a transnational journey. Some of them had only returned to

Vietnam for the first time for the sole purpose of marriage, while for others the first return visit may have prompted a desire for a transpacific marriage. These visits are not just based on nostalgic notions such as "home" and "roots." They are embedded in complicated emotional desires, to be sure, but these visits also have powerful implications for destabilizing and altering myriad social relations in the community of origin. They produce new social hierarchies along class and gender lines as well as restore traditions that have been seemingly abolished over time. I have discussed these implications and analyzed specific marriages elsewhere; in this chapter I take the opportunity to analyze return visits as an analytical category in the larger discussion on contemporary/transnational cultures, particularly as return visits raise important questions about the meanings of work, marriage, and family among immigrants who are just beginning to form and organize transnational lives (Thai 2003a, 2003b, 2008).

A fundamental concern here is the question of how transnational mobilities can simultaneously challenge as well as reinforce patriarchy. "Instead of being a social equalizer that empowers all migrants alike," Luis Guarnizo argues, "transnational migration tends to reproduce and even exacerbate class, gender, and regional inequalities" (1997, 281). In her study of Filipino transnational communities, Yen Le Espiritu notes that the idealization of the home "becomes problematic when it elicits a nostalgia for a glorious past that never was, a nostalgia that elides exclusion, power relations, and difference or when it elicits a desire to replicate these inequities as a means to buttress lost status and identities in the adopted country" (2003, 15). The fact that men in my study returned to Vietnam for a spouse is a telling story about gender relations in their transnational journey from Vietnam to the West and back to their homeland. In my interviews with informants about their transnational networks and in my more than twenty-five trips to Vietnam to do fieldwork since 1997, I always heard people telling me that return visits were made generally first by men, followed by women and children in later return visits. But, in general, single men are some of the first groups of people who return to Vietnam, some for the sole purpose of finding a wife. For many men in this study, return visits to Vietnam elicited enormous emotions and shifts in their identities that help to remake class and masculinity in powerful ways.

MASCULINITY

At the most basic level of cultural ideology, masculinity is a "personal and collective project" that often assumes an association between breadwinning and manhood (Donaldson 1993, 645). In the mid-1980s, a "new sociology of masculinity" was proposed in order to critically examine power relations among men and between men and women (Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985). Since that framework was introduced, much of the scholarly work on the topic invokes the plural *masculinities* to account for the diverse range of men's experiences.

Although most scholars agree that masculinity does not constitute a singular ideology or practice, it is clustered around what Connell calls "hegemonic masculinity," which "asserts the naturalness of male domination, based on solidarities between men as well as on the subordination of women" (Connell 1995; Jackson 1991, 201). While the notion of hegemonic masculinity is directly linked to the institution of male dominance, few men actually embody it, although most men "benefit from the patriarchal dividend of dominance over women" (Kendall 2000). And although hegemonic masculinity operates across the spectrum, most scholars agree that it often marginalizes working-class men while excluding men of color and gay men. As Donaldson has pointed out, the salient analysis in studies of contemporary manhood is the relationship between social class and masculinity; for some men, for example, class privilege may minimize other kinds of marginality (such as racial marginality) (1993).

Studying low-wage immigrant men beginning to build and sustain transnational ties to their homeland helps to shed light on the effects of global and transnational forces on gender relations in immigrant communities and the homeland. This task is a particularly important one because immigrants are more and more frequently turning to their home countries for social, economic, and political activities. Furthermore, as Robert Courtney Smith explains, immigrant men "are seen to want to return home or to imagine themselves returning, whereas women want to settle or imagine themselves settling, because men lose status and power in the United States and women gain them" (2006, 13). The narratives of the men in this study reveal how low-wage immigrant men construct their masculinity given that their lives are placed "at the intersection and interstices of vast systems of power: patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and capitalism, to name a few" (Chen 1999, 589).

In what follows, I consider intersecting aspects of these Vietnamese low-wage immigrant men's lives that precede and follow their return visits to their communities of origin. For analytical clarity, I supply narratives of two men, Chanh and Loc, to illustrate two different patterns by which men take on, redefine, or challenge meanings of masculinity as they move from the categories of refugees to immigrants to transmigrants through return visits to their homeland.² The stories of these two men offer an exploratory look at how some men "achieve" and others "restore" masculinity across transnational social fields. Examining the interview data revealed these distinct patterns among Vietnamese immigrant men just beginning to develop transnational identities.³

Achieving Masculinity

Among men who *achieve* masculinity through their return visits, most migrated as children and generally did not have experiences with the labor market prior to their emigration from Vietnam. These men had a mixture of socioeconomic backgrounds as children, but for the most part, they were low-wage working adults. Except for a few men who worked in ethnic enterprises such as nail

salons, where average hourly wages ranged from eight dollars to twelve dollars per hour, the Vietnamese American low-wage men in this study generally earned on average from six dollars to eight dollars per hour. These men usually worked in hourly wage, secondary labor-market jobs that offered them little stability (Sakamoto and Chen 1991). For the most part, they worked long hours for low pay. Their yearly salaries ranged between \$8,000 and \$24,000, and many of them fell below the U.S. poverty level at the time I conducted fieldwork (Dalaker 2001). For many of these men, low-wage status frequently translated into low marriageability, which is directly related to their sense of masculinity (Thai 2003). Many of the men in this study pointed out that lack of financial resources in Vietnamese migrant communities made them less desirable marriage partners. Moreover, many of them also talked about their low-wage jobs as unrespectable, which they felt was connected to their sense of being a man. This link between work status and masculinity makes sense in light of other studies that have found that men are more likely than women to view their work lives as the most central aspect of their self-identity (Lamont 1992, 2000; Rubin 1976). Both temporarily and in the long run, return visits to their homeland frequently offered these men an opportunity to achieve masculinity by being able to transform their low-wage income and U.S. residency to greater disposable income and higher social status in Vietnam. Many spoke of how this wage convertibility offered them a sense of emotional belonging.

The story of Chanh Tran, a thirty-two-year-old jewelry repairman who lived near Seattle when I met him, illustrates how return visits allow some men to remake social class in order to achieve masculinity as they take up transnational identities. When I asked Chanh, for instance, how he felt the first time he made a return visit to Vietnam, he quickly explained to me, "As soon as the plane touched the airport, I knew there was something there for me. I definitely had the feeling that I was home." One of the ways in which class identity becomes so poignantly evident for the men in this study is the way in which they talk about the affordability of consumption in Vietnam, an indicator of how their low economic status took on different meanings as they returned to Vietnam. As a case in point, when I asked Chanh why he felt there was "something there" for him when the plane touched the airport, he explained, "Before I decided to come to Vietnam, I wanted to know what to expect, and so I talked to some of my friends who had gone, and to my cousin who made visits to Vietnam. Most of the men told me how everything in Saigon is catered to men, that everywhere you go, it's really cheap and you can have a good time without having much money, and everyone treats you very nicely."

Chanh's family migrated to the United States when he was seven, being part of the first large group of Vietnamese refugees evacuated directly out of Vietnam a few days before the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.⁴ Chanh came of age in a suburban town two hours outside of Seattle in a family of four. His father worked on the assembly line at a factory when they arrived in the United States,

eventually becoming a manager of the plant, while his mother took on nursing as an occupation. Chanh said he was an ambitious student in high school, excelling in math and sports. He "confessed," as he framed it, that he was enamored early in his life by the idea of having money because one of his uncles owned a lucrative jewelry store near where they lived. "I wanted to earn as much money as I could, to help my parents, and to provide for my future family," he explained. Many of the immigrant men I spoke to in this study made strong links between making money and providing for their families, including their wives and parents, as crucial to their identity as men. For this reason, and although he graduated in the top tenth of his high school class, Chanh decided not to attend college immediately after high school, but instead took on an apprenticeship with his prosperous uncle. Chanh earned more than his friends after high school, but over time his income stagnated as his friends who went on to college eventually earned more than he did. When I met him, Chanh had not been able to open up his own jewelry store as he had hoped, and he was still earning by the hour working for his uncle. Reflecting on his choice of work, Chanh told me he had strong regrets for not having gone to college. He said he felt extremely marginal in his circle of friends, especially in the Vietnamese communities and networks in which he and his family were embedded. "I definitely think that there is a stigma for not having a college degree, and most people in the Vietnamese community I know who came to the United States the same time I did went to college. I regret not having gone to college because it definitely gave me less status in the community. At the time that I decided on not going [to college], I thought that I would eventually open a jewelry store like my uncle and would make a lot of money."

Some scholars have argued that the homeland "is not only a physical place that immigrants return to for temporary and intermittent visits, but also a concept and a desire—a place that immigrants visit through the imagination" (Espiritu 2003, 10). I contend that it is precisely the magnified moment of the return visit that allows some immigrants to realize their social status and to take on their economic privilege relative to the people in their homeland. In short, crossing physical boundaries also results in the crossing of social boundaries and a change of social contexts. For instance, when I asked Chanh to elaborate on the moment his plane landed during his first visit in 1998, he explained, "When we landed, the moment we stepped outside the airport and got a taxi to drive to my uncle's house, everything was cheap. I could afford to pay for taxis and other things that I couldn't pay in the U.S. The rest of the trip was awesome because I was able to pay for many of the times we went out."

Restoring Masculinity

Among the men in this study, only 30 percent ($n = 21/69$) migrated when they were under the age of eighteen. The vast majority—70 percent—of the men in this study were adult migrants, having come of age in their homeland. It is these

men for whom, through return visits, *restoring* masculinity was made possible by developing transnational ties to their homeland. Thus, I use the term "restore" to capture an experience of social class directly linked to masculinity that was lost due to migration and, perhaps, regained upon making return visits. Men who restored masculinity differed from men who achieved masculinity primarily because the former group had reached adulthood in their homeland before emigration and had either entered or finished secondary education before they arrived on Western soil; many of them had already entered the labor market prior to migrating abroad. Moreover, most of them were unable to translate or transfer their skills or social status once they migrated to the West. In other words, these men, if they had done so at all, had achieved masculinity in their homeland before they migrated, but they experienced tremendous downward mobility and a resulting diminution of their sense of masculinity as a result of migration. The visits to their homeland served to restore their masculinity.

The story of forty-four-year-old Loc Phan highlights how migration can bring substantial loss to one's sense of status, especially when the homeland is drawn upon as the reference point for understanding one's position in the global status hierarchy. As part of the urban middle class in Saigon, Loc aspired to become a physician after he graduated from high school in 1974, but his parents told him that he could not attend college because they wanted to start making preparations to leave Vietnam when the war ended. His father had connections in the Mekong Delta with someone who organized boat trips for potential refugees to go to another Southeast Asian country so they could be "processed" by various Western countries as political asylees. Eventually, Loc's family became boat refugees and arrived in a suburb of Orange County where his parents had family ties. At the time that I met him, Loc was working for minimum wage in the produce department at a large ethnic supermarket near the ethnic enclave of Little Saigon in Orange County. He had been working there for nearly fifteen years, after a number of odd jobs in various ethnic enterprises, and had been living with his parents in government subsidized housing since 1979, when they arrived in the United States after spending a few years in the refugee camp in Malaysia. Loc had hoped that, over time, he could start his own business. But working in low-wage work meant that he could not save enough capital to start any kind of business.

In talking about the pre-migration years, Loc revealed that his childhood was one of privilege by any global measure—he grew up in a household with successful parents who owned a factory that produced office furniture for the domestic market. As an adolescent, Loc had luxuries he never encountered as a young adult: domestic servants, chauffeurs, and the best education available in his context. It was this affluence that shaped how Loc understood his social standing as a young man coming of age in the cultural context in Vietnam. As a high school graduate in 1974, nearing the end of the war in Vietnam, Loc had already formed a romantic relationship with a classmate, to whom he had promised marriage

prior to his family's migration. When I asked him what happened to that first romantic relationship, Loc explained, "Well, of course, I told her that I would return in a few years and marry her. But that didn't happen. The bad part of it is that I couldn't afford to go back there until two years ago, and of course I don't expect her to wait for me for that long. I thought I would be sad, but when I came back to Vietnam for the first time, there were so many people I met, so many old friends. So I wanted to make new relationships, meet new people, maybe find a wife on that trip."

For these men, restoring masculinity was possible most often because they were able to develop a triangular relationship based on identifiable historical and geographical places that connect them to the community to which they migrated and to the community from which they originated (Guarnizo and Smith 1998b, 13). In other words, the men in my study were able to restore masculinity only because they had built a transnational status system through their migration that linked their community of origin and community of destination. The effect is that such men are able to restore masculinity upon their return to the homeland precisely because of the economic divide between their homeland and their immigrant communities that offered them the opportunity to "convert" their low wages from the West to high status on their return visits to Vietnam (Thai 2005). Partly because of the lack of knowledge about life in the United States, Loc's relatives and friends in Vietnam frequently thought of migration as desirable, which enhanced his status when he returned home. As Loc explained, "I saw many people of my youth, some of them became very successful in Saigon, but they did not judge me for what I do in the United States. Some really wanted to find ways to go to the United States. I don't know why they want to. I think they have much better lives in Saigon. But they always think the United States is a land of opportunity. They don't know that it's hard to make money unless you have a lot of money."

Yet it is precisely this perception of the United States among locals in Vietnam and Loc's ability to convert low wages to high status in Vietnam that offered him the opportunity to remake notions of social class in the context of a transnational status system. When I asked Loc to recount how he felt during the first visit back, he described his feelings in this way:

When I returned to Vietnam for the first time, I didn't know for sure if I was going to tell people that I worked at the supermarket all these years. But when I went there, I remember not feeling as poor as I do in America! So even for many people I knew in Saigon, my job at the supermarket was a dream job. I remember this very clearly because the first time I went back in 1998, they opened up one of the first Western-style supermarkets in Saigon and I took some of my friends there and I told them with this feeling of shame that I work at one of those places in the United States. And some of them told me they thought it was a great job! [*Laughs*] I didn't feel like I was this poor man like I do in the United States working in a job that no one cares about.

REMAKING CLASS AND MASCULINITY THROUGH RETURN VISITS AND TRANSNATIONAL TIES

I have suggested that Hochschild's notion of magnified moments sheds light on the linkage between masculinity and social class through a focus on homeland return visits. Return visits are powerful moments for low-wage immigrant men in the Vietnamese diaspora, potentially transforming how the social construction of gender and class can be reworked in transnational contexts. Such visits to Vietnam have the potential of eliciting enormous emotions and a strong sense of belonging to the homeland among Vietnamese immigrant men. I suggest that return visits produce and fashion such emotions in ways that remake class and masculinity in the context of transnational ties. Among immigrants, social class and gender relations are particularly enmeshed as men take on new identities across international borders, especially among men who potentially have more to benefit from returning to their homeland. A number of prominent scholars have made it clear that migration powerfully reshapes gender relations in post-migrant communities (Espiritu 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003; Kibria 1993). But few have studied how return visits to the homeland can alter or amplify gender relations during the post-migration years, especially how men take on new gender ideologies and meanings of social class after making return visits to the homeland.

NOTES

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1. When one speaks of postwar Vietnamese returnees to their homeland, it should be understood in the context of the origin of mass refugee migration when the Vietnamese represented the core group of refugees who fled Southeast Asia shortly after the withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam and the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.
2. To protect the privacy of informants, all names have been changed. As well, I have changed the names of villages in Vietnam and small towns in the United States. I have kept the real names of all metropolitan areas. And while full Vietnamese names are usually indicated in the order of last, middle, and first names, I will use "American" standards of referring names, since I used this format when I got to know informants.
3. These patterns should be viewed as Weberian ideal types. Some men undergo multiple, sometimes overlapping, patterns of change.
4. Although Saigon's name was changed to Ho Chi Minh City when the South surrendered to Northern Vietnamese military troops in 1975, most people I met in contemporary Vietnam still refer to the city as "Saigon," or simply "Thanh Pho" [The City]. I echo their frames of reference by using the name "Saigon," and "Saigonese" to refer to the locals there.

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