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Spectral kinship:
Understanding Vietnamese women’s endurance of domestic distress

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Abstract: Endurance is a key term used by women in contemporary Vietnam to characterize the moral persistence that their marital lives demand. Accounting for women’s endurance requires, fieldwork in Hanoi indicates, ethnographic attention to the ways in which kinship can be temporally and spatially capricious, exceeding the immediately manifest. The concept of spectral kinship aims to capture these latent aspects of kinship and their groundings in people’s imaginative lives. Defining relatedness as an imaginal accomplishment, a spectral kinship analytics draws attention to aspects of social existence that are neither “real” nor “delusional”, yet socially powerful nevertheless. Approaching Vietnamese women’s endurance through the lens of spectral kinship highlights the invisible imaginative efforts women make to cope with the vulnerabilities and contingencies of kinship, thereby bringing into analysis crucial yet often undervalued forms of gendered kin-work.

Keywords: domestic, distress, endurance, gender, imaginal, kinship, spectrality, Vietnam

Tóm tắt: Phụ nữ ở Việt Nam đương thời dùng từ khóa “chọi đựng” để miêu tả sự bền bỉ về mặt đạo đức mà cuộc sống hôn nhân của họ đòi hỏi. Nghiên cứu diễn đạt tại Hà Nội cho thấy tim hiểu sự chịu đựng của phụ nữ cần quan tâm đến các cách thức mà trong đó thân tổ có thể mang tính thật thường nhất thời và vẻ mặt không gian, vượt xa địa hiện lỗ ngay tức khắc. Ý niệm thân tổ xét như dài quang phổ nhằm nắm bắt được các khía cạnh ẩn tàng của thân tổ và cách truyền thụ chúng trong đời sống tương tự cung của người dân. Cắt nghĩa mới quan hệ
Haunting...makes us feel – makes us alive to – some fact about the world, some piece of information, that we are trying to avoid (Grosz 2014, 113)

Humanity is but a collection or series of ghosts (Derrida 2006, 172)

“Let’s go!” Lý says.¹ With a radiant smile and a swinging ponytail, she starts her motorbike. The motorbike carries four people: behind Lý on the bike are a little girl aged around three and an elderly woman holding an infant in her arms. This is the monthly immunization day at the commune health station, and Lý’s son has just had the vaccinations required by the state-run infant health care program. Driving home on her
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overloaded motorbike, Lý looks self-assured and happy, a content and competent young mother. Later in the day, as we sit on the tiled floor in her house talking, another Lý appears. In sharp contrast to the bright and self-assured young woman on the motorbike, this Lý seems vulnerable and desperately unhappy. In a low voice, she tells us about a life lived in deep social isolation, about a marriage suffused by verbal and physical abuse, about three small children constantly demanding her attention, about fear, anxiety, and loneliness. Lý is, she says, imprisoned; caught up in a life that is far from the family life that she had dreamt of as a young girl.

Lý endures. During fieldwork in Vietnam, I have met many women whose plight resembles hers; women who live under domestic conditions that they describe as painful and hardly bearable, but who consciously opt to endure (chỉu/chỉu dưng/chỉu nhìn). Such endurance is not unique to Vietnam: across the globe, female endurance in situations of domestic distress is well described (e.g., Das 2007; Mattingly 2014; Segal 2016). What, one may ask, renders such endurance meaningful and worthwhile – what sustains women, motivating them to go on? Previous anthropological inquiries into such questions have provided insights into the minute acts of kindness and care that prevent people from falling apart in situations of social and moral hardship (e.g., Das 2007; Han 2012); into the ways in which inner resources are mobilized to counter social pressures (e.g., Snell-Rood 2015; Tran 2015); and into the everyday ethical structures that make it possible to ascribe moral value to suffering (e.g., Nguyen 2011; Shohet 2013; Throop 2010).

The ethnographic observations that I present in this article indicate, however, a need to attend to other aspects of everyday endurance. Understanding the forces that underpin Vietnamese women’s responses to domestic distress requires attention not merely to immediate, everyday social relations and the moral sensibilities they engage, but also to what
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I term *spectral kinship* – inchoate dimensions of relatedness that exceed the kinship arrangements that anthropologists have most often studied.\(^2\) I use the concept of spectral kinship as an analytical prism that can help to highlight the emotional and imaginative forces involved in the production of kinship, thereby attending to the socially invisible work that the production and maintaining of relatedness involves. In present-day anthropology, increasing attention seems to be paid to such subtle and yet socially powerful forces. Drawing inspiration from philosophy and psychoanalysis, a growing anthropological literature points to the limitations of analyses that focus merely on the socially manifest while neglecting more subdued dimensions of human existence (e.g., Crapanzano 2006; Desjarlais 2018; Herzfeld 2015; Stevenson 2014; Throop 2010). The present article is inspired by this literature on the latent and subdued, while also drawing inspiration from recent anthropological scholarship on ghosts and haunting (e.g., Good 2019; Lincoln and Lincoln 2015; Pinto 2018).\(^3\)

I have developed the concept of spectral kinship on the basis of existing anthropological scholarship on kinship and relatedness. Firstly, I draw on Marshall Sahlins’ definition of kinship a matter of intersubjective participations, a “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2013; see also Carsten 2004). Since relatives are, as Sahlins argues, “intrinsic to the self,” kinship lies the heart of subjectivity. Secondly, I draw on feminist insights on kin-work, attending to the gendered emotional work that creating and maintaining relatedness requires (e.g., di Leonardo 1987; Lutz 2002; Wikan 1990). Kinship is, as this literature suggests, neither natural nor given, but a contingent performance that requires extensive social and emotional labor (see also Carsten 2019; Lambek 2013; Leshkowich 2017). Thirdly, I base this article on anthropological scholarship on children, kinship, and care which has highlighted the crucial roles of children in building and maintaining relatedness (e.g., Hunleth 2017; Olwig and Gulløv 2003). Parting ways with these studies, however, I suggest that kin
work is not merely an overt social performance constituted through verbal narratives, everyday actions of care, or social exchanges of material things. The making of relatedness is also an imaginal accomplishment; one that involves open-endedness, subjunctivity, and potentiality (cf. Hunleth 2019; Shohet 2017; Zigon 2014). The notion of the imaginal was coined by the philosopher Henry Corbin (1964) who drew on Islamic philosophy to describe an intermediate world, *mundus imaginalis*, which he describes as neither “imaginary”, in the sense of being delusional, nor “factual” and empirically observable. This is, he writes, “a world as ontologically real as the world of the senses and the world of the intellect, a world that requires a faculty of perception belonging to it, a faculty that is a cognitive function, a *noetic* value, as fully real as the faculties of sensory perception or intellectual intuition.”

Whereas Corbin describes the imaginal as a space, the spectral, as I use the term here, is an analytical prism, an optics that can help us to attend to imaginal aspects of life. Attending to the imaginal involves attending to images in more deliberate ways than anthropologists conventionally do; to the images that suffuse people’s dreams and fears, deepening and extending their worlds, and to the images – photographic, drawn, or mental – that form part of ethnographic fieldwork (cf. Stevenson 2014; Taussig 2011). The anthropological utility of a spectral kinship approach lies in the capacity of this approach to acknowledge the social weight of inner, imagery-driven worlds, thereby drawing attention to the significant forms of kin work that lie beneath the surface of public expression, in the in-between world of the imaginal.

Before unfolding the notion of spectral kinship in more detail, I shall briefly place the endurance enacted by Vietnamese women such as Lý in its historical and political context. Female endurance is, as we shall see, a key element in the normative gender ideals that socialist political rhetoric in Vietnam has set forth for decades.
“Heroic mothers:” Female endurance in Vietnamese political tradition

On September 24, 1994, Vietnam’s National Assembly established the honorary title of “Heroic Mothers of Vietnam” (Bà Mẹ Anh Hùng Việt Nam). The title was given to women who had lost either their only child; three or more children; both their husband and a child, or their own lives in the Second Indochina War. In the Women’s Museum in Hanoi, a special section is dedicated to the nation’s Heroic Mothers. Across three museum walls, the faces of hundreds and hundreds of elderly women meet the observer (see Figure 1). Wrinkled, worn, and stoic, they look straight into the camera. These elderly women’s faces are familiar to most people in Vietnam: repeatedly reproduced in nation-wide mass media, the photos on display here have become iconic images of female endurance. No one would question these women’s suffering or the moral significance of their endurance. They sacrificed for their nation, and they did so heroically, stoically, without complaint.

[Figure 1. Heroic Mothers: The Women’s Museum in Hanoi, 2016]

Vietnam’s Heroic Mothers are a prime example of the ways in which national authorities in Vietnam have turned human suffering – such as the suffering produced by the country’s protracted wars – into what Throop terms “positively valenced forms of moral experience” (Throop 2010, 2). But the moral-political mobilization of female endurance exceeds the realm of war. From my first fieldwork in Vietnam, conducted in a rural Red River delta province near Hanoi in the early 1990s, I recall the centrality in women’s lives of the capacity to endure. Often, people seemed to frame endurance as the very definition of womanhood; a good woman should be gentle, mild, and able to endure. Struggling with poverty, enormous work loads, and feelings of physical weakness, the women I met in the early 1990s would
present themselves proudly as persons who knew how to endure, managing hardship, loss, and suffering without complaint. Often, the moral premium placed on endurance seemed to render everyday struggles to keep families and selves together meaningful and worthwhile. Long working days cutting sugar cane in the scorching sun, tending to rice seedlings on rainy and freezing cold winter days, carrying heavy baskets of manure on shoulder poles to the fields, cooking meals for demanding mothers-in-law, satisfying the sexual needs of drunken husbands, helping children with homework in late evening hours – all of these activities seemed to be infused by the moral spirit of endurance (see Figures 2 and 3). Women who managed to endure hardship without complaint, who “knew how to endure” (biết chịu khổ), were rewarded with community members’ recognition and admiration, praised by local cadres as moral examples for others. In a time of material scarcity, this moral recognition seemed to be a valuable asset.

[Figure 2. Domestic labor, Đồng Anh, Hanoi.]
[Figure 3. Agricultural labor, Đồng Anh, Hanoi]

The emphasis on female endurance that I registered in the 1990s seemed to be closely linked to the party-state’s ideological emphasis on the “Happy Family” (Gia Đình Hạnh Phúc), a trope that has played a key role in state rhetoric since the late 1980s. The Happy Family is a powerful political entity, but it is also, I have learnt, a moral ideal of considerable existential and emotional importance to many people. A life well lived, most people in northern Vietnam will say, is a life lived in a Happy Family. A Happy Family consists of mother, father, and one to two children and is characterized by mutual assistance, solidarity, warmth, and love. In a Happy Family there are no conflicts, and family members smoothly take up morally appropriate positions, acting dutifully as mothers, fathers, children, husbands, wives.
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The moral responsibility for ensuring family happiness rests, state rhetoric tells people, primarily with the mother. These moral demands on mothers do not seem to have diminished in the current era of market reform (cf. Kwiatkowski 2011; Shohet 2017).

When staying calm and silent in the face of domestic distress, then, women such as Lý placed themselves within a long-standing national tradition of morally celebrated feminine endurance. Given this historical context, it would be tempting to interpret their endurance along Foucauldian lines, as a matter of subjectivity formation: by enacting state-promoted moral virtues, women also defined themselves as worthy citizens and as respectable family members. Such an interpretation would certainly have its merits – and yet, my fieldwork experiences suggest, other and more subtly expressed motivational forces were at issue too. To unfold this, I shall now return to the women I met in Hanoi. I proceed as follows: first, I examine women’s endurance as I encountered it at the level of the empirically manifest (what Alfred Schutz would call “paramount reality” [cf. Crapanzano 2006, 388]). Next, I introduce the concept of spectral kinship as an analytic – and I then try out this analytic by re-examining women’s endurance, this time taking spectral dimensions of day-to-day kin-work into consideration.

Lý and Luyến: Female endurance in the face of domestic distress

“Don’t eat too much salt, child,” Lý said, as her four-year-old daughter dipped another slice of guava in the salt-and-chili mixture on the plate before us. Seemingly embarrassed by this reprimand in front of strangers, the girl slipped into her mother’s lap, burying her face in her armpit. Placing her hand behind her daughter’s head, pushing it gently against her own body, Lý smiled, lifting her chin a little as she did so. This image stays with me: a little girl hiding in her mother’s arms, her mother holding
her protectively; loving gestures at the heart of a life that seemed, in many other respects, to be permeated by aggression and distress.

We were sitting in the semi-darkness of the main room in Lý’s house, shutters closed tight. From the lane outside, village sounds floated into the house; dogs barking, children calling out to one another, chickens cackling. The contrast between the lively sounds from the village lane and the dark loneliness that Lý described felt slightly uncanny. This was April 4, 2015, and I was visiting Lý together with Nhị, a doctoral student at Hanoi Medical University. Sitting on a rice mat on the floor, Nhị and I listened as Lý told us about her life. She had fallen in love with her husband, she told us, when she was only 18 years old. He lived 80 kilometers from her natal home, and they met at the factory where they both worked. Lý’s mother advised her against the union. “You have so many suitors,” she said, “don’t marry a man who lives far away.” But Lý and her husband got married, and following cultural convention, she moved into his household. Her relationship to her husband deteriorated from the day they got married and most of the time he seemed to completely ignore her. He spent most of his time outside, coming home only to eat and sleep. Being a stranger in this community, Lý felt utterly alone: “Before getting married, I thought that my husband would be concerned about me, that he would take care of me, that everything would be fine. But dreams are just dreams. They have not come true. Emotionally, he does not care about me at all… I have lost the friends I had at home. They live far away so I don’t see them very often. Often I feel so sad. I try to talk to my husband, but he does not care about me. So I think a lot.”

Soon after their wedding, Lý got pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. Their next child turned out to be another daughter.⁵ Living in a society where people place a premium on sons, her husband seemed to feel humiliated by his sonlessness. His friends ridiculed him,
and at family gatherings he was placed at the “lower” end where women, children, and sonless men are seated. He had always liked to go out to drink with his friends, but now he started drinking more heavily, often coming home very late at night. On such occasions, Lý said, she sometimes tried to appeal to him: “I say to him: ‘I’m a human being. I’m not a tree, or grass, or some trash without feelings. If you cared a little about me, then we could live together more peacefully, understanding each other better…’ Then he responds, ‘Well, I’m just a rude person. I’m not like others.’” One evening when her husband came home late, Lý asked him to hold their infant daughter for a moment. He refused. She said, “I have carried this child around all day, please hold her for a moment.” He again refused, saying he had had too much to drink. “So why do you drink so much?” Lý asked. “You could drink less, there is no need to get so drunk.” Her husband told her to shut up. “I will not,” she said. Then he twisted her arm in a sudden, hard movement, pulling it out of joint. At the hospital, she told the doctors that she had fallen down the stairs. Later, other episodes of physical violence followed. On one occasion, Lý left their house, seeking refuge for a short while in the house of her husband’s grandmother who lived in a nearby village. But in her daily life, she said, she strove to conceal her feelings, trying to protect her own and her in-laws’ reputation by keeping her troubles to herself: “When I’m with others, I’m always happy and smiling, like now. Normally I try to look like that. But when I go to bed in the evening, and I’m alone, I cry… I try not to think about these things, but it’s as if they force themselves into my mind, making me think, and so I cry. That’s all. When I think about my life, I cry.”

In a neighboring village, a few hundred meters from Lý’s house, lived 36-year-old Luyện, a mother of three. I visited Luyện for the first time on March 31, 2015, accompanied by Thanh, a doctoral student at Hanoi Medical University. Like Lý, Luyện had married a man who lived far from her natal home, and like Lý, she struggled to endure the social and moral pressures that her daily life entailed. On the day of our visit, we found both Luyện and her
husband at home. When I think back on that day, one particular image stays with me: Luyên and her husband sitting on the living room floor, papers scattered around them, looking perplexed and doubtful, anxious about their daughter’s health, disappointed about the incapacity of the state-run health care system to help them:

“We have never received any kind of [government] subsidy,” Luyên’s husband said, a tone of bitterness in his voice. “Our child has never received any help at all. We take care of her all on our own.” We were sitting on a mat on the living room floor in Luyên’s house; Luyên, her husband, Thanh, and me. It was still early morning, but Luyên’s husband already seemed slightly drunk – his eyes were red, and a faint smell of alcohol filled the room. Around us on the floor, papers were scattered; examination results from the district hospital, from the Children’s Hospital in Hanoi, and from the Psychiatric Hospital in Hanoi. They still felt unsure, Luyên’s husband said, regarding what was the matter with their daughter. In school she seemed to learn very slowly, and she often suffered from convulsions and fevers. Thanh glanced through the examination results. “Oh, but she has been diagnosed with epilepsy,” he said, “didn’t they explain that to you?” Luyên’s husband repeated: “Our child has never received any help, never. I call this neglect.”

A while later, Thanh, Luyên, and I withdrew into an adjacent room where Luyên’s infant son was fast asleep on the bed. The room was windowless, small, and dark and felt slightly claustrophobic. But we could talk in privacy there. Sitting on the bed, her son next to her, Luyên told us that she blamed her headaches on the multiple pressures that she was exposed to: her husband was addicted to alcohol and gambling, their domestic economy was strained, and their extended kin group deeply divided in conflicts over land. When he was drunk, her
husband would often talk rudely to her, intimidating her, and on one occasion he had beaten her quite severely. Luyến did not tell anyone about this episode. Her reaction, she said, was to endure (nhìn) – “for the children” (vì con mình). At one point, when her husband’s behavior became unbearable to her, Luyến returned to her natal parents, taking her daughter with her. Her son was attending school, so she did not bring him along. When her son called her, crying, asking her to come home, she returned to her husband’s household, determined to endure.

“For the children:” Endurance as a matter of kinship

The endurance that Lý and Luyến enacted was not unique to them: the vast majority of women I have met in Vietnam have responded to marital abuse with silent endurance (see also Kwiatkowski 2011; Vu 2008). Endurance, as the women used the term, referred both to their everyday management of distress – to the many situations where they tried to hold back their feelings, staying calm and enduring their husbands’ anger and abuse in silence – and to the fact that they stayed in their marriages rather than opting for separation or divorce. These two aspects of endurance were closely linked, as women would most often see their situational capacity to manage their emotions as a step towards maintaining their marriages in the long term. When talking about their daily lives, most women emphasized, like Lý and Luyến, that they endured “for the children” (vì con vì cái). As mothers, they explained, they felt responsible for ensuring a peaceful and cozy family atmosphere and so they strove hard to control their emotions, holding back negative feelings of anger, sadness, and distress. The “enduring for the children” idiom, then, captured these everyday efforts to protect children against family disorder and disintegration. Women acted to protect their children, and their children, it seemed, protected their mothers in return. During home visits, I was often struck –
and moved – by the efforts that even very young children seemed to make to take care of their mother; keeping an eye on her, bringing her things, doing what she told them. Mothers attended to children, and children attended to mothers. As Lý said when we talked about her eldest daughter: “She is only four years old, but she is very good at attending to others, sharing their feelings. If I feel sad and cry, she takes care of me, asking ‘Why do you cry, mum, did dad make you cry?’ If I’m ill, she is the one who takes care of me, listening to me, putting cold compresses on me, and so on. If I’m tired, she knows how to take in the clothes, fold them, and put them away. She is a good girl.” Similarly, Luyến described how her 17-year-old son helped her out when she went to work late in the evening: “He is a good boy. Every evening at midnight we go to the market, he and I. We stay there until one or two a.m., selling snails. He helps me until I’m finished, then we go home. He works very hard.”

The importance to women of these reciprocal acts of care must be seen in the context of kinship. In northern Vietnam, prescribed kinship is patrilocal and patrilineal; like Luyến and Lý, most women move into their husband’s household when getting married. By bearing and raising children (particularly sons), women become fuller members of their husbands’ families and kin groups, while also creating a mother-child unit that provides a certain measure of protection against the unpredictable tempers of husbands or in-laws (cf. Wolf 1972). Endurance helps, then, to keep day-to-day domestic relations tolerable and calm. By silently enduring domestic hardships, women strive to hold together their families, caring for their children and building bonds of belonging to their new family and kin group. As a frequently quoted saying puts it: “Enduring one thing brings you nine good things” (*một điều nhìn là chín điều lành*). Endurance is, in this sense, intimately intertwined with the culturally valorized practices of sacrifice (*hy sinh*) that Merav Shohet has described as key to sociomoral orders in Vietnam: it is by setting aside their own feelings and needs for the sake of others, enduring the hardship and pain that this may entail, that people come to achieve
membership of local moral communities (see Shohet 2013, 2017). Endurance can, along these lines, be seen as an ethical practice; as a way in which women constitute their moral being in relation to others. Endurance, women in this study explained, requires conscious effort; staying calm in the face of humiliations and distress is not easy, but demands an active disciplining of oneself into patience and silence. As Nhị said, talking about life as a married woman: “If you don’t suppress your feelings, then things will fall apart (giài tần).”

The analysis could end there, concluding that endurance is a key way in which women create and enact relatedness, maneuvering within a male-oriented kinship system. But more was at stake. During my encounters with women, I was struck by the ways in which their everyday lives seemed to be populated by people who were not there – and yet they were: by lost childhood friends; by husbands who used to be loving and caring, but were now acting in abusive and rude ways; by natal relatives with whom women used to share their lives, but who were now far away. It is this intense presence of absent people that has led me to focus on the affective and imaginal forces at play in the production of kinship.

**Spectral kinship: The temporal and spatial excesses of relatedness**

The temporality of kinship is a topic of long-standing interest in anthropology. Since the foundation of the discipline, ethnographers have studied processes of generational reproduction, documenting the varied ways in which people recall the past and orient themselves towards the future through the bearing and raising of children (e.g., Carsten 2004; Sahlins 2013; Stasch 2009). Kinship may, as Stephan Feuchtwang suggests, even be defined as “that particularly vivid mutuality and moral answerability created in the care of children and the dependency between children and their nurturers, reversed when the children are adult and the nurturers are old” (Feuchtwang 2013, 283). Ethnographic studies have also
attended to the temporality of kinship through investigations of recollection and memory, highlighting the important role that past experience plays in family and community lives (e.g., Carsten 2007; Yanagisako 1992). Kinship’s spatiality has also attracted anthropological attention. Human relatedness is, the ethnographic record shows, significantly shaped by spatial processes; by movements within and attachments to places (e.g., Hamberger 2018; Stasch 2009). As Rupert Stasch notes, reflecting on kinship among the Korowai of West Papua: “Places belong to people, and people belong in relation to those places” (Stasch 2009, 28-29). Kinship is a matter of topology as well as time.

While the significance of temporality and spatiality in practices of kinship has often been highlighted, fieldwork in Vietnam has drawn my attention to more latent aspects of relatedness. Regarding temporality, I have been struck by the ways in which past and future aspects of relations can be present in a vivid, pressing way – not merely as memory or as anticipation, but as a powerful temporal excess marking, expanding, and unsettling the present as people engage with what Danilyn Rutherford has termed “the noncontemporaneity of contemporaries” (Rutherford 2013, 272). Regarding spatiality, I have noticed how people who are physically absent can still be intensely present, affecting others in profound ways. These observations have compelled me to place this article in the theoretical context of the “spectral turn” that has recently occurred in cultural studies and the social sciences (e.g., Blanco and Peeren 2013; Good 2019). Whereas other recent “turns” in anthropology – the ontological and the ethical – center on things that are manifestly there (whether radically different worlds or empirically expressed moralities), the spectral turn offers a third perspective, drawing attention to more subtle dimensions of social worlds. An important impetus for the spectral turn was Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx (2006). Proposing a philosophical and political shift from ontology, the science of being and presence, to hauntology, the science of specters, Derrida advocates for increased attention to that which is
hovering between presence and absence, life and death, being and non-being, visibility and invisibility, asking us to question “the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it…” (Derrida 2006, 48).

Derrida’s call for enhanced attention to that which exceeds the immediately present – the absent, the invisible, the imaginary, the ghostly – is, I have found, highly inspiring for an expanded anthropology of relatedness. Attending to the spectral can, as Derrida suggests, enhance our understanding of human co-existence by drawing attention to the ways in which relatedness is always haunted by that which is not immediately there. Both Freud and Heidegger were important sources of inspiration for Spectres of Marx, and for the purposes of this article I have drawn inspiration from these thinkers too. The uncanny – a term that is usually attributed to Freud – plays an important but neglected role in Heidegger’s philosophy. As human beings, Heidegger says, we are basically not-at-home in the world. In our day-to-day lives, we keep ourselves busy with everyday affairs, thereby covering over the fundamental groundlessness of our existence; our not-being-at-home. When confronted with this condition, we are thrown into anxiety (Angst): “What anxiety is anxious for is being-in-the-world itself” (Heidegger 2010, 181). The term “uncanniness” (Unheimlichkeit), for Heidegger, captures this raw and unsettling feeling of not-being-at-home. In our ordinary lives, we flee from uncanniness, escaping into what Heidegger calls the “tranquilized familiarity” of day-to-day worlds.

While Heidegger sees the “tranquilized familiarity” of everydayness as a problematic form of inauthenticity, I find it more important to consider how human efforts to flee anxiety may affect our making and remaking of relationships. Being is always, as Heidegger notes, a “being-possible;” Being surpasses the here-and-now, reaching towards the future and the past. It is, as Jarrett Zigon has put it, “a nexus of potentiality in a world” (Zigon 2014, 21). In fleeing anxiety, therefore, we are engaging with the world as it might become and as it was in
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the past. We are living with ghosts and with premonitions. For a logo-centric discipline such as anthropology, however, capturing kinship’s temporal and spatial excesses is a methodologically challenging endeavor (cf. Carsten 2019, 138-139). Spectral dimensions of existence are elusive; as shadow sides of daily lives, they can be difficult to capture in language and to document empirically.

In this context, I have found inspiration in Susanne Langer’s reflections on what she calls “nameless realities” (1957, 95). There are, Langer writes, aspects of human lives that are inherently hard to document. Language has largely established the frame of our sensory experience: we register that which fits into our discursive forms. But human life exceeds discursive forms, and language does not always readily “present the nature and patterns of sensitive and emotional life” (Langer 1957, 8):

There is a great deal of experience that is knowable, not only as immediate, formless, meaningless impact, but as one aspect of the intricate web of life, yet defies discursive formulation, and therefore verbal expression: that is what we sometimes call the subjective aspect of experience, the direct feeling of it – what it is like to be waking and moving, to be drowsy, slowing down, or to be sociable, or to feel self-sufficient but alone; what it feels like to pursue an elusive thought or to have a big idea. All such directly felt experiences usually have no names – they are named, if at all, for the outward conditions that normally accompany their occurrence. Only the most striking ones have names like “anger,” “hate,” “love,” “fear,” and are collectively called “emotion.” But we feel many things that never develop into any designable emotion. The ways we are moved are as various as the lights in a forest; and they may intersect, sometimes without cancelling each other, take shape and dissolve, conflict, explode into passion, or be transfigured (Langer 1957, 22-23).
Analytical consideration of the spectral involves, then, attention to such “intricate webs of life.” This demands attention to the fleeting ways in which people are moved, to sentiments and experiences that are only subtly expressed; in silences and tones of voice, in gestures, images, tensions, movements, moods – phenomena that, in Langer’s words, “have to be presented to sense and intuition rather than to a word-bound, note-taking consciousness” (Langer 1957, 94-95; see also Taussig 2011). In order to take into account spectral dimensions of human being, we must, then, attend to the psychic forms of agency that unfold as people register and respond to one another’s feelings, gestures, sentiments, moods, trying to predict risks, imagine intentions, or preempt care needs.

On this background, we shall now return to Vietnam, beginning from a visit to Lý that Vân Hương, a Master’s student at Hanoi Medical University, and I paid on October 30, 2016.

**Uncanny homes: The spatiality of spectral kinship**

Vân Hương looked baffled. “What?!” she exclaimed. “You have lived here for six or seven years, and you still feel scared?” With a little laugh, Lý shrugged her shoulders and said, “Yes. I’m still scared. I’m scared that they will criticize me, that they will not be happy with me, with the way that I work. It’s different from living in my mother’s house.” Lý’s voice faded. Vân Hương looked intently at her, waiting for her to continue. “When I lived in my parents’ house I felt so relaxed,” Lý said. “I didn’t have to pay so much attention. Living here, I have to pay attention all the time, to every little thing... No matter what I do, I must pay attention, or they criticize me... Actually, my mother-in-law is gentle, and she does not criticize me much, but I still feel scared.”
Like Lý, many of the women we met described feelings of unease and estrangement living in their husband’s household. This house was now their home – and yet they felt acutely not-at-home. Like Lý, they seemed to live the everyday in a state of alertness, highly conscious of their own behaviors, constantly trying to gauge others’ assessments of them. The existential shelter that one could expect from a home, the feeling of safety and protection that they had experienced before getting married, was not what they found here. Their new homes were uncanny in a Freudian sense: familiar – in the sense of resembling the families they grew up in – and yet strange. In a similar way, but with less intensity, some women described a feeling of estrangement vis-à-vis the neighborhoods and villages that they had joined when getting married. As newcomers to the local community, they said, they had to be vigilant, as others – not yet knowing who they were – would observe, assess, and comment on them.  

Women often talked about their childhood villages with considerable nostalgia. Luyên, for instance, vividly described the differences between the atmosphere in her home village, located in a rural area forty kilometers away, and the semi-urban area where she now lived with her husband and children. As her husband’s village was located closer to the city of Hanoi, she said, social relations were different here: “Here, there is not as much feeling for one another (tình cảm) as in my home village. People don’t visit each other’s houses so much. At home, people would always visit each other in the evening, talking and chatting. If people lacked something, they could always borrow from others. Here, that’s difficult. People don’t help each other. If my husband and I have a lot, we eat a lot, if we have little, we eat a little. Here, we cannot borrow from anyone.”

To Luyên and Lý, as to many other women I met, leaving their childhood homes had been a hard experience. Their natal relatives – the “outside relatives” (họ ngoại) – were still their relatives; in most cases, they could visit, call, and consult their parents and siblings whenever they needed to, and in most cases they visited their parents’ homes at regular
intervals. But there was a loss: when getting married, women lost the daily contact with their natal relatives and childhood friends, and many now seemed to miss the feeling of organic (even if temporary) belonging that had characterized their lives while they were still unmarried. Depending on circumstances, the women seemed to have experienced this loss with varying degrees of intensity, but it was nearly always there, as a fundamental “tragedy of women’s fate” (Sangren 2013, 287). As Judith Butler notes, discussing the role that loss plays in subject formation, the immediately visible “I” is always haunted by a remainder; by traces of that which was lost (Butler 1997, 29). For women such as Luyën and Lý, the childhood home that they had lost – its atmosphere, its sounds and smells, the habits, voices and gestures of its inhabitants, the community in which it was embedded – now seemed to constitute such a remainder, forming an integral part of their selves and lives.

And yet, I realized, this was a complex loss. In some respects, those who were not around in women’s day-to-day lives anymore – mothers, sisters, childhood friends – were still there; despite their absence, they were present. When women endured, they often seemed to draw emotional support from these engagements with absent-yet-present people, feeling loved and cared for by spectral others. Lý, for instance, told us about the shared feelings (tình cảm) and emotional intimacy (thân thiết) that had characterized her childhood home; about her mother’s attention to her and the lively presence of her siblings. As she talked about this, her eyes lit up, her voice slipping into a lighter and more rapid tone. Thinking of her natal home, it seemed, infused her with another, brighter kind of energy, helping her to persevere.

Living with her husband’s harsh treatment of her, Lý said, she recalled how her mother had counseled her during her teenage years: “My mother told me to be alert. She said: ‘You must pay attention. At home you can answer us back, but in your husband’s house you cannot answer people back or they will criticize you.’ She told me that if my husband and I had conflicts, I must hold back my feelings and endure. If I didn’t, she said, my in-laws would
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scold me, maybe even beat me. I would lose out, but they wouldn’t lose anything. My mother said that in the worst case, they might lose a wife, but they can always find another wife. So I would have to endure. That’s how my mother advised me.” Lý’s mother lived far away. And yet she was here, beside her, praising Lý, embracing her, convincing her that her endurance was worthwhile. Her mother’s counsel during her teenage years was not just a matter of memory or recall, but a living, vital force suffusing Lý’s everyday existence. In a similar way, the people of Luyền’s childhood community were physically absent and yet spectrally present, reminding her that human warmth and mutual support exists. In women’s lives, these spatial collapses – natal homes and communities collapsing into husbands’ households and communities – often seemed to play significant roles when endurance was mobilized.

Through subtle modes of psychic agency unfolding in the intermediate sphere between the factual and the imaginal, the “real” and the “unreal,” women persisted.

Besides these spatial collapses, there were temporal collapses too. To illustrate this, I shall begin from a scene that unfolded during a visit to Luyền, on October 28, 2016.

“My son has come home from school:” The temporality of spectral kinship

Luyền was worried. Sitting on a woven mat on her living room floor, we had spent the morning talking, discussing the problems that troubled her. The ceiling fan was rotating slowly, the soft, warm air caressing our skin. During the past months, Luyền had suffered from severe headaches. She had bought some medicine at the local pharmacy, but it did not seem to take effect. While we talked, Luyền’s eldest son, aged 17, suddenly appeared in the door. He came home from school earlier than expected, still wearing his blue school uniform, a bright red scarf tied around his neck. “My son has come home from school (đãy cháu đi học về đây),” Luyền blurted. Being in the middle
of a sentence, Vân Hương did not seem to notice and continued talking. Luyến repeated, now in a slightly insistent tone, “My son has come home from school!”

Seeing us, the boy looked surprised. He nodded briefly in our direction and answered our xin chào with a polite, đa. “Child,” Luyến said in a gentle tone, “Go and prepare some chicken meat to boil for lunch, will you, and slice some squash and add it.” With a nod, and a shy smile, the boy disappeared into the kitchen.

This fieldwork image has etched itself into my memory: Luyến’s son standing there in the doorway, a bit hesitant; Luyến trying to draw our attention to him, the tenderness in her eyes when she looked at him. To me, witnessing this brief interaction, sensing the soft intimacy between Luyến and her son, added new layers of meaning to the words we had exchanged earlier. During our first encounters, Luyến had talked in vivid terms about her daily efforts to create a good life for her son, maintaining a stable home for him. I now sensed the contours of another dimension to Luyến’s endurance: perhaps it was not just the immediate intimacy and care between mother and child that kept her afloat, even though this was obviously important. Rather, like other children, this boy embodied a future – one that did not simply lie ahead of us, but that was present here and now, suffusing the present moment, coloring everything. “My son has come home from school.” Even though Luyến did not say so explicitly, what this short sentence also implied was: “My son is going to school; he is learning and achieving skills, in the future he will be able to protect me – if only I protect him now.” Luyến did not spell this out, because there was no need to, because everyone knew.

But the future that could be expected was folded into the here-and-now relationship between mother and son, being mobilized through imaginal means. As her son stood there in the doorway, Luyến looking at him with tenderness and admiration, I sensed the weight of this temporal excess, this going-beyond-the-present. Enfolded into this moment of domestic life
were a past and a future. A past where daily acts of motherly care had brought her son to where he now was – a strong 17-year-old young man – and a future where roles would be reversed and she would depend on him. Although the exact form of this future was still unknown, this temporal collapse shaped the present moment in a fundamental way. Standing in the doorway, the red scarf neatly tied around his neck, her son was present in his contemporary incarnation, but he was also spectrally present; he was 17 years old, and he was an infant; he was 17 years old, and he was a mature adult man, capable of caring for his elderly mother.

During fieldwork in Vietnam, I have noticed a constant, never-failing orientation towards children’s futures. “Will my child grow up to ‘become a person’ (thành người)?” people always seem to wonder. This question is sometimes brought up explicitly, if a child is born disabled, for instance, but most often it seems to run as a silent undercurrent to day-to-day lives. At issue when parents pose this question, I have learnt, are concerns about the futures of children – but also of parents themselves. In northern Vietnamese communities, as in many other societies, a person’s continued existence into old age and afterlife depends on his or her children. In a society with limited welfare provisioning, a dignified old age as a respected community member and an adequate life in “the other world” depend almost entirely on the support provided by adult children. If children fail to live up to expectations, their parents’ very existence is under threat. Most people seem to expect, though, that if they provide properly for their children while they grow up, then they can with some measure of certainty expect their children to return this care later. Intergenerational moral expectations of this nature are well documented; numerous anthropologists have recorded the mutual moral demands that parents and children place on one another (e.g., Hunleth 2017; Lamb 2000; Shohet 2017; Stasch 2009). The point that I wish to make here is, however, slightly different. At issue when Vietnamese women endured, I contend, were not just future-oriented
expectations of reciprocity. Rather than being simply placed in a distant future, as hopeful figures of a time yet to come, women’s future children were with them in the here-and-now, acting on and affecting the present. Their adult children were not here, and yet they were; comforting and caring for their mother, giving her the strength to go on. Domestic being-with, for women such as Luyện and Lý, was, in other words, a being-with the specters of their future children; shadowy figures who were present with them in the here-and-now, holding them up, urging them on. Confronted with the demands and pressures of daily lives, women responded by conjuring child figures of hope and support. Specters of other family members were present too. Many women talked in vivid terms about how their husband had once been another kind of man. During their engagement days, they said, their husband had been loving, caring, and attentive; an entirely different person from the one that he was now. This spectral husband was, it seemed, somehow still present, infusing marital relations with longing, love, and hope.

But the benign specters of children and husbands that hovered in women’s homes were, I realized, not the only existential force fueling their endurance. Beneath these specters were other, more dark and disturbing figures.

“Losing one’s children means losing everything:” Specters of loss and betrayal

“When we were children,” Lý said, “Tâm was my best friend.” She paused, then continued:

Tâm was beautiful and had many suitors. She got married before I did, and to begin with, everything was sweet. She and her husband had two sons. Then her husband went to work in another area, far away, and he found a lover there. He rejected his wife and invited his lover to live in their house. He prepared the divorce papers, but Tâm refused
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to sign them. She refused because of the children. She was determined to maintain her marriage, and she endured for nearly a year, even though her husband’s lover lived in their house. I admired her so much for her endurance. But eventually she couldn’t endure anymore, and she signed the divorce papers…. So she lost her two children. At that time, the eldest was four years old and the youngest was thirteen months. He was so small. (Vân Hương: “Why did she lose the children?”) The right to custody was not granted to her. Because she didn’t earn much money, but her husband’s family was wealthy… Now, it’s as if she has a depression. She doesn’t talk to anyone, doesn’t socialize with anyone. She just goes to work, comes home, takes a bath, goes to bed. She lives with her natal parents. They visit my parents constantly, crying and talking about how much their daughter is suffering. They don’t know what to do to make her feel better. They feel so sorry for her.

The room fell silent. Then Lý shrugged her shoulders. “I’m scared,” she said in a low voice, her eyes dark. “I’m scared of having to live alone one day, all by myself. Nothing scares me as much as that thought.” This was October 30, 2016, and Vân Hương and I were visiting Lý again. Thinking back on that October morning, I see Lý’s daughter before me – a five-year-old with round cheeks with dimples, black hair in bunches, and a faded pink t-shirt and shorts. I recall the way in which she sought care and protection in her mother’s arms, and Lý’s way of holding her tight. One day, we all knew, these mother-child roles would be reversed; this little girl would have grown into a mature woman who was capable of caring for her mother, embracing and shielding her, protecting her against the frailty that old age brings. And yet – Lý knew – contingency is there. Maybe this will not happen. Maybe she will have to manage on her own; her daughter, for one reason or the other, turning her back on her mother. The risk of abandonment is there. Failing as a mother, Lý knew – by being
unable to maintain family harmony or by letting one’s family fall to pieces – can have devastating consequences, causing abandonment, loss, and despair.

These anxieties point us to another kind of child spectrality than the hopeful one illustrated by Luyën’s case. Sometimes, I learnt, spectral children were bright figures of hope; sometimes they were dark creatures of fright and threat. The thought of being abandoned by one’s offspring, of being left to fend for oneself, alone, futureless, seemed to open a deep, dizzying rift in women’s lives, an abyss of anxiety. People can lose their children in many ways. Everyday gossip, circulating in village alleys and across domestic yards, often centers on the difficulties that *other people* have with their children: the son who has fallen into “social evils,” gambling away his parents’ money; the daughter who has married an unreliable man whose alcohol habits erode their family’s economy. Sons in particular, people say, are difficult to raise, always at risk of falling into trouble. The intensity with which people discuss other people’s children indicates, it seems, parental anxieties that run so deep that they can hardly be articulated directly. In day-to-day lives, this prospect of child loss seemed to be a constantly present threatening shadow, one that loomed large and that women tried intently to ignore, to push out of their thoughts and lives. “Losing one’s children,” as one woman said, “means losing everything” (*mất con là mất hết*). As I write this, years later, I can still hear her saying these words – the way her voice dropped, falling into a deeper register, the little pause before she continued talking.

The dark child specters that hover over everyday lives seem to evoke the uncanny in both a Freudian and a Heideggerian sense. “The uncanny,” according to Freud, refers to an unsettling merging of the familiar and the strange; to moments when that which we thought we knew best suddenly reveals itself as strange and frightening. Recognizing the unknown prospects of their relations to their own children seems to throw people into such moments of unsettling uncanniness. In day-to-day lives, these fears – of rejection, loss, betrayal – are
rarely put into words. And yet they are there, leading a quiet, ghostly life beneath the busy bustle of everyday activities, emerging, typically, when a life crisis disturbs everyday routines. Tâm’s situation was such a crisis. Elaborating on the fears that her friend’s plight evoked in her, Lý said – her voice so quiet that it was nearly a whisper: “You know – I often feel scared. When my children get bigger, when they are not small and tender (bé bông) anymore… how can I be sure that they will listen to me? Big children are different from small children. When they get big, I cannot be sure that they will listen to me at all… I’m so scared of losing my children. Very scared.”

“How will my child develop?” women seem to wonder. “Will this child grow up to become a stable income-earner, someone I can rely on? Or will I be left behind, abandoned, forgotten?” While in ordinary day-to-day lives these prospects of abandonment and betrayal are rarely verbalized, more mundane worries – regarding how to provide adequately for one’s children, securing schooling, day care, health care – are topics of lively everyday conversation. In an increasingly competitive market-based economy with shrinking state provisioning of social services, people’s concerns regarding children’s schooling, health and growth seem highly understandable. But this intense preoccupation with children’s wellbeing may also, perhaps, be a way in which people hold on to what Heidegger calls “everyday familiarity,” trying to keep deeper existential anxieties at bay. Busy preoccupation with everyday childcare activities helps, perhaps, to shift attention away from more fundamental, harrowing fears: the fear of ending up in a dark abyss of abandonment and existential isolation in the way that Lý’s friend experienced it; the fear of losing one’s footing in the world. Given the deep dependencies that characterize maternal-child relations, the prospect of losing one’s children is also a prospect of losing oneself, of social death. “Losing one’s children means losing everything.”
Conclusion: Spectral kinship as an analytic

This article started from an ethnographic question: what compels women in northern Vietnam to endure multiple forms of domestic distress? Women’s endurance is, as we have seen, a practice of kinship – one that unfolds in the intermediate, imaginal sphere between the fantasized and the empirically observable. Kinship is, as has often been argued, a social performance. Less attention has been paid to the shadow side of this; to the ways in which kinship is always also ecstatic, exceeding the immediately manifest. Defining the spectral as a dimension of our being, the concept of spectral kinship aims to capture this temporal and spatial excess. Had my inquiry into the endurance enacted by women in Vietnam focused merely on the socially manifest, I could have concluded by pointing to the importance for women of holding together their families and securing stable everyday lives for their children. At issue when women endured, however, were not merely attempts to enact morally appropriate motherhood or maternal desires to protect children against harm. Women’s endurance of domestic distress was, as we have seen, animated by vigorous – but socially suppressed – specters of intimate others; by people who were present, and yet not, emerging as unstable and contingent dimensions of women’s own being. Child specters seemed to loom particularly large: when women responded with patience and persistence to domestic distress, spectral children animated their endurance – unsettling them, scaring them, embracing them, urging them on. The endurance that women enacted was, in other words, animated by powerful existential urges; by bright expectations of better futures and by deep, unspeakable fears of dissolution and death. Their lives were suffused by contingency – a contingency that they worked against through intense imaginal work.

A spectral kinship approach attends, in short, to intermediate zones of experience, highlighting the invisible emotional and imaginative work at play when people endure social
pressures and distress. This renders a spectrality analytics relevant well beyond the field of kinship studies: when human lives unfold under conditions of increased vulnerability and contingency – such as in situations of economic crisis, environmental disaster, or political violence – spectral dimensions of existence may achieve heightened social importance. Understanding human endurance – or other forms of moral persistence – demands attention not merely to the social, material, and discursive performances that unfold when sociality is enacted and daily lives transpire, but also to the inchoate interfaces between social demands and imaginal living.
Endnotes

1 Except for the names of my colleagues in Vietnam, all personal names cited in this article are pseudonyms. This article is based on long-term academic engagement with Vietnam, and particularly on fieldwork conducted in Hanoi between 2014 and 2017. This fieldwork formed part of the PAVE project, a capacity building research project exploring pregnant women’s experiences with intimate partner violence (https://anthropology.ku.dk/research/research-projects/completed_projects/pave/). The research was conducted in Hanoi’s Đồng Anh district, a semi-urban area stretching between the Red River in the south and Sóc Sơn district in the north. The project included an epidemiological study involving 1,337 pregnant women, and an ethnographic study among 30 women who reported both intimate partner violence and emotional distress. I conducted the research in collaboration with colleagues from Hanoi Medical University (HMU), undertaking ethnographic fieldwork together with Nguyễn Hoàng Thanh, Trần Thơ Nhi, and Nguyễn Hoàng Vân Hương. All three obtained their degrees at HMU under the auspices of this project. We conducted the research in Vietnamese, and the quotations included in this article were translated by me.

2 I have developed the concept of spectral kinship with inspiration from fieldwork in Vietnam where the spectral – despite its transient and vague nature – seems to be integral to everyday lives, a force with which one has to reckon. In Vietnamese day-to-day lives, ghosts and specters are powerfully present (cf. Lincoln and Lincoln 2015). Sometimes, these are literal ghosts (ma) haunting and disturbing people (Gustafsson 2009; Kwon 2012; Schwenkel 2017); sometimes they are metaphoric gestures hinting at troublesome and conflict-ridden pasts (Leshkowich 2008); sometimes they are mental images besetting people’s minds, refusing to go away no matter how hard the sufferer tries to erase them (Gammeltoft 2014). This sensitivity to aspects of life that exceed the immediately present may be particularly
acute in Vietnam as a consequence of the country’s history of war and massive human losses, but research conducted in other societies indicates that spectral aspects of human co-existence are not unique to Vietnam (for an overview, see Lincoln and Lincoln 2015).

The analytical approach that I take in this article resonates with Vincent Crapanzano’s work on “the scene” (Crapanzano 2006). In anthropology, Crapanzano argues, our emphasis on the empirical has led us to ignore significant dimensions of life: those that take more shadowy, suppressed, and subdued forms. Arguing for an opening up of anthropology to include these dimensions of human existence, Crapanzano asks: “Why do we – some of us at least – cling so obsessively to what we call empirical reality? Why has that reality become the bulwark of an epistemological discipline that, despite its rejection of any ethical foundation, is carried out with such moral – yes, moral – rigor: preclusive rigor?” (Crapanzano 2006, 398; see also Herzfeld 2015; Okely 1994).

“Didn’t you consider having an abortion,” Nhị asked Lý. In Lý’s commune, sex-selective abortions are routinely carried out: in 2013, local authorities registered a sex ratio at birth at 130 (i.e., for 100 girls, 130 boys were born). Yet even though her husband fervently desired a son, Lý did not dare to terminate her pregnancy. “I’m scared,” she said, “small kids like that who are thrown away, they may return to haunt their mother, asking, ‘Why didn’t you let me live?’ So I’m scared. I didn’t want to do that.”

Endurance is, as one of the anonymous reviewers of this article pointed out, double-edged; it isolates women (by invisibilizing their suffering) while also integrating them in local moral worlds (by minimizing conflict within intimate relations).

The emotional experiences that Langer describes are diffuse, but still knowable to the subject. This makes her account of “nameless realities” different from affect theory’s approach to subjectivity. There is, as Emily Martin has noted, a tendency in affect theory to erase the subject, whereas what we need in anthropology are “robust ethnographic accounts
that are specific about how humans’ perceptions are social all the way down” (Martin 2013: S157).

7 This is not to say that language is not important for our understanding of emotional worlds. As Elinor Ochs and Bambi Schieffelin (1989) observe, “language has a heart:” language communicates not merely referential information, but also feelings, moods, dispositions and attitudes. For an exemplary analysis of affectively loaded linguistic forms in a Vietnamese context, see Shohet 2018.

8 Needless to say, such psychic forms of agency are, like other forms of agency, socially and politically produced; formed through people’s engagements with social, moral, and political demands. The imaginal is always inherently social and intersubjective.

9 Among the women we met, several had – in line with a long tradition of village endogamy – married a man who resided within their own village, and all had built networks of social relationships in the kin groups and communities they married into. In situations of marital conflict, however, these networks seemed to provide limited protection and support as, women explained, local people would nearly always side with the husband and his family. Most women therefore took a relatively guarded attitude in interactions with community members, sharing marital troubles either with no one or with natal relatives/childhood friends (in face-to-face meetings, through telephone calls, or via Facebook). Telling people within the local community about their difficulties would, women explained, only deepen their trouble by giving them a negative reputation as a person who lacks loyalty to her husband and in-laws.

10 Over the years that I have worked in Vietnam, I have often been struck by the intensity of parental anxieties. Such anxieties seem to emerge particularly often in the contexts of education, pregnancy, aging, and other transitional realms. The withdrawal of the state from health care and education that has accompanied Vietnam’s transition from a socialist to a
market-based economy has, people often observe, placed more intense demands on parents. In Lý’s words: “In the past, the state would provide education and even food. If a child didn’t go to school, people would even come to call on it. Today, if a child doesn’t go to school, it will simply be illiterate. So parents have more to think of these days.”
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