Marriage and Non-Marriage in Vietnam: Recent Patterns and Future Expectations

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Abstract

Set in Southeast Asia in a context where marriage postponement has made headlines in both academic and popular press outlets, this research was designed to assess current correlates of marriage and non-marriage in Vietnam, along with attitudes about the value of marriage and marriage alternatives. The data come from two sources: the three percent microdata sample of the 1999 Vietnam Census of Population and Housing, and 16 focus group interviews, eight of which were conducted Hanoi and eight of which took place in rural communities in surrounding districts. This research examines the relevance of a literature that stresses increasing economic independence among women, and growing individualistic attitudes in general, as possible reasons for shifting marriage patterns. The census data allow us to examine non-marriage patterns according to indicators such as education, occupation, and location of residence, while the focus group design incorporates comparisons by gender, age, and rural versus urban residence.

What follows is a fairly well developed discussion and analysis of the qualitative data and a promise of a thorough analysis of the census data by the time of the meetings.

Introduction:

Jones (1997, 2004) has conducted an extensive analysis of recent trends in marriage patterns in East and Southeast Asia and identified five critical elements. These include (1) a slight rise in cohabitation (which nonetheless remains well below levels observed in the U.S. and Europe), (2) continued early marriage in portions of Indonesia, (3) a general rise in divorce rates, particularly in major cities (but with lower divorce among Islamic subgroups than was true three or four decades ago), and (4) the widespread "demise of universal marriage" (5) except in China where nearly universal marriage persists (p. 6).

Of these findings, the one that is of particular interest for this research is the disappearance of universal marriage in the region. Until thirty years ago or so, failing to marry was considered aberrant in most contexts in Southeast Asia, although the Philippines and Myanmar were exceptions to this pattern (Jones, 2004). In the years leading up to the turn of this century, however, delayed marriage and non-marriage became increasingly common (Jones, 1997); and the shift toward new family building patterns was particularly striking among certain segments of the population: those in large urban centers, very highly educated women (Jones, 2004; Xenos and Gultiano, 1992; Guest and Tan, 1994; Williams, Guest, and Varangrat, 2006), and ethnic Chinese living outside of China (Leete, 1994; Heng and Devan, 1995).

Research into delayed and foregone marriage has often focused on women's growing economic independence to explain recent changes. This is not too surprising, since those who have been opting out of marriage have often been women who indeed appear to have more economic options. For an extensive review and discussion, see Oppenheimer (1994). Dixon (1978), Becker (1981), and others have argued that where women must depend entirely on men for their economic survival, their nearly universal marriage at a young age will be particularly likely. Once other avenues to economic well-being become available, however, typically through expanded educational and employment options, early (or any) marriage should become less necessary (Sweeney, 2002; Jejeebhoy, 1995; Singh and Samara, 1996), and opportunity costs to marriage should rise (Becker, 1991). Further, once increasing numbers of people choose to remain single for longer periods of time, the stigma associated with being unmarried should decline.

More recent work has at last recognized that men make up half of the marital equation (Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, and Lim, 1997; Jones, 2004), and so has begun to consider the role they play in declining marriage rates. Research in Thailand, for example, demonstrates the additional importance of men's economic well-being in influencing whether and when they marry. A growing literature now concedes that different processes may be operating for women and men, and this study was designed to allow for an analysis of gender differences in the context of northern Vietnam. Further, because perspectives across generations are likely to be tremendously important in understanding recent perceived changes in the value of marriage and its alternatives, this study's design includes comparison of older and younger individuals.

This focus of the research is Vietnam, where, until very recently, to "live a single life was unacceptable, except for a small number of Buddhist monks or some people who were considered marginal unfortunates. Celibacy was regarded as an expression of personal difficulties" (Bich, 1999:111). One's marriage has long been considered crucial to the entire family, not only because it is profoundly important for ancestor worship, but also because it is essential to the continuation of the lineage. In addition to the research that has been done on the changing economic roles of women and men, there is a growing literature that points to a shift toward individualistic attitudes as one reason for shifts in family formation patterns (Berfield, 1997; Lesthaeghe, 1998; Tsyua, 1994). Such a shift could be critically important in the context of Vietnam, where filial piety in general, and as it pertains to marriage in particular, has been a centerpiece of family life.

Among the majority population in Vietnam, who are the focus of this study, a woman is still expected to live with her parents until she marries (Jones, 2004), at which time she typically either joins her husband in an independent home or in the home of his parents, becoming a child of that family as well as her own (Malarney, 2003). Patrilineality and patrilocality are prevalent in northern Vietnam. Nonetheless, while a woman's relationship with her own parents may be reduced, it is not severed after marriage (Gammeltoft, 1999) and there may be ongoing support in both directions, particularly when the couple does not live far from the bride's family. While post-marriage residence patterns have been considered somewhat more flexible in Vietnam than is possible in more strict Confucian contexts, it is interesting that rather than diminishing in

recent years (in step with other modernizing processes), the norm of patrilocality appears actually to have increased among recent marriage cohorts (Hirschman and Minh, 2002).

Historically, the needs of the male lineage have taken precedence over all other relationships, including the relationship between the spouses themselves. According to Bich (1999:115) there are both legal and practical articulations of this hierarchy. For example, divorces have generally been initiated by men and were legally allowable on the following grounds: infertility, adultery, neglect of parents-in-law, talkativeness, theft, jealousy, incurable diseases. Bich (1999) contends that only two of these pertain directly to the couple, while the others (particularly infertility) are of concern to the husband's entire family. Love was considered "undesirable in marriage" because "with its vagaries and uncertainties" it might place the couple in a position that conflicts with the needs of the extended family. In addition, if the husband were to bend too much to his wife's preferences, this was considered a "very bad character trait" that would require resistance from his female relatives (Bich, 1999:116). Given the centrality of marriage in the Confucian family system, senior members of the family have traditionally had considerable input into the marriage decisions.

Despite the (sometimes weak) ties that remain between a young woman and her natal family after marriage, daughters are occasionally described as temporary members of their families of origin, and it has been considered quite important not to delay marriage too long. Not long ago, being married was considered natural, and being unmarried was not. Spinsters were thought to be defective in some way, and they were cause for concern among family members. In addition, those girls who did not marry at an early age might become pregnant and disgrace the

family. An older sister's spinster status could also reflect poorly upon younger unmarried siblings, jeopardizing their marriage prospects (Bich, 1999). For these reasons, heeding parents and marrying in accordance with their wishes has long been customary. In recent years fully arranged marriages have become less common (Malarney, 2003), making avoidance of an undesirable match more possible for the individuals involved. Interestingly, Belanger and Hong (2002:110) contend that while younger women do appear to have more options than was true among previous generations of women, choosing not to marry at all still "exacts a high cost" for young women today. Furthermore, in their view, new opportunities for women, while apparent, do not seem to be affecting marriage patterns in rural Vietnam.

The objective of this research is to get a fuller sense of how attitudes toward marriage and possible alternatives to marriage are currently articulated in northern Vietnam.   Has there been an identifiable shift in how important marriage is considered to be today?   Are there gender or generational differences in how the institution is viewed? How crucial is parental approval considered to be in the marriage process? Are there acceptable alternatives to formalized unions today? Where marriage is delayed or foregone, what are the primary reasons? How are those who never get married perceived? How similarly do Hanoi residents and their rural neighbors view these processes?

METHOD

The analysis presented in this paper is part of a larger comparative project of marriage attitudes in Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam. A first round of focus group interviews

conducted among urban middle-class women and men in major cities in the three countries

revealed some important differences across contexts. In this paper the focus is on Vietnam,

where earlier Hanoi-based interviews (conducted in 1999) are compared with a parallel set of

rural interviews (conducted in 2005).   The sample design for this component of the larger study

is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The design was informed by Knodel (1993: 39) who recommends organizing focus

groups according to break characteristics and control characteristics. Break characteristics enable

the investigator to set up the research in groups with "potentially contrasting views or

experiences concerning the issues under investigation." In this research, groups were stratified

by (1) gender and (2) age and marital status (break characteristics). Because statistical analyses

tend to indicate that the urban middle class has been on the leading edge of the retreat from

marriage in parts of Southeast Asia, focus group participants for phase I of this study were

recruited from the middle class in Hanoi (control characteristics). And because very different

processes may be operating in rural areas, we have conducted a separate phase of rural-based

interviews. Two group interviews were conducted with each subgroup. For example, there are

two sets of interviews with young unmarried men living in Hanoi, two sets with older women

living in Hanoi, and two sets with unmarried women living in outlying communities. If results of

any of the paired sets of interviews had proved dramatically different across interviews, it would

then have been possible to conduct a third group interview, and possibly a fourth. In each case,

however, results within pairs on key questions were generally deemed consistent enough to consider third or fourth interviews unnecessary.

After an initial person in each target group agreed to take part in the group interview, he or she was encouraged to suggest friends and acquaintances who met the selection criteria. The study coordinators then approached the additional people to see if they were interested in participating. Those people could suggest others, and so on. Most focus groups thus were comprised of persons who knew each other. While this type of snowball approach would be undesirable in certain contexts, local colleagues with experience in focus group research recommended the strategy for this study. Similarly, Morgan and Krueger (1993:6) argue that "[limiting] ourselves to groups composed of strangers would make it exceedingly difficult to conduct focus groups in organizations, communities, and other ongoing social settings." The approach we chose helped to encourage openness in the discussions. The focus groups were held in private surroundings, ranged in size from 6-10 participants, were moderated by experienced Vietnamese researchers with fluency in the local language, and included a note-taker. Female moderators conducted group interviews for women and male moderators interviewed the men.

Two sets of guidelines were constructed, one for younger never-married participants (ages 18-24) and one for older participants (ages 40-50) who had ever been married. Focus group guidelines were developed in English, translated into Vietnamese and pre-tested. Slight modifications and additions were made to the guidelines to fit the local context. The range of issues covered in the interviews with the young never-married participants included: perceptions of the importance of marriage and possible alternatives to marriage, dating and friendship, age at

marriage, characteristics of an ideal spouse, expectations within marriage, perceptions of divorce and remarriage, and problems that could occur within marriage. These topics were also covered in interviews with older ever-married groups, and additional questions were asked about perceived changes in family formation over the previous generation. The group interviews thus provide information that allows us to examine change by comparing the attitudes and opinions of participants from two generations, and to examine perceptions of change as expressed by the older groups of participants. All interviews were conducted by native speakers (men interviewing men and women interviewing women). The interviews were tape-recorded and transcripts were made of each recording. The comments of the note-takers were then integrated into the transcripts and the full texts were translated into English.

Informed consent procedures were followed in all interviews. Group respondents were informed of the aims of the project and advised that their participation was completely voluntary. They were told that some topics discussed could be considered sensitive, and that they could choose whether or not to participate in any portion of the discussion. As was promised in informed consent procedures, no information that would allow an individual to be identified is presented in our research.

We concur with Krueger (1994: 87) that "the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation." The analysis of this focus group data is intended to provide new insights into current and recent attitudes toward marriage in Hanoi and a nearby rural community.

The method of thematic analysis was used in processing the transcripts. Thematic analysis is an inductive approach that draws themes from the text rather than imposing a preset coding scheme upon the texts. Owen's (1984) criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness were used to identify themes. Except where indicated, only quotes that pertain to themes that meet these criteria are presented in this paper.

Finally, one additional data source is included in this study. The three percent public use sample of the 1999 census was used to generate one table in which the average age at first marriage was estimated for women and men at different education levels: those who had attended at least some primary school, those who had attended at least some lower secondary school, and those who had attended at least some upper secondary school. Results are shown separately for urban and rural areas.

RESULTS

Average age at first marriage in Vietnam as of the 1999 census is shown in Table 2. As expected, men marry at slightly older ages than women across education categories, and age at marriage increases with education. In addition, average age at first marriage is higher in urban than rural areas, but this is particularly true at upper levels of educational attainment. This is

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

consistent with what the literature cited above would suggest, and the observed patterns in ages at marriage are consistent with respondents' views regarding the "best" ages to marry. Rural

respondents across interviews reported a range of preferred marriage ages, but most viewed 20 to 22 as optimal for women and age 25 or thereabouts as optimal for men. Urban participants reported somewhat older ages as being preferable, but the reasons for this varied between the generations. Older participants were among war-affected cohorts and many reported that they had married at older average ages out of necessity. Typically they considered their own marriage ages reasonable and appropriate given the context in which their marriages occurred. Younger participants were more apt to report the need to achieve financial stability before marriage, and so also thought postponing for a time was necessary, but for different reasons. All participants viewed lengthy postponement as being very risky for women, less so for men. Related to this, most viewed the likelihood of remarriage to be greater for men than for women if their initial unions were to dissolve. This was at least in part because second marriages are likely to take place at older ages, by which time many respondents felt a woman's beauty would have faded.

The Importance of Marriage

When participants were asked about the importance of marriage overall, most were in agreement that it remains a centerpiece of life. It is necessary for continuation of the family and society, for old age support, and because it is "natural" or "normal". It is a sign of maturity as well. The following excerpts from all subsets of older respondents in Hanoi and in the countryside provide clear evidence about the centrality to their generation of marriage as an institution.

I think it is essential for people to get married, since it is an ancient tradition. If we don't get married, we will have no children, hence no one to take care of us in old age (older woman - urban).

In general, now as before, almost all people get married as a part of growing up. That is a social rule. And people who did not marry would be considered as not normal. Marriage is important because each person needs their own happy family and having children… (older woman - urban).

Back then, we got married because of the pressure of our family, it was the first reason. I am the only child in my family and I was a government worker and worked far from home. I thought marriage was one of my obligations to my family (older man - urban).

For me, I got married because of two reasons: the first was that my parents forced me to marry. The second was that I was mature enough to build a family. If I didn't marry, people might think there was something wrong with me that made me not want to marry. In fact, it is [still] very rare to find people who do not want to marry (older man – urban).

It is just as it was before -- marriage is the rule of life (older woman – rural).

I think the principle of getting married is to build the family and nation. I think it's the very first reason, and that remains the same in all times (older man – rural).

Being in a union - that's natural to our life. Every adult has a family of his/her own. There may be some bachelors, but it [that lifestyle] is not popular. I think it's natural, everyone gets married when they have grown up enough (older man – rural).

One of the questions motivating this research was whether younger and older Vietnamese respondents would have decidedly different views about the importance of marriage today. On that specific question, with few exceptions, the opinions of younger participants were quite similar to those of older speakers. When asked about the importance of marriage today, young rural women noted:

It's an indispensable need of life.

It is necessary to maintain society.

It's a duty.

Women want to get married as they need to have a support and protection. As for men, they get married so as to have a family, wife and children.

And rural men added:

It's very important to me. Marriage marks a new path of life. People must be responsible when getting married since then their parent's duty has finished…

It's very important to lead love to marriage. People get married to maintain the human race. Humanity cannot continue without marriage…

Physiology, psychology, affection, satisfaction, and individual responsibility with family. Those are what marriage brings about.

Those reasons above are not enough. We have to count the reason that we need a spouse to support/encourage us in bad times, and the need to stand on our feet when we've grown up. Those are things only brought about by marriage.

One might hypothesize on the basis of the literature and in light of regional statistical trends that young urban participants would be most likely to view the importance of marriage differently, i.e., to consider it less critical than would those in rural areas or than would members of their parents' generation. Interestingly, younger participants in Hanoi did not differ markedly in their opinions of marriage as an institution:

I think marriage is the most important thing in a person's life. It seems that it a definite thing in life (young man – urban).

When people become mature, sooner or later they will get married. They get married because of emotional needs; people need a warm nest of their own. Although there are many ways to deal with these needs, like having sexual relationships, I think it is better if they are together as a family. It is not only more efficient economically, since both take care of the family, but also more stable for happiness. Secondly, marriage is necessary for the preservation of the family name. If there was no marriage, there would be no children, and hence there would be no one to maintain society. Moreover, if one gets married too late, one will be considered "out of

normal" (Everyone laughs). Yes, that is true. However, there are not many people like that (younger woman – urban).

In addition to the common themes of duty to family and society, and fear of social approbation, younger participants thus also reflected on personal happiness and companionship, as well as on the economic costs and benefits associated with marriage. With few exceptions, most of the unmarried 18 to 24 year olds continued to view their own marriage as desirable in the future, for the reasons articulated above.

As is becoming clear from text in quotes already introduced, when they were asked about people who do not get married, respondents in almost all subgroups said they are often viewed as "not normal" or defective in some way. Consistent with the literature cited above, participants indicated that while both men and women may be judged by society if they do not ever get married, spinsterhood remains particularly undesirable for women.

Unmarried men are considered as having mental problems or having a disease, or they are thought to be incomplete persons… (older woman, urban).

If a woman above 30 years old is still single she will be seen "to be on the shelf." Her parents will worry as if there is "a delayed action bomb" in their house (younger woman, urban).

People who don't get married are considered "out of normal." Looking at someone who is over 40 years old but who is still single, people will think that person must have some serious problem and hence cannot get married. It's especially true if the person is a woman (younger woman, urban).

Women who may be too ugly, blind or too weak to bear child and to care about themselves, they may not be married (older woman, rural).

It also became clear that some people may postpone marrying for legitimate economic reasons. This theme resonated most clearly among urban participants. Waiting until one can afford marriage and children, who are seen as increasingly expensive, was an important theme.

Some people do not have money. They are afraid of marrying [and] then having children they cannot afford. For example, before we could put our child at the daycare without paying. But now people must pay themselves for their child's daycare. It is expensive now (older woman – urban).

Of course, as we have indicated, a number of these individuals might eventually find that they had waited too long, in that past a certain point one might never find the right person. And, there are some who do not deliberately delay marriage, but who also fail to find a suitable spouse.

I think nobody does not want to marry. There were only people who missed opportunities to marry (older woman, urban).

It is not that they do not want to get married, but their circumstances do not allow them to build a family. Time flies and they miss their chance... (older man, urban).

There would be no difference between now and then for those who did not marry. They all are unhappy, unlucky and virtually the same in characteristics. In most cases, they are people who are unluckily fallen into that situation, they do not decide or choose it (older man, rural).

Older respondents also indicated that the war with America had had anomalous effects on their generation:

Participant 1: In the past I don't think there were any people who did not want to marry, just that they could not marry. I can give you an example. During the war period, many young girls volunteered to join the army; when they came back they missed the opportunity to marry because of they were older, or they were war invalids. So how could they marry even though they wanted to?

Moderator: What did people think of them?

Participant 2: [We] just felt pity for them because they would not have children. Without a child, their life would be very hard, especially when they were old. This problem has occurred not only for women but also for men.

Many younger participants from Hanoi also expressed sympathy for those who never marry these days.

I think in general, people who do not get married often have their own inner lives. They are lonely and should be sympathized with. Discrimination against them is unfair (young woman, urban).

I think we shouldn't mind about the personal life of other people. Each person has his/her own way of life. It's true that we often talk about them, especially if they are women (young woman, urban).

I think these persons must have their own reasons. The society does not think badly about them. Being unmarried is just their habit. Some persons are outstanding. They spend almost of their time for their work so they don't want to marry. People should not comment about them (young man, urban).

Young rural women speculated about other possible reasons one might not get married. These included pursuit of job/career, family history, parents disapproving of partner, failure to find the right partner, and perhaps homosexuality.

Participant 6: Perhaps it may due to their job. They work very hard to make money, and forget marriage. Sometimes, it becomes too late to marry.
Moderator: What do you think of men who don't marry?
Participant 4: Nowadays homosexuality is quite common. Such men may be gays.
Participant 6: The influence of their family, especially their parents is important…
Participant 1: They haven't found their ideal partners; I mean they may never find them.
Moderator: What about women? Why don't they want to get married?
Participant 3: Maybe they haven't found their suitable man.
Others: Sometimes because their parents don't agree [to their choice of partner].
Participant 2: Maybe because they are too keen on working and studying.
Participant 6: There are some women who hate men.

One woman suggested that it might be necessary to settle for a less than ideal partner.

Participant: Rural women like us should lower our expectations… We shouldn't expect too much.

Moderator: Why did you say so?

Participant: Women are just like paddy rice which should be harvest on a ripe time, not too late as it can be wasted.

Alternatives to Marriage

Although most participants shared a sense that marriage remains vitally important as an institution in Vietnam today, when cohabitation or partnering outside of marriage was considered, there was less agreement.

Young urban women acknowledged the conflict between a more independent life and the needs of family. In addition, they explicitly discussed having "a lover" before marriage and a number of participants were tolerant of that, within limits. There was a range of opinion on this, however, and many said they believed that marriage should still be the long-term objective. In addition, how "dating" is experienced in the meantime is thought to differ between men and women and a sexual double-standard clearly remains.

Participant 3: …If a man said he is dating a woman but he thinks that he could never marry her, it means he is tricking her. It is very bad. But if a man and a woman are lovers and both of them just want to be lovers and not marry, it is okay…

Participant 5: For most young women dating is expected to evolve into marriage. However, many young men think in a different way. They consider that they should have many lovers to get experience for their marriage.

Participant 4: I think it depends on the point of view of each country. When people consider having sex before marriage as normal, it should not be a problem for anyone. However, Vietnamese society still does not accept premarital sex. Even if we know about contraception, we should not do that.

Participant 8: Vietnamese men still consider women's virginity as important. Therefore, we should avoid sex before marriage.

Several younger men agreed with these concerns and worried about the future of women who had entered dating relationships, as well as for men who may have more than one partner.

For example:

I think they should not date. Because if a man does not want to marry but still dates someone, he would bring trouble for that woman in case she wants to marry another man. Men should not do that. Men should do something good so they will be respected. If a man still flirts, he may suffer the consequences. If a woman really loves him, she may be shocked. That man should be careful [with her and] her family…

In rural interviews, young unmarried women expressed a wide range of attitudes about cohabitation or non-marital partnering. Some viewed the desire for independence as reasonable. Others saw non-marital partnering as irresponsible or selfish. Most agreed that if a pregnancy were to result, the couple would have to marry and that marriage might not be a happy one. For example:

Participant 4: It can be for selfish reasons. They want to enjoy themselves for a while.

Participant 1: They only want to enjoy themselves but unfortunately, the woman got pregnant. So they have to get married, but they may not be happy in the marriage.

Participant 2: They both want to live more comfortably and not be bound to anything. Marriage can be bothersome and painful if it becomes unhappy.

Young urban men tended in general to be quite nonjudgmental on this topic:

Moderator: What do you think about those who live together but do not intend to get married?

Participant 5: Perhaps [it is] due to some peculiar conditions of their own. I don't have any negative thoughts or judgment; it's up to them to decide.

Participant 1: We shouldn't criticize their problem. It's their business, they have their own rights.

Most older urban men appeared to view premarital sex in today's world in a matter of fact way. The following quotations arose in response to questions about age at marriage and parental approval of marriage, but reflect the men's views on the prevalence of non-marital sexual relationships today. While the responses indicate awareness of a new reality, they do not necessarily view this new reality favorably.

Participant 6: As we said before, young people now get married earlier than us before because something happens (pre-marital sex and pregnancy).

Participant 2: Generally speaking, young people now get married at age 25 for men and 21-22 for women. The reason is at that age they have a strong demand and they are loosing the traditional norms. Therefore, they are more likely to have a sexual relationship and are more likely to be pregnant, so they have to marry in such a situation.

M: What about parental approval. Was it important for you? And how about for young people nowadays?

Participant 1: Now, parents sometimes have to accept their children's marriage although they do not like their in-laws. But their children have had a sexual relationship so they must accept them. Even if they want to forbid their child to love that girl, they could not do that. But in my time, parents had a very strong voice with their children. We had to obey our parents.

Participant 3: Yes that's true. Now if our children have a lover, we could not forbid them. Since they have had sex and have a baby, we must accept it. I think youth now do not have a good knowledge about the family, they do not care about the consequences. Back then, we had to marry someone our parents chose. But in fact, we were responsible for each other. The situation was not like now.

Older rural men's views about cohabitation without marriage were much more negative. While some explained that lack of proximity to children often reduces parents' influence on their behavior, and some felt that cohabitation might make sense for economic reasons, most viewed cohabitation and non-marital sexual relationships as completely unacceptable.

Participant 4: With such a thing, in general, no one can agree. No, we disagree [with the practice]…
Moderator : Why ?
Participant 5: Because it's illegal and unacceptable morally. They are not legitimate. I mean now you can have a lover, you can have social relationships or indulge, but for a boy and a girl to live like spouses without legal marriage is unacceptable.
Participant 3: Leaving aside the moral matter, it's hard to say. The matter is that they live together, [aside from whether] it's with love or not, or how moral they are. But the fact is that they live together; perhaps we can say that they "contribute rice to cook together".
Moderator: Yes, they couple or cohabit. Mr. L said he disagrees with it, as it's not a legal marriage. Are there any other reasons?
Participant 4: Now, there are many reasons for university students or students. They study together, see each other every day… Like our ancestors said, "Straw near fire for long will catch fire".
Participant 1: As for me, this case is also unacceptable. They are just debauched. Especially for women, our people cannot accept this.
Participant 2: But what can we do for our children who study away?
Participant 1: They are far away, out of parents' control, we cannot do anything.

Young rural women agreed that non-marital cohabitation was not acceptable to them, indicating the role of social approbation and the likely impact on parents:

Moderator: Do you approve of people living-together without a wedding?
All: We don't approve.
Moderator: Why not?
Participant 3: First, this is not allowed by law and social norms. Secondly, they are so bad that their families don't accept their love and relation. Even they themselves are different from normal people, so they choose to live like that.
Participant 5: Their action and choice can hurt their parents very much. It can loose their face to the commune or villagers as well.

In general, rural participants viewed cohabitation without marriage much more negatively than did members of urban groups. This was particularly true among older participants. That living together without being married is both illegal and immoral was mentioned repeatedly. It is seen as more likely to take place in urban areas, where exposure to "social evils" and Western influences is more common.

How Things Have Changed

As the quotations have already begun to illustrate, most older participants had a great deal to say about how things have changed over time. Not surprisingly, some of these changes were viewed favorably, while others were not. Most considered the shift toward more companionate marriages as desirable, although most also believed that marriages would be happier if all involved (including parents) were to agree that the match is a good one. One rural women's group mused about how things had changed since they had come of age:

Frankly speaking, we didn't think much. We were only aware that we had to get married, bear children. Life was much simpler then than it is today. The reason is that we couldn't go to school; people's level of knowledge was generally poor.

We didn't have the chance to study at all. As long as we and our husbands got on well, we all were satisfied.

It was war-time and we only wished to marry to a soldier to help us with the farming work.

Movies or films were very rare; love didn't make much sense to us. It was rather backward. Now young people can choose their spouses.

Older rural men's were strikingly similar. People are now much freer to marry whom they

choose and to make other important decisions independently from their parents. The opportunity to become more highly educated and to work in different occupations has broadened opportunities to meet potential mates. These sentiments were widely shared among older groups across geographical location. In the quotation that follows, one father encapsulates the feelings of many parents:

> We [now] need to respect our children's decisions, but we should keep them on a good track. I think if we give them good advice, they will make the right decision. While I assume our daughter might obey us about 50 percent of the time, it would be much less for the son. Sons normally are very independent. I don't think they would change their marriage decision because of parents. (Laughter). (Older urban man).

DISCUSSION

In Vietnam, marriage is still seen as central to family and society, and permanent non-marriage by choice is largely still seen as anomalous. The focus group data suggest, however, that there is often tolerance for and understanding of non-marriage under a number of conditions. Older respondents cited circumstances during war years that kept some people from ever marrying. This was considered very unfortunate, but completely understandable.   The information obtained through our interviews appears to support Belanger and Hong's (2002:90) argument that the experience of "war spinsters," has "acted as a catalyst to make singlehood more acceptable for younger generations."   There is apparent widespread recognition that some people may never find "the right person" and so may remain unmarried. At times, marriage has to be postponed until one becomes financially secure (or mature) enough. Up to a point, such

postponement is seen as appropriate. It can be risky especially for women, however, because once they are past a certain age (and estimates vary depending on one's location), marriage becomes increasingly improbable.

Although academic writers and the popular press often portray women as the driving force behind what is perceived as the marriage revolution in East and Southeast Asia, the focus group transcripts analyzed here do not suggest that Vietnamese women's views differ markedly from men's at this point. Furthermore, those interviewed for this study do not appear to view women as responsible for delayed marriage or increasing non-marriage in Vietnam. One difference between men and women appears to be that women have had fewer choices in the marriage market, and that the period in which choices can be made is narrower for women than for men. Goodkind (1997) identified a "double marriage squeeze" for women following the war with America, which accounted for the war spinsters mentioned earlier, and which appears to have been recognized to various degrees by participants in our research. Although sex ratios have stabilized among more recent marriage cohorts, the perception that women have more difficulty finding a (suitable) spouse remains.

Some of the findings outlined in this study are consistent with the hypotheses that have primacy in the sociological literature today, but we concur with Belanger and Hong (2002) that the growing economic alternatives for women in northern Vietnam do not appear to be generating a secular shift away from marriage. There is considerable evidence of movement toward marriage as a matter of individual choice, along with concern among many older respondents that their children might choose to marry someone they themselves would not

approve.   Most seem to believe they have no choice but to accept the partners their children select.

The largest difference of opinion identified in the transcripts was that surrounding cohabitation and non-marital partnering. Although attitudes were mixed among men and women, the two age cohorts, and the rural and urban groups, younger participants tended to express more tolerance for temporary cohabitation than did older participants and urban participants generally expressed greater acceptance of the practice than did rural dwellers. That many participants recognized that there has been a rise in premarital sexual relationships and non-marital pregnancies is consistent with Gammeltoft's (2002:128) argument that "the idea of a unitary and unchanging tradition of Vietnamese sexuality in which non-marital sexual relations rarely occur is a cultural fiction – and idealized and simplified depiction of a highly complex cultural past…"

Most participants also emphasized, however, that entering a non-marital sexual dating or cohabiting relationship remains much more risky for women than for men. This is also consistent with Gammeltoft's (2002:128) argument that "even though social and moral meanings are constantly interpreted and negotiated in the course of social life, there are limits to cultural contingency… To young women in Viet Nam, this means that exercising their agency in the sexual sphere can become a highly hazardous and self-defeating enterprise." This was just one of the many reasons our research participants continue to view marriage as desirable (and necessary) in the long run, however, and based on our interview data, a secular shift toward cohabitation in lieu of marriage does not appear likely in Vietnam in the near future.

While this research can provide a window into how current attitudes toward marriage are articulated in northern Vietnam, it does have some limitations. Since the rural interviews were conducted six years after the urban interviews, any differences observed between the two settings may be (1) "real", (2) may be enhanced by change over time, or (3) may have been mediated by change over time. The literature is clear in concluding that the urban middle class tends typically to be ahead of rural communities in the shift toward later marriage, greater rates of non-marriage, and more individualistic behavior throughout the process. As a result, it is possible that more substantial differences would have been identified if the two sets of interviews had been conducted concurrently.

In addition, the study is limited by the small number of focus groups conducted. We do not have national level data on shifting attitudes throughout the country. Future research might begin by comparing attitudes of groups represented here with those in even more remote rural areas, those in the south of the country, and with members of different ethnic groups among whom marriage may still occur at very early ages and with much more strict guidance from parents. In the meantime, however, because we are able to look at conversations about marriage and cohabitation, we are able to get a sense of the range of views on these topics in northern Vietnam and to understand the importance of marriage across generations, between men and women, and across geography in that context today.

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Table 1: Number and Composition of Focus Groups

Respondent Characteristics   *Number of Groups*

Marital Status and Sex	Age	Rural	Urban
Ever-married women	40-50	2	2
Never-married women	18-24	2	2
Ever-married men	40-50	2	2
Never-married men	18-29	2	2
Total		8	8

Table 2 – Singulate Mean Age at Marriage by gender, place of residence, and education

Education Level	Urban		Rural	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
At least some primary school	25.29	22.71	23.99	22.02
At least some lower secondary school	26.90	23.92	24.38	22.03
At least some upper secondary school	28.65	25.61	25.99	23.86

Data are from the three percent public use sample of the 1999 Census for Vietnam.