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Parenting Patriots: Filial Piety, Family Socialization, and Insurgency in the Vietnam War

“Imagine this: you want to protect your mother and your father, your sister and your brother. Of course you would take up arms.” Such were the words of Tuấn, a former Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF) fighter who joined the guerrilla struggle against the American-backed Government of Vietnam (GVN) when he was 16 years old. In his statement, two themes stand out. The first is the presumption that under some circumstances, the decision to join the military struggle as a child is almost expected—“of course” one would do it. The second is Tuấn’s view of himself—and other children who joined the communist struggle against the United States and the GVN—as protectors of their families. In his view, despite being an underage soldier at the time, *he* protected his loved ones, rather than being the subject of protection. As I collected interviews of former young NLF and Youth Shock Brigades recruits and analyzed their motivations and experiences, I found that Tuấn’s statement was far from unique. Indeed, many of my interviewees recalled that as children, family was one of their primary motivators to become a guerrilla.

Based on forty life history interviews of former Vietnamese child soldiers conducted in 2016 and 2019, this article analyzes the dynamics between

family, childhood, ongoing militarization, and the presence of guerrillas in children's lives. In doing so, I will explain how these factors predisposed children to volunteer for the struggle against the United States and the GVN. These findings, in turn, shed light on how familial and kinship loyalties and intimacy helped mobilize and sustain insurgencies in Vietnam and beyond, and can further suggest how these factors contributed to their success.

This article is organized as follows: First, I provide an overview of the existing research on the role of kinship as a motivator of insurgency in Vietnam and elsewhere. Next, I clarify my approach to childhood, and specifically Vietnamese childhood. I then explain the methods used for data collection. Subsequent sections are dedicated to empirical findings. I identify two ways in which family facilitated children's participation in war, with the main focus on parent-child relationships. First, the idea of the nuclear family as a highly politicized space was normalized—children were expected to understand and participate in politics alongside adults. Second, the values of filial piety and loyalty were reinforced. I then contextualize the findings in light of wider historical and social shifts, and more specifically, in the context of how guerrillas widened and changed the notion of family and filial piety—which also affected children's perceptions of their own motivations. Taken together, these factors created a powerful environment that, for many children, was sufficient to induce the decision to join the guerrillas. I conclude by reflecting on the extent to which intimacy and insurgency interact and sustain each other, thus contributing further to the literature not only on the Vietnam War but also on war in general.

Intimacy and Kinship as a Motivator to Participate in Military Struggle: Vietnam and Beyond

Writing about the motivations of Muslim fighters in Indonesia, Scott Atran proposes the following hypothesis: “Maybe people don't kill and die simply for a cause. They do it for friends, campmates, schoolmates, workmates.”¹ In Serbia, Klaus Shlichte shows how the motivations of veterans were always connected to collectivities, imagined communities, family traditions, friends, or colleagues.² In this sense, he argues, “all individuals are integrated within social settings,” and decisions about war participation are driven decisively by the social environment surrounding actors.³ A similar view is expressed

by Alpa Shah, who attempts to tease out the reasons behind the relative success of Maoist groups in comparison to other (better-funded) Indian political institutions, including the Indian state.⁴ Shah concludes that “accounts . . . which explain the persistence of the movement in terms of greed or grievance—the standard models of rebellion in economics and political science—are grossly deficient.” Rather, it was relations of intimacy—specifically focused on the family and kinship bonds often deliberately engineered by Maoists themselves—that guided and sustained the long and protracted struggle.⁵ Similarly, Sarah E. Parkinson argues that rebellion in Palestine was sustained and determined by informal social networks that became central sources of information, finance, and supply for Palestinian militant organizations.⁶

Throughout Vietnamese history as well, fighters and combat supporters have affirmed that ties with family shape motivations to engage in military struggles. For example, Tal Tov notes that many Vietnamese insurgents joined the political struggle against the United States and the South Vietnamese government because they were following in the footsteps of family members, “essentially translating a familial allegiance into a political one.”⁷ Sandra C. Taylor, likewise, observes that many Vietnamese women joined the revolutionary movement because they wanted to protect their families.⁸ Interviews conducted by RAND highlight that Vietnamese guerrilla recruitment tactics often utilized familial (parent-child and husband-wife) loyalties.⁹ Hue-Tam Ho Tai describes the impact of family ties during the 1920s for Nguyễn Trung Nguyệt, a woman coming from a “close-knit family with scholarly learnings and anticolonial sympathies.”¹⁰ Her revolutionary journey, Ho Tai writes, did not start from personal rebellion or political engagement: “it was filial piety that led her to patriotism [and to feminism].”¹¹ Family did not need to be biological to inspire political engagement. For example, David G. Marr describes an even earlier instance, taking place in 1883, when the French captured Phan Đình Phùng’s brother to force him into submission.¹² As Marr writes,

Phan is said to have told his lieutenants: “From the time I joined with you in the Can Vương movement, I determined to forget questions of family and village. Now I have but one tomb, a very large one, that must be defended: the land of Vietnam. I have only one brother, very important, that is in danger:

more than twenty million countrymen. If I worry about my own tombs, who will worry about defending the tombs of the rest of the country? If I save my own brother, who will save all the other brothers of our country? There is only one way for me to die now.”¹³

Much like in conflicts in India, Serbia, or Palestine, connections with social community and family played a significant role in sustaining Vietnamese rebellions and military struggles against a range of adversaries. This article builds on current findings regarding the role of family connections in predisposing potential recruits to join military struggles. To contribute to the current scholarship, I will analyze the role of family, with a specific focus on the impact of parent-child relationships and filial piety, on the motivations of children who joined the NLF in their struggle against the GVN. I will also analyze how the concept of family was mobilized to represent national liberation causes. In conclusion, I suggest how insights from the Vietnamese case can deepen our understanding of what motivates underage recruits to join and stay in insurgencies.

Children and Childhoods

The aim of this article is to identify how family predisposed children to join military struggles. First, however, I will analyze the concepts of childhood and child soldiering. The idea of children participating in war is heavily loaded; children and war are frequently seen as a contradiction in terms.¹⁴ Such an assumption stems from a specific perspective on childhood that Huynh Kim characterizes as a “caretaker view.”¹⁵ In this view, children are assumed to be apolitical due to their supposed immaturity, vulnerability, and passivity until they reach the age of 18. These portrayals and their applicability to child soldiers have been extensively questioned; for example, Sharon Stephens speaks against the notion of one universal childhood, and the “timelessness, absoluteness, universality and naturalness” of the image of an innocent, malleable child.¹⁶ On the contrary, Olga Nieuwenhuys suggests that there is nothing universal about the figure of an innocent child, one who is only innocent until the age of 18: rather, this image is a Western invention.¹⁷ To “export” it across the globe as a universal ideal for other cultures to strive for is to ignore the many other types of childhood experiences. This in turn presents societies with different childhood experiences as abnormal

or uncivilized.¹⁸ With respect to child soldiers, the a priori assumption of children as malleable victims has been demonstrated to be flawed when it is used to guide demobilization programs. For example, there has been much frustration among former child soldiers because international post-conflict responses often fail to meet their economic and social needs—an oversight stemming from the presumption that children require less economic support than adults.¹⁹ Another particularly striking anecdote is recounted by Susan Shepler, who worked with former Sierra Leonean child soldiers:

An American working for the UN Human Rights section remarked to me... that seeing the children play on the beach at Lakka always made her feel that “at last they can have a normal childhood.” But playing on the beach all day is *not* a normal childhood for Sierra Leonean children.²⁰

As an alternative to the “caretaker” view, sociologists such as Allison James and Allan Prout have contested the notion of the universality of childhood and argue for the construct of “childhood” to be reimaged in terms of multiple *childhoods*.²¹ As David Rosen further contends, the rich ethnographic work carried out by researchers *with* children and, more specifically, with child soldiers undermines the idea of the universally innocent and passive child.²² Reexamining the “natural” boundaries of childhood, Charlotte Hardman describes children as agents in “their own right and not just as receptacles of adult teaching.”²³ Proponents of the new sociology of childhood, then, emphasize that “children should be perceived as social actors and holders of rights rather than...as passive and dependent on the private family.”²⁴ This approach opens up a possibility for a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of children whose actions, such as engagement in politics or employment, do not fit the mold of the “stereotypical child.”

Starting from the presumption that there are multiple childhoods, I will now call attention to some features of Vietnamese childhood in the mid-twentieth century. While it is impossible to speak of one single representative Vietnamese childhood, widely communicated messaging (frequently circulated through magazines, radios, or schools) aimed specifically at children indicated some common expectations of what constituted a good Vietnamese childhood. These expectations do not fit neatly with the

presumption of children as passive, innocent, and malleable beings, who should be shielded from the public life until the age of 18. For example, many Vietnamese children worked, taking on various responsibilities with regard to farmwork, household tasks, and domestic chores. One of Hồ Chí Minh's teachings for children [*5 điều Bác Hồ dạy*] specifically encourages children to "study well, labor well" [*học tập tốt, lao động tốt*]. It reflects one particular Vietnamese view of what constitutes a good child: one that not only engages in studying, but also participates in production and the economic life of the family and community. Nguyen Van Chinh observes that children were once expected to help with household tasks from as young as two years old, and "their task performance made a significant contribution to the household."²⁵ Schools accommodated the expectation that children would help their families and work in the fields, scheduling vacations around harvest times. Intellectually, children were expected to understand concepts such as inequality, socialism, and injustice from a very early age.²⁶

This is not to say that children were completely equal to adults or that childhood did not exist in Vietnam. Vietnamese children were still constrained within a strict hierarchy that consistently reminded them of their subordinate position vis-à-vis their parents. Such subordination was manifested, for example, in the relational pronouns that consistently denoted children's (and, in general, younger people's) social position in the hierarchy and accompanying expectations of obedience.²⁷ Later in life, children's subordination was underscored by the power of parents to choose their children's partners.²⁸ From a young age, children needed to understand and navigate their own social position in the web of relations, exhibiting an "extraordinarily fine-tuned awareness" of who is their superior and who is their equal.²⁹

While children's subordination in the family hierarchy was not strictly tied to age, for the purposes of this study I was particularly interested in experiences of people who were under 18 years old at the time of enlisting. My initial interest arose because, at least in theory, both the NLF and the GVN listed 18 as the age of conscription.³⁰ Multiple interviewees told stories of wanting to volunteer when they were 14, 16, or 17 years old and being turned down by NLF recruiters because of their age. In practice, young recruits could lie, beg, or find other ways to join the military struggle,

suggesting that the criteria were not strictly enforced. Gordon L. Rottman notes that even during periods when the NLF was particularly selective, they still recruited motivated 17-year-olds in good physical condition.³¹ One of my interviewees recounted that in his village, when quotas could not be fulfilled, the phenomenon of “borrowing age” [*vay tuổi*] appeared: families sent their eldest sons, even if they were under 18 years old. Such instances indicate that childhood was a malleable concept for the guerrillas: on the one hand, anyone under 18 was still considered underage. They therefore were subject to, and had to navigate, the expectations attached to children. On the other hand, the NLF expectations about the capabilities of children were flexible and adaptable to suit the needs of the guerrilla group. In addition, some of my interviewees thought of themselves as distinct from older recruits in being more carefree, mischievous, or having specific physical needs and capabilities. For the purposes of this study, I will refer to my interviewees, who all enlisted under the age of 18, as former child soldiers, while acknowledging that their experiences do not line up with the “care-taker” idea of the innocent, apolitical, and passive child.³² I hope to convey the diversity of their experience in detailed accounts of their life histories.

Part of this diversity stems from the fact that the recruitment process varied according to geographical and political factors. I found that in the NLF-dominated provinces in the north, such as Nam Định and Hưng Yên, where I conducted my fieldwork, the guerrilla recruitment groups had more opportunities to spread propaganda via meetings, radio, and posters. The enlistment process was also more straightforward, as potential recruits only needed to locate NLF groups and apply to join them. By contrast, most of the territory in the south was tightly monitored for potential guerrilla meetings and experienced a higher number of counterinsurgency operations.³³ There, communist operations were more informal and clandestine, and southern interviewees made more references to witnessing first-hand GVN repression against suspected guerrillas. It is within this context that the experiences of interviewees such as Kim and Đức—both of whom referred to secret guerrilla meetings and nonconfrontational acts of protest—are best understood. However, there were also many overlapping ideas, such as the notion of the “revolutionary family” that emerged across all groups of interviewees.

While my interviewees contributed significantly to the military struggle, not all of them were part of the NLF. There were alternative options for underage recruits to participate, such as joining the Youth Shock Brigades. Indeed, many of my interviewees, after being rejected by the NLF, actively sought to join these brigades. Specifically set up to provide noncombat support for the NLF, the Youth Shock Brigades employed less rigorous recruiting criteria. As a result, many of their members consisted of “teen soldiers,”³⁴ or child soldiers who otherwise did not meet the weight and age criteria of the NLF. The motivations and contexts of Youth Shock Brigades volunteers will also be considered in this essay.

To be clear, the purpose of my research is not to reinforce the idea that children are inherently more malleable than adults, nor is it to argue that children are more easily susceptible to changes in political or historical context. Indeed, many studies cited in the previous section suggest that social relations played a significant role for adults who joined insurgencies as well. My findings, however, contradict the image of the malleable and passive child. Within a highly constrained environment, restricted by a tight social hierarchy and an ongoing war, Vietnamese children found ways to reinterpret, appropriate, and attach meaning to courses of action that they thought to be desirable, honorable, and in line with their perceived vision of a “good childhood.”

Narrating the Story of Life: Life History Interviews

For this research, I collected life history interviews—a method that elicits life narratives and describes a person’s life. I asked my interviewees to recount their lives in their own words and from their own perspectives.³⁵ Due to its focus on past as well as the present events, the life history approach helps to uncover the ways identities are shaped in childhood and adolescence, and thus provides insights into the development of specific courses of actions. This method, then, sheds light on the “unfolding history of one person’s experiences” and illuminates the person’s social roles, relations, and self-conception throughout the transitions from one experience to another.³⁶

The responses given in this essay are part of a larger research project that investigated the experiences of child soldiers who participated in the First and Second Indochina Wars, tracing their life histories before, during, and

after they joined the guerrillas. The theme of family was interwoven through many of my conversations. However, for the purposes of this essay, I will focus on examining the role of family in predisposing my interviewees to join the NLF or the Youth Shock Brigades. To this end, I include the accounts of the eight interviewees who provided the most in-depth and detailed reflections on the role of family in their lives and motivations for joining the fight.

My interviewees were men and women from peasant backgrounds, located in various parts of rural Vietnam, from northern and southern provinces. The full location and origin of my interviewees are provided in the interview list. At the time of the interviews, their ages ranged from 61 to 73. The sample I present here consists of five men and three women. To protect the anonymity of my interviewees, I use pseudonyms throughout the article. All of my interviewees joined the NLF under the age of 18. They performed a diverse range of tasks and jobs, including engaging in combat, nursing, spying, delivering messages, maintaining camps, and serving as Youth Shock Brigades members. My interviewees were recruited for participation in this study by word of mouth, personal connections, and snowball sampling, as well as social media. The interviews ranged from about 1 hour to 2.5 hours. They took place in an environment where interviewees would feel most comfortable (for example, their personal home or a private space in a restaurant). I conducted interviews in Vietnamese, and recorded, transcribed, and translated the data into English. The research project received ethics approval from the Department of Politics Research Committee at Goldsmiths, University of London. Before the interviews, all participants were made aware of the nature and purpose of the project and gave informed consent to being interviewed and recorded.

An important aspect of my data collection, analysis, and interpretation was reflexivity on my own positionality. As a young Vietnamese woman who was raised in northern Vietnam, I was broadly familiar with many references to specific historical or political events mentioned by my interviewees. I also speak fluent Vietnamese, which allowed me to communicate with the interviewees without a language barrier. Due to our age gap, my interviewees frequently commented that speaking to me felt like a conversation with their granddaughter. I found that these aforementioned factors allowed for warm

and informal interviews, where my interlocutors could safely share some of their most vulnerable moments. A small number of my interviewees noted that my background as a researcher from a Western university made them eager to share their stories with me, saying that their own grandchildren often did not believe the stories they tell in the way that I, an “educated person,” did. I was conscious, however, that my background could also affect their responses. For example, I could not relate or verify many of their experiences: participation in war, particular visions of childhood, or the kind of jobs children had to undertake in the fields. To mitigate this, I asked clarifying questions and cross-checked them among other interviewees to ensure internal consistency. I will reflect on this process in the paragraphs below.

Retrospective interviews raise a range of questions with regard to the memories and self-narratives that my interviewees chose to convey. To interpret and understand these, I have followed Emily Keightley’s argument that although memory can pose empirical problems, the value of memory goes beyond being able to confirm historical truths.³⁷ “While narrative does not yield absolute truth,” Ochs E. Capps suggests, “it can transport narrators and audiences to more authentic feelings, beliefs, and actions and ultimately to a more authentic *sense of life*” (emphasis added).³⁸ Beyond illuminating what happened in the moment, reconstructed memories demonstrate the interviewees’ ideas of good and bad, desirable and undesirable, thinkable and unthinkable, what ought to be said and what is better left out. I therefore approach memory as a social action in itself. This is because the process of making sense of experience and ascribing meaning to memories—whether they are influenced by collective experiences, conventions, or cultural norms—holds as much significance for research as does historical empirical evidence. A similar approach to memories as a source of data has been articulated by Keightley: “memories respond to the demands of current experience and future desires, and social and cultural frameworks of power.”³⁹ Individual memories also shape reality in a sense that they contribute to wider cultural frameworks, enabling people to build relationships and identities and to affiliate with a specific group. On a more radical note, Ulrich Neisser and Robyn Fivush point out that “reality is not so much something against which memories can be checked as something established by those memories themselves.”⁴⁰ In a similar vein, Jerome Bruner

encourages researchers to approach life “not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold.”⁴¹

Retrospective interviews, therefore, are a source of valuable information, *because of* (not in spite of) the reality that memories are continually reconstructed, omitted, and reshaped as a result of the passage of time. They will not obstruct understanding the experiences of child soldiers but can add to the stories by revealing how these events were responded to and perceived, both on an individual and collective level. What my interviewees chose to tell me, along with what they omitted, is indicative of specific cultural perceptions surrounding childhood and war. They therefore still provide valuable information with regard to expectations and social practices of child soldiering. With this methodological framework established, I now turn to analyzing my interview data.

Childhood, Family, and War: Empirical Findings from Fieldwork in Vietnam

FAMILY AS A POLITICAL SPACE

As I conducted the interviews, I was struck by the frequency with which my interlocutors referred to instances of families socializing their children into a particular political orientation. Various sources contributed to this socialization. For example, parents often discussed political matters with their children or asked their friends, who were similarly politically oriented, to babysit their children. An account by my interviewees, Kim and Đức, can help to illustrate how children started to adopt their parents’ political stance.

Growing up in southern Vietnam, Kim volunteered to serve as a nurse on the battlefield as a 13-year-old. Her account makes it clear that both her childhood and family life were deeply politicized and militarized prior to her recruitment.⁴² When she was as young as 4 years old, her father, a supporter of the NLF struggle, brought her to secret guerrilla gatherings. He considered it important for her to be exposed to political discussions and issues at an early age. During these meetings, she met other guerrillas—friends of her father. As she recounted later, she received “guidance” from these “uncles and aunts,” with whom she developed a close bond. Sometimes they would take her to see performances organized by guerrillas specifically for

propaganda purposes. Together, they watched lively musical and theatrical performances about notable events in Vietnamese history and the country's record of anticolonial struggles. They also listened to songs, plays, dances, and rallying speeches devised to recruit new guerilla members. These propaganda performances were a common occurrence throughout Vietnam, conducted as a part of communist mass mobilization and recruitment campaigns. Kim remembered thinking that "those performances were fun" and she began to reflect on her own political stance after extensive social interactions with guerrillas. "They [the uncles and aunts] told me," she remembered, "that I come from a family where supporting the revolution is a tradition, and I should choose a profession which contributes to our country, too." Kim's political outlook, then, was shaped directly by her father bringing her to guerrilla circles and helping her familiarize herself with revolutionary activities from a young age; however, it was also shaped by her family's friends. Their advice that she should follow the family tradition was persuasive, given the importance Vietnamese society places on family loyalty and on upholding family tradition.

Not all children were exposed to such direct instructions; some were socialized in other ways. For example, Đức came from a rural district just outside of Sài Gòn, where local authorities persecuted the NLF. As such, many families could not express their dissatisfaction with the current regime openly and resorted to performing politics in a subtle, nonconfrontational, and anonymous way. The children's everyday lives, attitudes, and beliefs were shaped by witnessing the struggle and political actions that their families undertook. As an example, Đức told me how his family used steel buckets (typically used to carry water or fish sauce) and turned them into tools of protest:

In the evening, after a shout, people would hit and bang on it to make noise. At first, we would hit it quietly, and then everyone else would join. But then they [the GVN] couldn't catch us—we didn't do anything illegal. But it was this unity. But if there was a family that didn't make noise, we'd know that they were on the enemy's side. And then, when the officials went to check for the buckets, you'd say, "Oh, my neighbors were making noise, so I followed them, but I don't actually know anything. I just heard the noise, so I joined in..." They would try to find the person who started it, but no one would tell them, how would they know?

Both of these cases provide an illustration of how children's first involvement with politics started with direct socialization by their family. In carrying out everyday resistance against the government of South Vietnam and in choosing to expose children to propaganda meetings, the family instilled a political orientation in children. My findings indicate that Vietnamese peasant parents did not think of their children as apolitical. Rather, children were encouraged to engage in and form opinions on politics. It is not a stretch, then, to imagine that within these circumstances, participating in a war was a viable option for them. Within these circumstances, the idea of participating in the military struggle—whether by taking up arms or otherwise—had already become an inseparable part of the children's social lives.

The important role that families played in socializing children for political participation is demonstrated in the emergence of the label “resistance family” [*gia đình kháng chiến*]. In both the First and Second Indochina Wars, this honorific designation was given to families that had at least one member in the resistance movement. Notably, being a resistance family did not always mean involvement in combat; many of these resistance families participated by sheltering guerrillas or providing them with food and clothes. Other families supported fighting at the rear by digging tunnels for guerrillas to use as cover or helping with messenger duties.

At a young age, children were not simply exposed to talk about politics among family members, but they also gained a first-hand understanding of what revolutionary activities looked like. In many cases, children helped with small errands for guerrillas, such as buying them food or clothes if their family was sheltering fighters or keeping watch for enemy forces while their parents were digging tunnels. Being a part of a resistance family came with an expectation that children would continue their parents' activities or at least not tarnish the family's reputation. This is reflected in the following statement of one of my interviewees: “Whatever anyone said, my family was a resistance one—I had to do something to deserve that family.” The case of another interviewee, Hồng, who grew up in southern Vietnam, presents a particularly interesting illustration of the expectations placed on children from resistance families. When she asked her father to let her join the guerrillas, it was explicitly forbidden at first, as he thought that she was too weak to carry out the physically demanding tasks in war. However, he later

reconsidered his decision, with the only condition being that she complete her mission without deserting. Otherwise, he would disown her. He said, “This is a resistance family; if you desert, you will damage our honor. Whatever it takes, do your best.” Ultimately, she joined the military struggle while keeping her father’s words in mind. Resistance families, then, did not simply socialize their children into a specific political orientation but also placed an unquestionable expectation that children had a duty to protect the family’s honor.

Several of my interviewees pointed out that coming from a resistance family was an important factor in their decision to take up arms. For example, Hồng’s father had previously supported guerrillas in the war of the Việt Minh against the French. They continued to secretly work with the NLF guerrillas in their struggle against the American forces, even as the GVN regime continued to persecute communist supporters:

Back then, I was small, but I saw that my father left home early and came back very late; my mother worked very hard to feed my several brothers and sisters. I was small, but I worked with my mother. She didn’t know where my father was, she thought he cheated on her or was having fun somewhere—it was all done in secret, he didn’t dare to tell her. But after, in ‘63, it was a boom, and revolution came to my house. All those people came to hide in my place. Then, my mother started participating, too....Basically, my family interacted with almost everyone at the war zone. We fed and let them sleep, we hid them.

Already, we can see the idea of family as a political space manifesting in Hồng’s story: from a young age, she was exposed to and interacted with guerrillas, thus bringing the war closer to her. As she grew up, she started to reflect on her background and her future: “Those activities made me think about my father’s activities. I was a child of a family like that, with parents like that—how should I behave?” Her thought process demonstrates that children did not passively accept their parents’ traditions but imbued them with their own thoughts with regard to what they felt was appropriate given their family background.

PIETY AND PATRIOTISM

Children’s aspirations to follow in their parents’ footsteps and participate in the military struggle fit with earlier observations of how important parent-

child relationships are in Vietnam. For example, Neil Jamieson observes that “the parent-child relationship [is] the core of Vietnamese culture, dominating everything else.”⁴³ This section explores another manifestation of filial piety in the experience of my interviewees and the tensions arising from the many different messages about what made a good child.

Writing on the subject of filial piety in Vietnam, Merav Shohet emphasizes that the value of filial piety is upward-directed, taught to children before they can speak—although it is by no means the only form of care and love in Vietnamese families.⁴⁴ Throughout social upheaval and changes in economic and political environments in Vietnam, Shohet further argues, family members continue to exercise various forms of familial love and care, such that “people’s lives are not all their own.”⁴⁵ The specific expressions of filial piety are many, including obedience;⁴⁶ acts of care, respect, and nurturing;⁴⁷ as well as “properly performing funeral rituals and worship for deceased parents.”⁴⁸ Of particular relevance here is a summation offered by Elisabeth J. Croll that “the concept of filial support has less to do with piety, obedience or duty and more to do with support, service and care.”⁴⁹

On the surface, many children I interviewed defied the core tenets of filial piety: some ran away from home, lied to their parents, and sometimes explicitly went against their parents’ wishes in order to join the guerrillas. In many instances, parents did not believe their children were capable of withstanding the hardships of war, often citing their physical weaknesses as a potential source of difficulties. This led to arguments between parents and children. For example, the father of one interviewee, Sang, tried to discourage Sang from joining the Youth Shock Brigades by describing the hardships of manual labor. Sang’s father insisted: “With your strength, and your personality, you will not be able to do it. And once you go and aren’t able to do it, you will come back. And if you come back, I will not take you back.” Another one of my interviewees, Minh, who joined the guerrillas at age 14, remembered his mother being sure that he would die and crying when she found out that he decided to join the NLF. In both situations, the two former child soldiers went to great lengths to argue with their parents. Minh’s strategy was to tell his mother “not to be silly” and “act more adult.” He used various arguments to persuade her, saying that the family knew many people who had joined the political struggle at an even younger age than he.

On the other hand, Sang told his father not to worry and to trust that he would not return without finishing his mission, to which his father agreed. At the time, Sang was about 16 years old.

Yet, while seemingly unfilial on the surface, many of the children's actions were still guided by their loyalty to parents and filial piety. Outside of the militarized environment, filial piety would most likely manifest in children participating in labor. Rachel Burr points out, for example, that child labor is one of the ways in which children fulfilled their desire of being a "good child."⁵⁰ In other cases, children were socialized to study well and do their household chores. As their everyday lives became permeated with ongoing war, however, it brought a new expectation for a "good child" to carry out: to participate in the military struggle, with the specific goal of protecting one's family.

Hùng, for example, grew up in South Vietnam, where the US-backed regime was persecuting guerrillas and actively conducting anti-insurgency campaigns. He first started his guerrilla activities by helping his father, a full-time guerrilla, with small tasks—digging tunnels to shelter other fighters, taking down leaflets disseminated by the GVN, and covering mines with banana leaves so the GVN metal detectors wouldn't find them. He recounted:

It starts with your dissatisfaction, with your frustration. It was a natural instinct. Suddenly there's someone disturbing your home, burning it. And you are very angry. There's nothing about patriotism—you wouldn't know anything at that age....No one knew what communism was. Only that America came. So, they wanted to stop them, whoever was frustrated, whoever was able to do it.

Home [*nhà*], here, can be read in two ways: as the immediate home where Hùng lived with his family and as a symbol for the wider nation. This was further reflected in the nature of the work Hùng ended up performing for guerrillas later. Hùng's early "missions" were not proper missions but rather small favors he volunteered to do for his father first, and then later for his guerrilla uncle, because, as a family member, he wanted to help. These missions started out as small errands, such as stealing guns, grenades, and food from American bases. As Hùng explained, this was "no problem, easy, it's just a favor for the uncle."

While not the main focus of this paper, it is important to note that for many children, the duty to protect extended beyond their parents. Particularly relevant here is the story of Đức, who grew up in an area that experienced a particularly large number of insurgency and counterinsurgency operations. As a result, his childhood was already thoroughly affected by the ongoing war. He remembered hiding in tunnels dug by his family whenever there were particularly disruptive attacks, studying there at night with only an oil lamp to provide light. The next day, his and his siblings' snout was black due to inhaling oil fumes. He remembered seeing not only his parents, but also his neighbors, living in constant fear of their lives; at 14, he made the decision to join the guerrillas and act as a spy. When I asked him about his motivations, he stated:

There was nothing [in my motivations] about communism or patriotism. At that age, you don't know these things yet...But you saw that that person, and that person, was suffering. It made your heart angry, and you wanted to stop it.

This sentiment is very similar to that of Hùng: both boys were motivated to take up arms because they perceived it to be the best way to protect their homes from being disturbed. For many children, then, participating in the military struggle did not entail a complete disruption of what they believed was normal. On the contrary, it was in line with values that were already familiar to them—collectivism, contributing to the lives of their families, and placing their families' needs above their own. It is not surprising, then, that in an environment where children were expected to be a part of the collective—and carry out the necessary responsibilities that come with that membership—protecting one's family was at the forefront of the minds of many children who ended up joining the guerrillas.

Filial piety and expectations for children to participate in politics—to continue a tradition established by their revolutionary family—ultimately intertwined. The accounts of my interviewees indicate, however, that children did not passively accept these presumptions, but they processed, navigated, and fused them with their own desires and understandings of their social environment. Particularly illustrative here is the case of Linh. When I asked her to describe her childhood at the beginning of our interview, she immediately identified herself as a daughter of a resistance family. Her father

was a guerrilla who died in a battle when she was young; her brother, following in her father's footsteps, quit studying at age 15 and volunteered to join the guerrillas. Unlike her father and brother, she—only 12 years old at the time—was evacuated with her mother to a nearby village and continued studying. When a branch of the Youth Shock Brigades arrived at her village, she thought that this was an opportunity to join the military struggle.

Joining the Youth Shock Brigades was not an easy decision; in deliberating whether she should go, Linh tried to decide between the contradictory desires of being a good daughter and being a good daughter of a *resistance family*. If Linh left, she would leave her mother alone, since Linh's father was dead, and her brother was in the military. If she stayed, she felt that she would not be able to fulfill her role as a child of a family in which supporting the revolution is a tradition. In the end, she decided that since the opportunity came to her (the Youth Shock Brigades coming to her village), she wanted to make use of that opportunity. Instead of directly arguing with her mother, like some of my other interviewees, she chose to leave in secret. She told me:

While I wrote, I still didn't let my mother know that I was going. The night before leaving, I remember lying in bed and crying. My mother asked, "Why are you crying?" I said, "The province chose me to go study cultural education for women and children for ten days at the town school." She asked, "It's only ten days, why cry? When you marry, are you going to cry too?" So that [not letting my mother know] was easy.

The next day, December 22, the local branch of the Youth Shock Brigades met me. I volunteered on one condition: no one could let my mother know where I went. I was there for about four to five days when my mother found out. She went up to the base and called for me. But I was afraid that if I met my mother, my determination would disappear. So, I hid among the squad members. We wore uniforms, rubber sandals, and caps, so she couldn't see who her daughter was. She searched for me for four or five days; she couldn't find me, cried, and left.

On the surface, Linh running away and leaving her mother alone could be read as an unfilial act. Yet her story also reveals careful navigation of the many, sometimes contradictory, ways to be a good daughter. Awareness and sympathy for her mother's feelings, and her ultimate choice to participate in

the struggle, were strongly guided by her love for her family. While not the primary theme of this article, it is also important to highlight that throughout Linh's time with the guerrillas—and the hardships that the war brought to her—it was her thoughts of maintaining her family's tradition that kept her going and stopped her from deserting.

Family in Vietnam: Militarization and Change

As the findings from my interviews show, the motivations of many former Vietnamese child soldiers can be linked to the notion of filial piety and to a highly militarized family life. Much of these findings are in line with earlier research and discussions on Vietnamese family relationships and, more specifically, historical records about Vietnamese parent-child relationships. The importance of the nuclear family has been maintained since at least the Lê dynasty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the parent-child relationship was close throughout children's lives.⁵¹ From early childhood, the Vietnamese child would be taught to “readily forget himself for the sake of his family's welfare.”⁵² Not caring about one's relatives has been considered one of the biggest sins.⁵³ It would also mean that children's primary loyalties lay with their families, even if they sometimes went against the wider morality imposed by the state—for example, engaging in child labor went against the law, but by working, children fulfilled their obligations toward family.⁵⁴ In discussing the place of children within the family, Phạm Văn Bích goes as far as to say that in Vietnam, there is “no individual in the Western sense, and certainly no free individual,”⁵⁵ precisely because people are never completely free from their family and community. He writes further:

[W]hile the *raison d'être* of the Western family may be to produce and support the individual, whose maturity will signal the attainment of its objective, in the Vietnamese family the *raison d'être* of each individual member [is] to continue, maintain, and serve the family.⁵⁶

While the responses of my interviewees can be linked to filial piety and loyalty to the family, an additional context is necessary to understand their motivations. Children were working, socializing, and living in an ever-changing political and social context that affected social relations, including

filial piety. This is often the case with intimate and familial relations, with the specific form of these relations being significantly impacted by ideology and political organization.⁵⁷ Understanding how ideology influences different forms of intimacy, including familial relations, can provide crucial explanations of why people support and join rebellions, how political mobilization is sustained, and how it declines.⁵⁸ Filial devotion is not an exception to these changes. It can be modified and transformed; participating in the family's economic life, caring for one's parents, and not leaving home while parents are still alive were not the only manifestations of filial piety, especially in the context of the ongoing Vietnam War. The malleability of filial piety and family loyalty has indeed been shown by scholars such as Vanessa Fong, who describes how transnational Chinese students translated affective parent-child relations to expressions of filial piety to the nation, a phenomenon she calls "filial nationalism."⁵⁹ As I will describe below, very similar shifts occurred in the perception of filial piety of Vietnamese peasant children.

In rural areas, many of which were hotbeds of ideological and political struggles, guerrillas not only built on existing values of family relations but also provided a specific ideological perspective for peasants to interpret them. The NLF, being a peasant-led movement, was notable for its sensitivity to Vietnamese peasant traditions, as well as the ability to draw from the values and traditions of the existing social order to mobilize the masses.⁶⁰ Part of its conduct was the "three together" with civilians: eating, living, and working together. NLF cadres treated members of the lowest social class as equals, which was well-received by the masses.⁶¹ Living in proximity, wearing the same clothes, behaving politely, and helping with farmers' tasks also meant that members of the NLF were able to understand not only the peasants' economic hardships and political grievances but also their existing social practices. These, in turn, were used in the guerrillas' recruitment messaging and tactics. For example, as I mentioned earlier, the NLF often sent family members to encourage potential recruits to join the group, thus utilizing family loyalty as a tool for enlistment. By contrast, the GVN's presence was associated with distant officials, raids, and assaults. Although the targets of counterinsurgency missions were specifically guerrillas, the missions often turned into attacks on entire villages and massacres of civilians: many American soldiers were instructed to approach the entire village

as an enemy target.⁶² It was not rare for the United States to burn villages that were suspected of shielding guerillas. In turn, this meant that civilians could be forced to flee their ancestral villages at any time—a tragic event in a culture that places great importance on honoring ancestors and expressing loyalty to home villages.⁶³ Frequent raids, village sweeps, and bombings resulted in a deteriorating relationship between Vietnamese villagers and US troops.

The NLF freely borrowed common values in Vietnamese society, most often those of Confucianism, and reinterpreted them to fit the narrative of the liberation effort. The same principles of family loyalty and filial piety that characterized family life in Vietnam were extensively used in the context of the revolution. For example, the guerrilla group articulated the concept of “loyal to country, filial to people” [*trung với nước, hiếu với dân*]—a transformation of the older Confucian principle “loyal to the emperor, filial to parents.”⁶⁴ In serving the revolution, a cadre liberated the people, including their parents—this, in the eyes of the guerillas, was the true fulfillment of filial piety. Failure to do so would mean failing the people and failing one’s parents.⁶⁵ This also allowed for the justification to leave one’s family—as from a Confucian perspective, going away while parents are still alive is one of the biggest breaches of filial piety. An earlier reincarnation of the NLF—the Việt Minh, a guerrilla group established to resist the French forces—articulated the combination of filial piety and revolutionary activity as follows: “[I]f you fulfill your duty toward your country, then by the same act you will have completed your duty toward your family, because they will be free and no longer exploited.”⁶⁶

Deliberate efforts from the NLF, then, linked Vietnamese conceptions of family to symbols of national liberation. For example, print materials from the Vietnam War established a “firm connection” between Hồ Chí Minh and children.⁶⁷ By referring to him as “Uncle Hồ,” children included him in their family; he then became a constant part of their growing up. Uncle Hồ was presented to them as a person they should love in the same way they loved their biological parents—and in loving him, they also loved the more abstract notions he stood for: the goals of unifying the country and building socialism. As such, children internalized this sentiment. Olga Dror writes, “for them, it was a genuine feeling of love maintained and transmitted from

one generation to the next, and it generated a persevering loyalty to and compliance with the state and its causes.”⁶⁸ Dror concludes that “love was an important part of bringing to adulthood a new generation of fighters.”⁶⁹ The NLF was not innovative in its reframing of family ties in the context of military struggle (for example, see the case of Phan Đình Phùng outlined earlier), but the mobilization of such imagery nevertheless highlights the NLF’s understanding of these values and history, which would already be familiar to most Vietnamese peasants.

Enlistment in the NLF similarly widened the notion of family, “liberating” a cadre from their “old” family and providing a surrogate family. One propaganda manual stated that “the army is one happy family.”⁷⁰ Political cadres presented themselves as fathers of the Vietnamese nation, while the younger recruits were presented as their children. The relationship was then organized accordingly, with the cadres in higher positions expecting loyalty and respect from the recruits.⁷¹ Once their loyalty shifted from the family to the guerrilla group, recruits would accept the words of their guerrilla leaders as they would those of their parents.⁷²

Vietnamese peasant children in the twentieth century, then, grew up in an environment where filial piety was a core virtue, where they were socialized from an early age to be loyal to their families—particularly to their parents—and to put their families’ interests above their own. With the arrival of guerrillas, the importance of family remained but was transformed to fit a militarized reality. Where filial piety would normally manifest as child labor or helping with household chores, it now appeared as participation in the revolution. Guerrillas reframed participation in the struggle as protection of one’s family, therefore as fulfilling one’s duties as a member of the community. As a result, many of my interviewees cited their desire to protect their family, or to continue their family’s tradition and political socialization, as a reason to take up arms. These findings, in turn, demonstrate the ways in which concepts of filial piety gained new meanings and new interpretations in children’s everyday lives.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed how filial piety and loyalty to parents predisposed children to join the NLF and the Youth Shock Brigades. My findings add

empirical insights to earlier scholars' observations that Vietnamese insurgents transformed familial loyalties into political allegiance.⁷³ However, these findings also have theoretical implications. One important factor to consider in the case of Vietnamese child soldiers is that much of their socialization was facilitated by deliberate and systematic social engineering carried out by the NLF. Filial piety, *by itself*, does not necessarily lead to participating in war. However, the NLF conducted culturally sensitive propaganda campaigns, targeted family members as channels of recruitment, and appropriated familiar values related to family to fit the context of their cause. It is not a surprise, then, that many children considered taking up arms to be a viable option. The NLF's propaganda methods can be further traced back to the specifics of communist ideology and social practices: like many other Maoist-inspired movements, the NLF guerrillas made a point of living next to peasants, treating them equally, and perhaps most importantly, understanding their values, traditions, and grievances. By contrast, the forces deployed by the GVN failed to behave in a similar way, maintaining only distant, sometimes hostile, relationships with peasants. My findings highlight the importance of analyzing and detecting not only the social ties of insurgents but also the social context surrounding them—specifically, how the ongoing war transforms and interacts with wider society. The guerrillas, understanding the importance and centrality of family in Vietnamese society (a value that was present long before the guerrilla group emerged), were able to mobilize these values to encourage recruitment. It is this understanding that played no small part in their eventual victory.

Overall, these findings uncover and invite further inquiry into how Vietnamese children, who have only recently started being conceptualized as a distinct site of knowledge in Western scholarship on the Vietnam War, navigated and were simultaneously constrained by the fusing of political ideology with the existing societal practice of filial piety. On a broader level, these insights contribute to the literature that emphasizes social environment as an important factor in mobilizing and sustaining the NLF insurgency. Given its empirical prominence, the role of social ties (family, kinship, and friendship) provides fruitful grounds for further research to understand the societal dynamics underlying the NLF struggle against the United States and the US-backed GVN—specifically, how politics, intimacy, mutual

loyalties, and affection, familial and otherwise, intertwined with and shaped the course of the war.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores two ways in which family, specifically parents, predisposed Vietnamese children to join the National Liberation Front. Firstly, I found that family often socialized children into a certain political orientation, and children were expected to uphold their parents' honor as revolutionaries. Filial piety and desire to protect one's family played an important role in motivating Vietnamese children to take up arms. The findings presented by this article emphasize that family can be a space where politics and affection intertwine, thereby becoming an important motivator in mobilizing potential insurgents.

KEYWORDS: *Vietnam War, child soldiers, National Liberation Front, Youth Shock Brigades*

Notes

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Interview List

- Interview with Tuấn, August 24, 2019, Hồ Chí Minh City. Enlisted at age 16 in the NLF.
- Interview with Sang, August 17, 2019, Nam Định. Enlisted at age 15 in the Youth Shock Brigades.
- Interview with Linh, July 24, 2016, Quảng Ngãi. Enlisted at age 16 in the Youth Shock Brigades.
- Interview with Minh, August 11, 2019, Hà Nội. Enlisted at age 14 in the Youth Shock Brigades.
- Interview with Đức, August 24, 2019, Hồ Chí Minh City. Enlisted at age 14 in the NLF.
- Interview with Kim, July 23, 2016, Quảng Ngãi. Enlisted at age 13 in the NLF.
- Interview with Hồng, July 24, 2016, Quảng Ngãi. Enlisted at age 16 in the NLF.
- Interview with Hùng, August 25, 2019, Hồ Chí Minh City. Did not formally enlist; started to help the NLF with errands such as stealing weapons, gathering intelligence, digging tunnels, covering mines from when he was "three or four years old."