

# Introduction

VIETNAM IS A COUNTRY, NOT A WAR

SACRIFICE IS MUTE AND SECRETIVE

This book is concerned with a basic human question: How do families hold together when turbulent forces threaten to tear them apart? In Vietnam, many families were split during years of civil war and anticolonial and anti-imperial struggles with the French and Americans. They reunited only after the wars ended with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's victory and the collectivization of the economy under one-party Communist rule in 1975. Subsequently, liberalizing reforms initiated under the *đổi mới* (Renovation) policy of 1986 led Vietnam to embrace a "market economy with a socialist orientation" (*kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*, or market socialism for short). The reforms culminated in Vietnam's admission to the World Trade Organization in 2007. Yet the nation's booming economy tested family unity once again, as opportunities differentially benefited members across generational and political strata, straining their ties.

In the face of such radical change, we might expect families to be irreparably fractured and public Confucian values—already challenged by the egalitarian ideals brought by the Communist Revolution—to be

abandoned. I argue, however, that practices of “sacrifice” (*hy sinh*) and “love” (*tình cảm*) keep families knotted together. Any cohesion or continuity that families achieve, however, is precarious: it involves suffering and hard work to sustain and sometimes runs up against the limits of love.

Family members often repeat the refrain, “Respect those above, yield to those below” (*kính trên nhường dưới*). They suture this bidirectional notion of hierarchy to ideas of everyday acts of sacrifice, in which suffering is ideally shrouded in silence. Indeed, only silent sacrifice counts as moral care. The importance of ordinary, silent sacrifice was made explicit to me on an overcast day in June 2007, when I sat across from fifty-eight-year-old Loan in her spacious living room in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), sipping fresh-squeezed watermelon juice. Loan was a retired political cadre sent to the People’s Republic of China for revolutionary Communist indoctrination at the age of seven. Her son now worked for a banking firm abroad, while she and her husband, Đan, made their new home in Saigon (as locals call HCMC), where Đan could continue working until sixty, the mandatory retirement age for men (women are required by law to retire at fifty-five).

A longtime colleague and close friend of my host mother in Đà Nẵng, where I was conducting ethnographic research, Loan had declared me to be “family” during our last outing in April and insisted that I visit her in Saigon. She reminded me of lessons I had learned from others living along Vietnam’s central coast about sacrifice (*hy sinh*). It involves suffering in silence for the sake of intimate kin and it binds families together:

Sacrifice refers to difficulties that [one] directs toward oneself, whereas when there’s something advantageous [one] secures it for [one’s] father, for [one’s] mother, for [one’s] husband and children . . . Sacrifice doesn’t just mean fighting in wars; the term includes a lot of meanings, so when you talk of sacrifice it means accepting suffering for oneself . . . hoping that [the beneficiaries] don’t know about your sacrifice, right? For example [if] you sacrifice but you have to say that you sacrifice that’s really ugly . . . Sacrifice is mute and secretive.

Loan’s experience of separation from her family—both in her childhood and now as a parent watching her son advance a capitalist regime at odds with the socialist one she had spent her life defending—was not unique. From the minute that I landed in Vietnam (first in 2002 and during sub-

sequent trips in 2004, 2005, and 2007–8), I encountered families whose members had fought on opposing sides of the war. Their seeming ease at reuniting puzzled and intrigued me, as did their constant invocation of the term *tình cảm*, which I learned refers to sentiments and acts of love and concern that motivate material aid and affective intimacy and care.<sup>1</sup> The research set out to understand what these terms mean and what work they perform in practice.

Vietnamese literary and national (public) discourses abidingly invoke the term *hy sinh* (sacrifice) to extol both patriotic (and masculinist) death in war and more muted everyday acts of care usually associated with women's devotion to their families.<sup>2</sup> In interviews, family members linked *hy sinh* to patriotic death in war, as elaborated in chapter 1. Yet, they hastened to add, "not only those who fought on the battlefield, but those who remained behind, they also were sacrificing." Even more frequently, they associated sacrifice with family roles that entail silence and moral care, as Loan had explained.

Everyday sacrifice, then, is both similar and dissimilar to ritual slaughter and patriotic devotion to the point of death. Like the canonical, publicly oriented forms of sacrifice that enact communion, quotidian sacrifice involves the moral modification or sacralization of the participants involved.<sup>3</sup> Yet quotidian sacrifice is also a continual, gendered practice, experience, and ethical orientation rooted in idealizations of love rather than primarily or only a discrete, irreversible, paradigmatically violent act. And in Vietnam, sacrifice is embedded in a social structure grounded in what I term "asymmetrical reciprocity": a set of bidirectional but asymmetrical relations that, in emphasizing both respect and yielding, steer family members to struggle to prove their *tình cảm* (loving sentiments premised on material relations of care) for one another. This (re)conceptualization of sacrifice beyond the ceremonial or heroic reframes one of anthropology's most hallowed concepts, to advance the "ethical turn" in anthropology,<sup>4</sup> by attending to a so far overlooked insight that emerges from the ethnography: gender and kinship are key dimensions of ethics. I use the tools of cultural, linguistic, and psychological anthropology to show how virtuous personhood is gendered and engendering and how hierarchical relations pervade and centrally organize webs of reciprocity.

The chapters that follow feature family members' accounts of love and loss, conflict and control in the ongoing rhythms of domestic life to tease out the contours of silent suffering in forging intergenerational continuity. Bridging the quotidian and the historical, *Silence and Sacrifice* considers fleeting instantiations of familial sacrifice within Vietnam's broader economic and biopolitical mission to improve the "quality" and well-being of the population.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I consider how relatives navigate moral binds and entangled love relationships that arise against the backdrop of scars and long shadows cast by war, and from the daily challenges of maintaining ties within stratified households. Drawing on extensive participant observation and audio- and video-recorded interactions, the ethnography illuminates how quotidian sacrifices are embedded in mundane greeting practices; narrative accounts of personal experiences; the labor of taking care of children, spouses, the old, and the sick; efforts to discipline one's emotions to promote others' well-being; and enactments of elaborate ancestor worship. These practices flood families' daily rituals and form the heart of stories they recount about others to one another, (re)affirming love in life together. Though ostensibly banal, these interactional rituals constitute mechanisms through which kin achieve seeming equanimity and continuity in understandings and enactments of ethical personhood and (dis)affiliation with dominant Vietnamese state discourses about "social evils," "cultured happy families," and "modern love."

If I originally wanted to study the traumas and memories of war, time spent in Vietnam during the first decade of the twenty-first century indicated that what people were most concerned with was how to live morally in the present while orienting to a future where they would have to grapple with—and benefit from—a rapidly changing economy. This new economy was spearheaded by state bureaucrats as well as entrepreneurs envisioning new pathways for Vietnam to paradoxically embrace and abandon its collectivist (Confucian and then socialist) past. The prologue to this book, which describes my landing in Saigon and journey to Đà Nẵng in February 2007, as well as initial observations of love in a family's life, illustrates the exuberant rate of development and the ways that the past and future hung over families raising children in Vietnam at the time of this study.

Unlike other Vietnam ethnographies, *Silence and Sacrifice* is neither a Foucauldian story of the emerging, atomized neoliberal self in Vietnam nor an archival document of haunted yearnings for a past that may never have been.<sup>6</sup> I seek to understand the subjective lives of people inhabiting new marketizing conditions, especially how they forge a sense of continuity in these transforming circumstances.<sup>7</sup> The project builds on Helle Rydstrom's (2003a) study of gendered moral socialization within families in Vietnam's northern rural region, Tine Gammeltoft's (2014) rendition of contemporary modes of belonging within families and clinics in Hanoi, Ann Marie Leshkovich's (2014a) account of women traders in HCMC, and Kimberly Hoang's (2015) account of bar girls' modes of mobilizing gender to question as well as reinforce global and state discourses of development and modernization in the south.

Like Rydstrom, I studied moral socialization within families. Focusing on family units in Đà Nẵng's sprawling metropolis and its neighboring rural province, Quảng Nam, I attend to a gender regime that is less strictly "Confucian" than in Rydstrom's (2003a) rural and Gammeltoft's rural (1999) and urban (2014) north Vietnamese studies. Here, women take on multiple roles that cannot be easily subsumed in a passive victim versus agent dichotomy. Like Leshkovich (2014a) and Hoang (2015), who follow Saba Mahmood (2005), I do not take women's "oppression" as a given but rather delineate how women in Vietnam use gendered discourses of *tình cảm* (love-care), *hy sinh* (sacrifice), and asymmetrical reciprocity to constitute themselves as moral beings within their specific familial configurations. This lens enriches understandings of women's subjectivities and theorization of intergenerational relations of continuity and change. Focusing on the material and narrative labor and oft-silenced suffering involved in sustaining life together, the ethnography reveals how in this Buddhist-Confucian, late-socialist context, modern romantic love can converge with rather than oppose intergenerational love, as members expect and strive to enact sacrifice and show *tình cảm* (love and material care) for (would-be) spouses, children, ancestors, and other relatives and friends. Gossip, directives, silences, and other forms of talk discipline family members as they face the demands and dilemmas of moral personhood in ordinary, traditional, yet also modern life.

## SCALES OF SILENCE AND SACRIFICE

Huy's father died following his immigration to the United States after languishing in a reeducation camp as retribution for serving the South's American-collaborating Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), just like Huân's grandfather, mentioned in the prologue. Their and other tragic stories of displacement and death led me to study Vietnam's postwar history and society. These stories are commonplace. Many families during and after the war had been split up and later reunited. They suffered losses, absences, and delayed gratifications. Some put off marriage, never consummated their loves or raised children; others were unable to tend sick family members and missed funerals. War had taken its toll. As an immigrant to the United States from the often-turbulent Middle East, I was attuned to Vietnamese senses of ambivalence about leaving or returning, reuniting or staying away from what had been a homeland that ensnared family members on either or both sides of the war.<sup>8</sup> And as I began to read Vietnamese history and literature, I became interested in trauma and "memory work."<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Vietnamese acquaintances in the United States and Vietnam seemed profoundly *uninterested* in trauma, memory, or history. Why dwell on a painful past, they would ask?

Their questions and seeming indifference to a painful past challenged me. As the Israeli-born granddaughter of Holocaust survivors on one side and Kurdish Jewish Singaporean refugees fleeing the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia during World War II on the other side, I had always assumed that sufferers and their descendants never forget history. Memorializing trauma and war seemed essential to one's identity. Instead, Vietnam taught me that there are other ways of carrying on life and acknowledging and maintaining familial continuity.

As the slogan goes, "Vietnam is a country, not a war." Teachers and friends who introduced me to Vietnam's literature, proverbs, and history consistently highlighted *not* trauma and victimhood but a quiet resilience. Vietnamese people, they emphasized, valorize bearing suffering with equanimity through sacrifice (*hy sinh*) and the moral sentiment of *tình cảm*: love, care, and concern that motivates material action and support.

This study enlarges the domain of sacrifice beyond ritual, religion, and patriotic death to include ordinary moral behaviors that transpire almost

unnoticed in daily life, except when violated. Sacrifice here is conceptualized not just as a discrete and irreversible act, but as a continual practice, experience, and moral orientation.<sup>10</sup> The Vietnamese whom I came to know did not habitually distinguish “sacrifice” from “self-sacrifice,” unlike speakers of English and other Indo-European languages or those with monotheistic traditions. For them, sacrifice (whether quotidian or dramatic) was always a multiparty affair that entailed, as in classic anthropological theory, the modification of the moral persons involved.<sup>11</sup> It could but did not need to and often did not involve death, material violence, or destruction. Instead, they insisted that sacrifice (*hy sinh*) is etymologically derived from the word *sinh* (life, birth, biology).

In contrast to dominant anthropological and other humanistic formulations, where the overwhelming focus is on the sacred quality of sacrifice, which is paradigmatically achieved through holy death,<sup>12</sup> sacrifice (*hy sinh*) in Vietnamese does not typically refer to the ritual slaughter of life.<sup>13</sup> It represents what speakers of English might consider self-sacrifice: everyday family-based or patriotic and nationally oriented renunciations for the sake and benefit of others. This book’s approach to sacrifice refocuses attention on what it means to sustain life as a set of ordinary ethical practices and moral orientations socialized in families’ daily lives and maintained through community- and state-level discourses. Given Vietnam’s seismic political and economic shifts over the course of the twentieth century, sacrifice provides a means of bridging what might otherwise become irreconcilable or, at least, conflict-generating differences, for example, between generations, genders, and political-economic regimes. I argue, then, that practices of sacrifice enacted on a small and larger scale engender and sustain amicable relations between factions that could alternatively be prone to rift and rupture.

The focus on family-based sacrifice rather than on religious or state institutions builds on yet also contradicts key scholarship on postwar Vietnam. For example, in his sensitive ethnography, *Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam*, Shawn Malarney (2002) suggests that, despite a traditional lack of association between sacrifice and death in Vietnam,<sup>14</sup> the tropes of patriotism and revolutionary martyrdom proved so powerful as to effectively trump previous meanings associated with the term *hy sinh*. State efforts to ennoble war death, Malarney recounts, ultimately

met with approval and gratitude, not resistance. By casting the war as a “sacred obligation,” a struggle for “national salvation,” the state linked the struggle against the French and against the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies to previous struggles against foreign invaders, particularly the Chinese, who had occupied Vietnam for over a thousand years (111 BCE—938 CE). Drawing on a number of memorialization practices of acknowledgment and celebration, as well as by bequeathing material benefits to “sacrifice families,” the state was able to narrow the meaning of “sacrifice.” It rendered *hy sinh* synonymous with revolutionary ardor to give up one’s life “in a just cause to protect and improve the collectivity.”<sup>15</sup>

State containment of the notion of sacrifice, however, seems questionable, particularly in central and southern Vietnam, where consensus regarding the Communists’ vision of unity was not achieved. Indeed, as Ashley Pettus (2003) demonstrates in her ethnography, *Between Sacrifice and Desire*, the semantic entailments of sacrifice constituted contested territory, even in the North’s public discourses disseminated in newspapers and journals published by the Women’s Union (an official organ of the Communist state). On one hand, throughout the war and postwar collectivization years, as well as during the early marketization period when Pettus’s study ends, sacrifice has been an effective discursive mode by which the state is able to discipline women. On the other hand, the ways in which women were to display virtue (by embodying sacrifice) were changing in these state representations. No longer called on to embody socialist asceticism and collective struggle, women now sacrifice by facilitating more individualistic and materialistic urban middle-class aspirations to become “civilized happy families” made up of disciplined, beauty-conscious consumers.<sup>16</sup> Contra Malarney’s argument of a unified and purified vision of sacrifice in Vietnam as relating only to patriotic death, sacrifice manifests multiple sides.<sup>17</sup> Even beyond Vietnam, sacrifice extends beyond public state discourses into mundane ethical orientations and practices.

Examining sacrifice as a quotidian practice, experience, and moral orientation entails focusing on the interactional *work* involved in sustaining stability and the so-called ordinary. It means considering routine lifeworlds along with crisis situations as worthy of study and attending to how families manage life together and living in community rather than assuming these. Like many others, I regard communities and the culture-

scapes and individuals who populate them as characterized by dynamism, indeterminacy, ambivalence, relationality, multiplicity, partiality, and rupture at times. Cauldrons of conflict rather than harmonious halcyons make for interesting studies of the human dramas of existence.

While Joel Robbins (2007b) has disparaged anthropology's obsession with continuity to the neglect of change, I counter that continuity is not a hoary Durkheimian construct that relies on the faulty assumption of societal coherence and stasis. Instead, this book details the ways in which continuity is a precarious and often evanescent achievement, both in situations of crisis, when people subsequently have to remake their worlds, and in mundane life itself.<sup>18</sup> The ordinary and the expected are not foregone conclusions within a rigid and predictable totality. The routine, as conversation analysts like Emanuel Schegloff (1986) have taught, is an achievement in its own right. It requires intricate, emergent efforts to initiate and sustain, even in fleeting minute-to-minute interactions.<sup>19</sup>

To study the ethical labor entailed in routines and seeming continuities, I ethnographically account for what matters to whom, in which way, and under what conditions. This perspective is applied to both micro social encounters and larger-scale societal transformations framed as state-sanctioned teleologies.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, *Silence and Sacrifice* draws on thick descriptions to analyze discourses and practices of *hy sinh*, the Vietnamese (but arguably more generalizable) form of sacrifice that anthropologists have largely minimized.<sup>21</sup> On a broader level, it reflects upon ethics, affects, and the ordinary itself. Indeed, in countries like Vietnam, in which "the ordinary" has been a rapidly transforming target, spanning dramatically different political and economic regimes, what does ordinary mean? From whose point of view and in what social circumstances? I draw on the methods of linguistic anthropology, including narrative, language socialization, and interactional analysis, to get at these questions.

### *Narrative as a Model for Life*

Questions of scale, perspective, and continuity surrounding sacrifice, I believe, benefit from close attention to narrative practice and other modes of representation through which lives are made and multiple

truths—sometimes compatible, at other times colliding—are reckoned. Narrating life experiences often leads narrators to engage in *sideshadowing*.<sup>22</sup> That is, narrators entertain a multiplicity of perspectives, possibilities, and temporalities regarding life events to keep at bay or, alternatively, underscore (in)commensurabilities among these sideshadowed versions of events.<sup>23</sup> The term comes from literary critics Michael André Bernstein (1994) and Gary Saul Morson (1994), who have sought to confront the epistemological problems implicit in teleological tales that pervade novelistic and historical accounts. Such narratives typically are strongly ideological and project inevitable futures, for example, by *foreshadowing* progress and modernity (e.g., the US westward expansion as manifest destiny) or *backshadowing* disaster. In the backshadowing case, linearity haunts narratives of collective trauma when narrators use their present-time hindsight to visualize a clear, logical progression of events and/or morally assess protagonists (e.g., Holocaust victims) in the past for “failing to see the writing on the wall.”

Sideshadowing, by contrast, emphasizes moral and causal uncertainty and contingency and foregrounds the subjunctive, open-ended qualities that lend narratives their capacity to imagine alternative possible worlds, for example, by deploying hypotheticals and the *irrealis* mood.<sup>24</sup> This way of analyzing experience in relation to narratives, I think, is especially sympathetic to the idea of ordinary and virtue ethics as developed in Michael Lambek’s (2010b) edited volume and Cheryl Mattingly’s (2010, 2014a) ethnographies, where morality is conceived as *more* than reproducing orderly societal norms and conventions and ethics is a continual, existential struggle for what may be incommensurable goods. Like them and other ethics and morality scholars,<sup>25</sup> I insist that ethics and morality involve relationships and the mediation of the body, and also the mediation of discourse, as I elaborate in the rest of this book. Introducing the concept of *family*-centered ethnography to enrich person-centered ethnographies,<sup>26</sup> the book also explicitly examines the role of gender in enacting moral personhood. It advances the “ethical turn” in anthropology by showing how kinship and gender are central to studies of ethics and morality. The “self,” I demonstrate in the ensuing narrative-based chapters, is gendered and always tethered to and entangled in a web of dynamic family relations.

*Language Socialization and Interaction Mold and Model Culture*

In foregrounding kinship and gender in the study of everyday ethics in Đà Nẵng, I analyze sometimes fleeting but often routine communicative practices, including both direct instructions to children and others and subtler exchanges that involve the body and spatial, symbolic, and material resources that interlocutors use to take meaningful action in their local moral worlds. As language socialization theorists have shown, it is in the process of learning and using language that people acquire, exhibit, and entrench (or contest) their community's cultural values, affects, and practices; and it is through participation in cultural practices that people learn and adopt (or negotiate and at times question) the preferred linguistic and other communicative habits of their communities.<sup>27</sup> In the following chapters, I therefore attend closely to communicative practices and nuances to examine the ways in which normative femininity and masculinity are engendered in the course of family members' interactions with one another.

Ethics, I insist, are both gendered and engendering; and as subjects speak with and about one another, they reify local constructions of masculinity and femininity by disciplining and assessing one another's ability and commitment to abide by the norms of asymmetrical reciprocity and *tình cảm*. These norms are not universal across class, gender, or political or familial positioning. Rather, they vary across the life course, permitting or foreclosing different forms of agency depending on who is involved in the relation and context-specific interaction.

The present linguistic anthropological study of discourse, narrative, interaction, and socialization allows me to highlight the tensions between Levinasian approaches to ethics that emphasize interpersonal community dynamics<sup>28</sup> and Foucauldian approaches that focus on power, subjectivation, and biopolitics.<sup>29</sup> As I show particularly in chapters 2, 4, and 5, every interaction, including the most micro, is pervaded by relations of power and hierarchy that affirm care as both nurturing and potentially disciplining and hurtful. Ethics and moral frameworks then are exposed as dynamically enacted rather than static precepts that subjects—as complexly related family and community members—either abide by or reject. They are asymmetrically gendered and imbricated within family dynamics that

challenge, and indeed render impossible, any reduction to simplified, universal principles.

Yet, despite the variability and nuance that characterizes moral judgments in each of the following chapters, families in Đà Nẵng and Quảng Nam nonetheless exhibited similar configurations and practices and articulated similar value patterns as those of Loan and Huân in Ho Chi Minh City in the south and of friends and informants in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital. Rural, urban, or urbanizing, they mixed "traditional" and "modern" ways of being and engaged in devotional practices that brought into question labels like "sacred" and "secular." Their accounts and practices also problematize the narrative linearities assumed by theories of modernization and secularization that accompany these terms. Nonlinearity, however, does not imply lack of patterns: household configurations, relationships, interactions, and ethics in fact proved remarkably consistent despite members' diversity across political, class, generational, and gendered lines. This is *not* to say that families were uniform or that individuals within families all shared the same values and motivations. I claim no homogeneity within Vietnam. What I interrogate is how, despite differences, participants engage in similar practices with similar results, whether with shared, different, or contradictory motives. Together, these reinforce what I came to see as three interrelated organizational principles that help sustain seeming continuity within a dynamic field of change, achieved, in part, through the living and telling of sideshadowing narratives that embrace contradictory positions and articulate the contingencies and indeterminacies of life.<sup>30</sup> The three principles are sacrifice, asymmetrical reciprocity, and *tình cảm* (love and care manifested through material provisioning).

### *Sacrifice, Asymmetrical Reciprocity, and Tình Cảm*

Sacrifice (*hy sinh*), as we heard from Loan, ideally entails silently and *willingly* suffering and taking on hardships for the sake of others. It is a disposition learned from infancy through embodied practice and undergirds structures of filial piety traditionally characteristic of East Asian families who share China's Confucian and Buddhist legacies.<sup>31</sup> And as discussed earlier and will be elaborated throughout the book, quotidian sac-