



"A Simple Exam to Guarantee the Future": Promoting a "new life" (*cuộc sống mới*) by preventing HIV transmission from mother to fetus. Photo by Christina Schwenkel

Rendering Infant Abandonment Technical and Moral: Expertise, Neoliberal Logics, and Class Differentiation in Ho Chi Minh City

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Over the past several decades, transnational adoption of Vietnamese children has developed from a response to war into a routine option for foreigners trying to build families. This article explores how the logics that have emerged within Vietnam to make sense of the transnational movement of children reflect both broader neoliberal ideologies of family and selfhood and market socialist anxieties about class differentiation. Central to narratives about transnational adoption is the pitied and demonized figure of the mother who anonymously abandons her infant. In Ho Chi Minh City over the past decade, child welfare professionals, the media, and casual observers have explained rising adoption rates as due to the desperation, ignorance, or emotional inadequacies of poor, rural single mothers who abandon (*bỏ rơi*) their children. Other accounts, particularly in the media, highlight the ruthless depravity of the traffickers who prey on such women.

Claims about parental unfitness or unscrupulous traffickers reflect a growing tendency in Vietnam to explain increasing class differences in terms of individual issues of morality, education, and “cultural level” (*trình độ văn hóa*).¹ Such narratives appear to correspond to the logics of neoliberal visions of the self-surveilling, self-disciplined citizen-subject who has internalized the standards of behavior promoted by governing regimes that in turn celebrate the market as the domain in which most dilemmas of social and political life should be settled.² Building on Michel Foucault’s and Nikolas Rose’s theories of governmentality, Tania Murray Li argues that contemporary states seek to govern populations by improving them: “educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations, and beliefs.”³ Key to this “will to improve” is what she terms the process of “rendering technical,” in which a problem such as rural underdevelopment is defined as a technical matter to be solved through the application of scientific expertise, rather than as a political issue to be corrected through, for example, reallocation of land and resources.⁴

Although rendering technical may seem to depoliticize problems by claiming rational, objective knowledge as an absolute, it is hardly value neutral. The educated, motivated, rational decision maker to be developed through the application of technologies of self is not simply an efficient economic actor but a morally laudatory role model. As Michael Blim notes, “If [people] can do something for themselves, a greater moral dignity is attached to them and some change in their character is inferred.”⁵ Rendering technical succeeds by convincingly rendering its target moral.

The narratives through which social workers, the media, and casual observers in Ho Chi Minh City define and propose solutions to the problem of infant abandonment exemplify this relationship between rendering technical and rendering moral: the form of personhood that is supposed to result from technical interventions—a maternal subject who, for instance, recognizes that childbearing and child rearing require particular family configurations, material resources, and forms of knowledge and can rationally assess her own fitness accordingly—becomes the solution because it is persuasively asserted to be morally correct. This moral dimension is crucial in domains of life that are already saturated with values, such as the family relationships and conceptions of parenthood examined here.

Andrew Kipnis has recently observed, however, that ascribing the spread of particular notions of personhood or technologies of self-improvement and assessment to a global neoliberal advance elides important differences of ethnographic context and history.⁶ This is particularly important when considering late socialist environments where neoliberalism operates as much through exception as through normalization.⁷ Rather than debate the extent to which Vietnam is neoliberal, I interpret these concerns as a call to be precise in tracking supposedly neoliberal behaviors and logics and to be as attentive to their points of continuity as to their novelty. Self-monitoring, for example, is a cornerstone of socialist assessment and personhood in service of national developmentalist goals. Self-mastery has even deeper roots in Confucian moral codes, and these also position the family as a microcosm of ideal social order.⁸ Investing financial, educational, and emotional resources to form an individual capable of behaving effectively and efficiently in a market environment may be a neoliberal idea, but its appeal to certain segments of the Vietnamese population and the elaboration of particular family configurations and moral values as the best means to achieve this idealized personhood also reflect compelling, preexisting moral discourses about motherhood, personhood, and political economy.

Narratives about infant abandonment reveal a further dimension of socialism's ongoing significance to southern, middle-class urbanites: their anxiety about emerging class inequality and consequent hunger for logics that render it technical (a problem to be solved through scientific models promoting economic growth) and moral (the prosperous deserve their comfortable status). Writing on this dilemma in China, Carolyn Hsu has observed that class formation is as much a narrative, moral process as a structural, economic one.⁹ Official and popular moralizing logics praise or condemn specific kinds of subject positions and justify as natural an emerging system of differentiation with unequal access to resources and wealth. The task for anthropologists then becomes to track how, in Stacey Pigg's words, "these ideologies frame social difference and how certain ways of imagining social difference come to be associated with specific social positions or identities."¹⁰

Why might neoliberal technical and moral renderings of the family in general and motherhood in particular appeal to southern Vietnamese

middle-class urbanites in the first decade of the twenty-first century? And what consequences do these constructions have? Following a brief discussion of why the government since the early 1990s has promoted particular models of the family as part of the market socialist policies known as *Đổi mới* (Renovation), I consider the context in which the particular figure of the anonymously abandoning mother and the circumstance of transnational adoption more generally have attracted popular attention as “monster stories.”¹¹ I then analyze several types of narratives that have emerged to explain the monstrous mother, the trafficker who exploits her, and the transnational adoption that has arisen in response to her act, as presented by social workers, the media, and casual observers. At least as important as the bad actors such narratives construct and condemn is how articulating them serves to establish the subject position of the narrator. Through identifying particular kinds of classed, gendered, and localized subjects as unfit parents or unsavory market actors in need of particular kinds of reform, urban middle-class narrators implicitly justify and naturalize their own relative economic, social, and geographical privilege in terms of a moral worth and respectability that their class others lack.

Finally, I consider the testimony of one so-called anonymously abandoning birth mother. Although not necessarily representative of birth mothers in general, this woman’s eloquent narrative advances an alternative moral rendering of abandonment as resulting not from individual defect but from structural political and economic violence against vulnerable women and children. Her claim merges expertise about child psychological development with a liberal appeal to universal human rights and a socialist-inflected critique of socioeconomic inequality.

In making sense of these narratives, I am not primarily concerned with whether they are factually accurate accounts of why infant abandonment occurs. There are elements of the mothers’ and children’s purported histories that are unlikely. There are also competing and credible interpretations of traffickers’ behavior that render them not as moral degenerates but as fixers helping out women in trouble. As interesting as it may be to sort out these competing tales, what concerns me in this article is why particular kinds of stories about anonymously abandoning birth mothers and traffick-

ers have come to be seen as credible and accurate by adoption workers, officials, the media, and the broader public; what counter-narratives might be more quietly voiced; and what these developments reveal about the connection between neoliberal expertise, morality, and biological and social reproduction in a market socialist environment of increasing class differentiation.

Rendering Reproduction Technical and Moral

A significant outcome of market-oriented policies in Vietnam and the concern with values that they have prompted has been increased official and popular focus on issues of reproduction — social, cultural, and biological — as well as on appropriate forms of femininity. As Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp have noted, anxieties about maternity, reproduction, and the fate of the next generation can prove diagnostic of broader social and cultural issues.¹² A preoccupation with motherhood is also consistent with scholarship elsewhere that explores the centrality of respectable, appropriate femininity to defining the contours of emergent middle classness.¹³

In Vietnam, family has figured most obviously in government campaigns to promote economic development through birth control and birth planning. Calls in the 1980s and 1990s to limit births to one or two children promised that this would make the people rich and the country strong (*dân giàu nước mạnh*). As with similar campaigns in China, programs to promote birth planning seemed to celebrate “population” as a quantifiable unit that could be scientifically measured and managed.¹⁴ At the same time, actual implementation of the One Child Policy focused less on the technical aspects of reduced population growth and more on its cultural and moral desirability. Parents were urged to have fewer children so that they could invest resources in enhancing each child’s quality (*suzhi*). This new generation could then better advance nationalist goals of economic growth and modernity.¹⁵

Family planning propaganda in Vietnam similarly focuses on moral claims about why families should elect to bear fewer children. The planned family is not simply small, but “happy” (*hạnh phúc*) and “cultured” (*văn hóa*). Through these images, birth planning was grafted onto an earlier move-

ment, begun in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (northern Vietnam) in 1962 to develop a “Cultured Family” (*Gia đình Văn hóa*) that would support agricultural collectivization by performing collective labor, practicing good hygiene, and conforming to party policies.¹⁶

In recent decades, the Cultured Family campaign has deemphasized political, economic, or biological goals in favor of an emotional and social response to the challenges of a market economy. Family planning, although still important, has been superseded by calls for families to be harmonious, happy, and actively engaged in relations with neighbors.¹⁷ Red banners draped over streets testify that particular alleyways and neighborhoods have successfully attained quotas for the number of families certified as “cultured.” The campaign has also come to focus more squarely on the figure of the mother. Ubiquitous billboards, pamphlets, educational programming, and contests sponsored by mass organizations such as the Women’s Union celebrate the modern Vietnamese woman as a middle-class mother able to care for the physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being of her husband and children.¹⁸ Mothers are urged to maintain the home as a cozy nest that will protect the family from the more negative consequences of globalization and commodification.

Although the Vietnamese campaigns present visions of the ideal family, the kind of quality they promote differs from that emphasized by *suzhi* in China. As described by several scholars, *suzhi* largely refers to a project of cultivating individual quality through projects of socialization and education.¹⁹ Families provide the resources to support children in this process. In Vietnam, the unit to be cultivated is the family itself. Lisa Drummond notes that this is a departure from the earliest mobilization campaigns, first promoted by Hồ Chí Minh in the 1940s, which heralded a New Way of Life with a New Socialist Person who would be directly loyal to the party and collective, as opposed to the family.²⁰ By the 1980s, however, the focus of state mobilization campaigns turned to the family, with little talk of a new person, socialist or otherwise. Several factors help to explain this emphasis on the family: (1) a postwar recovery that led to a focus on regeneration, reproduction, and a celebration of motherhood;²¹ (2) a nationalist assertion of the centrality of the family to Vietnamese culture;²² and (3) the declara-

tion in the 1980s, as part of market-oriented economic policies, of the family as the basic unit of economic production.

The Cultured Family campaign has rendered the family a technical unit to be developed in particular ways in service of national development goals. But it has done so by turning the family into a moral project requiring constant vigilance and improvement of its members, particularly mothers. Bookstores offer manuals on child development and family relationships, newly prosperous middle-class parents worry that their children will be seduced by the pleasures of an urban market economy, and advice columns counsel women in the subtleties of companionate marriage and sexual techniques.²³ Melissa Pashigian argues that these depictions of the happy family have made maternity even more central to women's notions of proper, modern adulthood.²⁴ As a result, they have problematized failure to reproduce, prompting many women to invest extensive time and effort in fertility treatments in order to achieve biological motherhood.

Equally striking has been a growing tendency to evaluate certain forms of reproduction as inappropriate or unconscionable—the image of the unhappy or uncultured family that makes the ideal legible. Over the past decade, there has been a proliferation of media stories of bad parents who abuse, neglect, or show utter disregard for their children. These form a corpus of cautionary tales, similar in tone to the “monster stories” that Anna Tsing argues arose as the US public in the 1980s became outraged over an apparent epidemic of women who gave birth alone without medical assistance and whose children subsequently died.²⁵ Tsing suggests that these monster stories became meaningful because they constructed an explanation of the women's behavior in ways that reflected anxieties about “the female” in US society.

In Vietnam, anxieties about family, economics, and morality have similarly fueled a preoccupation with monster stories. Monstrous mothers can come in a variety of forms, but in 2007 one figure in particular captured popular attention: mothers who, in alarmingly increasing numbers, anonymously abandoned their infants, many of whom ultimately were adopted by foreigners. The monstrous abandoning mother crystallized preoccupations about the role of biology, economics, and morality in parenting, as she

served to remind the public that a poor woman can be so morally bankrupt that she cannot fulfill the basic feminine obligation to care for the infant she has biologically produced. Although she may have appeared almost scripted to deliver this message, concrete circumstances, particularly surrounding the always-charged relationship between the United States and Vietnam, made this monster available as an object of moral panic at a particular moment.

Prelude to a Moral Panic

Media stories about abandoned infants and their mothers appeared with increasing frequency in late 2007, just as a bilateral agreement on adoption between the United States and Vietnam was due to expire. It seemed unlikely that the two governments would be able to sign a new memorandum of understanding. These predictions proved correct. A moratorium on adoption began on September 1, 2008, and, as of this writing, continues to be in effect.

What captured the attention of the media and public in Vietnam was not so much the impending cessation of adoption with the United States *per se*, but the allegations about infant abandonment that had produced the diplomatic impasse. The embassy of the United States in Vietnam reported that 85–90 percent of the Vietnamese children for whom US adoptive parents were requesting immigration visas had been documented as anonymously abandoned.²⁶ It had reason to doubt these figures. In 2003, prior to a nearly three-year suspension of adoption between the United States and Vietnam, only 20 percent of children were anonymously abandoned.²⁷ The remaining 80 percent had known birth mothers who had signed relinquishment papers. Although some of those papers were later discovered to be forgeries, the dramatic shift in the behavior of birth mothers that these statistics suggested did not seem plausible. What's more, Vietnam did not have a history of anonymous abandonment. In 1975, as southern orphanages were filling up, one Catholic nun reported that of the seventy or so children in her orphanage at any given time, only three or four had no known family.²⁸ That was at the height of the disruption caused by war. Orphanages have often been used as temporary placement centers for children whose parents cannot care for them, but the hope has been that families can reclaim

them at a later point. Anonymous abandonment is rare. The situation in 2007–2008 therefore suggested that the personal histories of a large number of babies were being erased, either to make the adoption process easier or to conceal illegal or unethical practices surrounding it.

Almost as quickly as the anonymously abandoned infant was rendered a blank slate, a new story was created to explain its origins. The dominant origin story switched its focus from the infant to the birth mother. Birth mothers were said to abandon children in large numbers at maternity hospitals or some other anonymous spots. For example, in 2005 Tũ Dũ Hospital in Saigon reported 308 anonymous abandonments.²⁹ The common story was that a young single woman would register under a false name, give birth, and then leave the baby there a few days later, sometimes without paying the hospital bill because she could not afford it. Other accounts described more risky abandonments along the side of the road or in a garbage can.

Abandoning mothers are typically described as extremely poor, uneducated, young, and unmarried. Some may be migrant workers in industrial zones where they have the opportunity to engage in sexual relations but little family support to deal with the consequences. Within these nearly universally agreed-upon qualities, however, exactly who the birth mother might be, why she cannot parent her child, and the broader implications of this situation vary in ways that reflect and participate in establishing the subject position of the speaker. I now turn to some of these different perspectives.

Vietnamese Social Workers: Narrating Expertise

As professionals entrusted with child and family welfare, Vietnamese social workers have been centrally involved in orphanages and adoption. Not surprisingly, the social workers with whom I spoke have strong opinions about the rise in reported infant abandonment and the impending moratorium. Their position as experts, however, is tenuous. Social work in Vietnam originated under French colonialism, through training and charitable work by organizations such as Caritas.³⁰ A popular profession for women in the southern part of the country during the war, social work was discredited in the decade following 1975 by a victorious socialist regime that ascribed the problems of families and children to capitalist inequality. According to this

logic, the dysfunctions addressed by social workers would disappear once society had been restructured to permit equal collective access to the means of production.

In the wake of market-oriented economic reforms (1986–present), Vietnamese officials have recast family problems as individual moral concerns. The field of social work has thus reemerged as a means of addressing these issues, including through the care and placement of abandoned children. By 2010, more than thirty universities had established programs in social work. In October 2008, Caritas resumed operations in Vietnam after a thirty-two-year hiatus.

Social workers' access to international discourses of adoption, family, and children's rights allows them to construct stories about adoptees and birth families valorized by an authoritative system of knowledge—something that their still tenuous position within Vietnam might make them particularly motivated to do. At the same time, the social workers I know also see themselves as charged with representing the best interests of the child. This can lead, on the one hand, to a sense that a foreign parent with economic and emotional resources may be the best solution for a particular child, and, on the other hand, to ambivalence about the long-term desirability of transnational adoption.

One social worker I know was trained in community development in southern Vietnam prior to 1975. Forced to abandon the occupation after the collapse of the southern regime, she resumed her work in the early 1990s. A few years ago, a US nongovernmental organization (NGO) asked her to help them with international adoptions. As we spoke in January 2008 about the moratorium, she lamented the conditions that were leading an apparently increasing number of Vietnamese mothers to abandon their children: "The mothers are extremely poor. There's no father, the mothers are very young. Maybe the mothers don't want to be pregnant, so they don't take care of themselves The result is that the babies are underweight, they're so very tiny." It takes money and time to get the infants healthy, she told me, so it is understandable why such a mother would get scared and run away.

Social workers described abandoning mothers as desperate enough to do such a thing because they come from poor families, often in rural areas, and are young and single. They are also commonly characterized as igno-

rant and hence not fully cognizant of the consequences of their actions. I repeatedly heard claims such as this one, offered by another social worker: “It’s not like in the US where a mother might agonize and plan to give her child up. The mothers having these babies in Vietnam have a lower level of understanding, of education. They don’t even realize they’re pregnant until it’s four or five months and it’s too late to have an abortion.”

Characterizations about poverty and lack of access to birth control often slide into more general claims about knowledge or character. A woman who runs a shelter for single pregnant women summed it up: “They lack culture, their educational level isn’t high.” The mothers who give up their children generally have “problems with their minds.”

Some of the social workers I know saw the situation as more complicated. While they were concerned about children being mistreated or trafficked, one doubted US embassy allegations of baby smuggling or stealing. “It’s like this,” she told me:

A mother gives birth and is poor, the child is underweight, another person comes and sells the child by acting as a middle agent, maybe for four or five million đồng [US\$250–\$310 at the time], takes the child and promises to get it across the border [into another province], and then to an organization. If the mother had money, she wouldn’t give up the child. But if you go find the family, you’ll see how hard their lives are. The child was small, maybe a kilo or two, how could they take care of it?

While she was clear that she did not condone the practice, she rejected the easy moral condemnation of those who transfer children as wicked reprobrates interested only in money. Instead, they help those who are desperate and receive a modest sum for doing so. She also suggested that when these situations come to light, the birth mother is likely to defend herself by feigning ignorance that the child was to be placed permanently for adoption abroad.

Another social worker pointed out that not much attention is paid to how Western agencies might be complicit in pressuring orphanages to get more children for their clients. A supply-and-demand situation has developed, with many more foreign parents who want to adopt than there are babies available. Agencies compete in trying to find children. At times, foreign

agencies exert direct pressure through donations, gifts, or bribes to orphanages. At other times, they simply ask if there is any way they can get more children.

This results in an increased movement of babies into state-run orphanages that are licensed to release children for permanent international adoption. This is a change from earlier patterns in Vietnam in which children might be placed in an orphanage, perhaps run by Buddhists or Catholics, or with another family for a short period of time when a family faced a temporary crisis in finances or circumstances. Parents might reclaim a child when the situation improved. That happens today, but much more rarely, according to social workers and orphanage personnel in Ho Chi Minh City. Instead, there is pressure to get those children quickly declared orphans or abandoned under the terms of the Hague Convention. Some social workers, for example, question why a hospital such as Ho Chi Minh City's Từ Dũ might have such high abandonment rates and argue that unscrupulous medical staff inflate the prices for obstetrical services and refuse to relinquish the child if the mother cannot pay. The implication is that staff members receive a finder's fee from an orphanage or agency.

Although social workers condemned the financial incentives that might compel unscrupulous officials to hasten a child's placement for international adoption, they also asserted that in many cases, foreign parents were better positioned financially and emotionally to care for a child. I had expected ambivalence about these prospective foreign parents, but instead I only heard praise for their capacity to love and sympathy for what social workers saw as a naïveté born of privilege. One social worker recalled a sickly infant abandoned by the side of the road and was surprised by how quickly its foreign parents embraced it. "It was so ugly, but they liked it," she laughed. Another social worker had occasion to visit with adoptive families in the United States. She said that US citizens described adopted Vietnamese children as well behaved, dutiful toward their parents, and studious. She was happy to hear these descriptions and recalled feeling proud as a Vietnamese, but she was also confused. How could foreigners so easily love these children? Having heard about the model minority myth from relatives, two social workers who work with international agencies told me that foreigners see all Vietnamese babies as intelligent. The social workers, of course,

knew better. Finally, they linked the overwhelming preference for girls among foreigners as stemming from the fact that girls are sweet and nice. “It’s the same way with foreigners who want Vietnamese women as wives,” one orphanage employee laughed, referring to another, much-talked-about form of emigration from Vietnam.

Perceptions of financial differences between Vietnamese and foreigners, particularly US citizens, did lead some social workers to criticize transnational adoption. One used a market metaphor: “Money rules, so how can a Vietnamese compete with a foreigner? If I wanted to adopt a child I’d need to own my house, I’d need money. How can I get that?” The head of an orphanage that does not handle adoptions told me about the various high prices that foreigners would pay for children of different ages. The result is that orphanages would not want Vietnamese parents to adopt. One social worker commented that the best solution for abandoned infants would be to establish a system of foster families and support programming to permit birth family reunification, but that the foreign NGOs active in this area had an interest in furthering transnational adoption to meet the demands of their clients and funders.

These narratives represent a diversity of personal opinions, but what I want to highlight here is how the dynamics of their production might have shaped their content. These statements were motivated by an impending moratorium that prompted social workers to articulate what the “problem” with transnational adoption, if indeed there were one, might be, and to do so for a US anthropologist. This enabled them to engage in what Timothy Mitchell has called “enframing”: describing a problem in a way that simultaneously asserts mastery of it, or the people associated with it, through claims to expertise—a process akin to what Li and Rose identify as rendering technical.³¹ Looking specifically at the field of social work, Aihwa Ong has dubbed such assertions of knowledge and efforts to reform the behavior and mindset of wayward subjects—in her case, Cambodian Americans who are seen as victims of primitive patriarchal culture—as a form of compassionate domination that disciplines the poor and vulnerable to conform to social workers’ own classed, raced, and gendered norms.³²

Social workers’ accounts of the situation of orphans and their birth mothers exemplify this tendency to claim objective knowledge in ways that

conceal the workings of ideology. As Vietnam develops an increasingly marketized, urban-centered economy marked by growing socioeconomic divisions, newly prosperous and somewhat anxious middle classes tend to represent their success as the result of moral virtues such as intelligence or hard work. Although social workers express sympathy for the poor and devote their lives to improving their conditions, traces of such moralizing enframing can be discerned in their stories as well. In describing the abandoning birth mother or well-intentioned foreign parent, social workers position themselves as expert mediators: reemergent, knowledgeable middle-class professionals able to reveal the truth of the shadowy underclass in which the birth parents are located and to find appropriate solutions. The crisis in adoption, their assessments imply, has happened because those most informed about the situation — social workers — have not been sufficiently involved in programs driven by more powerful actors, such as Vietnamese officials, international NGOs, and foreign parents.³³

Vietnamese Journalism: Reporting Monster Stories

In February 2008, as the US embassy in Hanoi was investigating claims of child trafficking and the Vietnamese and US governments were facing a March deadline to sign a new adoption agreement, police in Hanoi arrested several people for selling newborns. They were accused of paying US\$500 to \$1000 per child, whom they would then move across the border into China and sell into adoption, presumably to go abroad. They were arrested with two babies, including one who was only two days old. When one birth mother, an unmarried teenager, stepped forward two days later, she reported that she had been paid three million đồng (then equivalent to \$175) and had believed her child to be placed for adoption with a woman she knew in the same district. As described in the newspaper, the woman is a sympathetic, albeit naïve or foolish victim who gave up her baby against the advice of senior women in her family.³⁴ Meanwhile, the Vietnamese media depicted those arrested as common criminals interested in making money by selling people.

Over the next few months, the Vietnamese press reported the arrest of several more “adoption gangs.” In contrast to the social worker’s claim,

recounted above, that middle agents might be well-intentioned providers of a service for which they deserve compensation, these stories condemned the gangs as ruthless, inhuman criminals: sellers of children. Press reports also furthered the already widespread belief that what may seem to be adoption within Vietnam is in fact child labor, as in adopting a young child to be a household servant. In Ho Chi Minh City, the local press featured stories about even more elaborate labor adoptions. For example, in January 2008, a husband and wife were arrested for “adopting” four children.³⁵ The couple had acquired the children in rural areas, brought them to the city, and forced them to work at night selling cigarettes, hawking lottery tickets, and begging downtown. They sent the parents between 500 and 600 thousand đồng per month (around \$35).

In Vietnam in the months leading up to the moratorium, although abandoning mothers sometimes were depicted in monstrous terms, child traffickers were more regularly identified as the moral degenerates who needed to be punished. Within a rapidly changing Vietnamese society, the trafficker provided an object lesson on the need to moderate the increased emphasis on wealth with a moral framework that would prevent profiteering from leading to such reprehensible extremes. As with the social workers’ stories, however, what might have been a political or structural critique of expanding neoliberal market logics instead enframed the problem in terms of some irredeemable individual moral defect that caused traffickers’ callous disregard for basic human sentiment. Resonating with the rationale of official development agendas that bifurcated the world into civilized (*văn minh*) and uncivilized (*không văn minh*), these characterizations of unsavory elements quickly took hold. By far the most common response to my questions about these news reports was for the speaker — typically an educated, middle-class urbanite — to suggest that Vietnam, despite the dramatic improvement in living standards over the past two decades, still contained “backward” (*lạc hậu*), “uncivilized” (*thiếu/không văn minh*), and “uncultured” (*thiếu/không có văn hóa*) individuals whose greed knew no bounds.

Other stories about abandoned babies cast a wider net of blame to include inappropriate market actors who take the profit motive to the depraved extreme of trafficking in human beings. The trafficker provides a cautionary tale about the moral dangers of excessive constructions of market logic,

similar to the high-profile corruption trials that accuse the super rich of capital offenses for cutting legal and moral corners in pursuit of wealth.³⁶ With traffickers, the drama plays out on the other end of the socioeconomic ladder, in an underworld where the desperate prey on those who are even more desperate. Although such critiques imply the market itself to be morally questionable, they perform a kind of bait and switch that assigns ultimate blame to the moral deficiencies of the trafficker as an individual, which are representative of the lower moral standards of certain segments of the poor.

With all media affiliated with some organ of the Vietnamese government or the Communist Party, articles about monstrous traffickers also can be viewed as part of official Vietnamese attempts to manage the looming moratorium crisis. The US embassy announced in October 2007 that its suspicions about widespread child trafficking and falsification of documents would lead to a broad investigation. In an April 2008 report, the embassy claimed that such incidents, as well as other forms of corruption, were common enough to cast doubt on the appropriateness of all adoptions.³⁷ The head of the Vietnamese Department of International Adoptions rejected these allegations as “totally not true” and spoke instead of Vietnam’s “transparent” system occasionally marred by paperwork errors.³⁸ With official denials from the highest level, press reports of adoption ring busts allowed the government to insist that it was aggressively addressing whatever limited problems might exist. The impending crisis did not simply expose preexisting conflicts to the light of day. Rather, by compelling articulations of the problem and plans to address it, the crisis created opportunities for strategic enframing that produced the kinds of morally monstrous others—the trafficker, the ignorant abandoning mother—that such accounts claimed merely to describe.

Casual Observers: Vietnam’s Global Position

The looming cessation of adoption between Vietnam and the United States provided opportunities for middle-class social workers and journalists to articulate the problem in terms of a moral or cultural flaw on the part of birth mothers or traffickers, the former becoming an object for the application of sympathetic expertise, the latter an object for surveillance and pun-

ishment.³⁹ Given that the adoption and abandonment crisis was unfolding within the context of notoriously fraught US-Vietnam diplomatic relations, however, accounts of the causes of the problem also provided an opportunity for a nationalist rendering of Vietnam's compromised position in global political structures. These accounts represented allegations of corruption as cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Corruption is a common topic in Vietnam, with nearly universal laments about how much money needs to be paid to whom to get even the most routine bureaucratic task accomplished. At the same time, and particularly when faced with self-righteous international criticism of such practices and calls for increased oversight or transparency, speakers will describe these behaviors as creative Vietnamese ways of getting things done. For example, in a conversation with me, an official at the Vietnamese Ministry of Justice followed up his claim that international adoptions were always processed diligently and honestly with a characterization of such voluminous documentation as not necessary for domestic adoptions within Vietnam. Describing a sense of community cohesion, he asserted, "In Vietnam there's a network of neighbors who oversee things very well. Because of Vietnamese culture, everyone knows what's going on in the families around them, so we don't need the kinds of inspections like they have abroad." The logic parallels that which rejects universal human rights in favor of culturally particularistic and supposedly traditional formulations of "Asian Values."⁴⁰

This logic also provides a way to engage in critical commentary on Vietnam's position with respect to other countries. The US government is calling upon the Vietnamese government to exert stricter oversight of the local governments responsible for certifying children as orphans and running orphanages. The very fact that it is the US government calling for such changes, however, invites a nationalistic response. When I spoke to people about this proposal, many conveyed a sense that it was fine in principle, but Vietnam was not yet developmentally ready for this kind of structure. One man in his sixties explained the problem as follows:

I think that Vietnam's integration into the world, Vietnamese haven't had enough time to prepare, especially with respect to the labor force [implying cadres in particular] . . . There's not enough training of the

labor force, not enough standardization of the culture of administration. But in truth a foreigner who wants to do business in Vietnam must accept that the situation is like that. They have to understand and can't demand procedures in Vietnam, because the way of behaving, the way of solving problems isn't yet like in the West.

He then concluded, "Besides, in Vietnam there are nooks and crannies, ways to solve things secretly so you can get an adoptive child faster if you want."

This statement and others expressing similar sentiments suggest Vietnam is currently at a disadvantage in cultivating what have become designated as international standards of ethics and the bureaucratic apparatus to enforce them. Some Vietnamese expressed anger about this state of affairs, particularly in the urban south where such standards can be used as an indictment of the first decade of postwar socialism, when political loyalties were valued more than administrative competence. At the same time, however, speakers asserted with pride that complicated issues such as adoption could be better handled locally and informally by the people directly involved. Such statements question whether the moral standards and structures of rich nations really are the best way to handle the problem of children who need homes. This is precisely what government officials themselves suggested when they claimed that Vietnam could not adequately administer international adoption practices such as standardizing and tracking the payment of "fees." Statements of cultural particularity thus expressed nationalistic pride in ways that speakers found significant, but they also worked to thwart changes that might cut off a potentially lucrative source of officials' income.

Vietnamese Birth Mothers: Framing the Personal as Global

In contrast to the proliferation of discourses about abandonment and adoption, Vietnamese birth mothers remained relatively silent on the eve of the moratorium. Toby Alice Volkman notes this silence to be typical. Birth parents are "shadow figures" conspicuously absent in many adoption accounts, most likely because of the stigma surrounding the circumstances in which their children were born and relinquished.⁴¹

For some pregnant young women, the anonymously abandoning mother

provides exactly the kind of cautionary tale that the circulators of monster stories might intend. One woman, single, five months' pregnant, and living in a Catholic-run shelter, told me that she could never be the kind of person who would give up a child: "It would hurt too much, I would miss it so much. Even if it's very hard, I need to keep it." There is a sense that, as understandable as it may be that some women feel forced to give up babies, those who actually do so have something wrong with them emotionally, morally, or mentally.

When they can be elicited, the narratives of abandoning mothers prove, not surprisingly, to be more complicated and to belie any simple equation of failed reproduction with poverty and deficient morality. I was able to meet with several women who had relinquished children for international adoption under duress. The women told me that they had been forced by their bosses in a state-run organization to give up their children so that their work units could be described as adhering to family planning policies.⁴² Failure to comply would result in the loss of their jobs and housing. They reported that their children were classified as anonymously abandoned and had been placed with parents in Europe and North America. They believed that the adoptive families had been given no information about their children's birth families. One mother had reason to think that the couple that adopted her child had explicitly asked for such information but had been told that it was not available. These birth mothers described their bosses' motivations in forcing them to relinquish their children as a combination of fear of reprisals for excessive or out-of-wedlock births among their workers, and greed for the payment that the referral of an adoptee would generate. The women claimed to have received no compensation.

Although these were unusual circumstances, they may be more common than is suggested by popular accounts of the frightened mother abandoning her child at a hospital or police station or the gullible mother whose child is taken from her. A growing number of young, single women have migrated to industrial zones where they live in dormitory housing. The state owns many of these factories or operates them as joint ventures with foreign companies, so there are incentives and opportunities for bosses to persuade or coerce pregnant single women to relinquish children.

The events described by the birth mothers had occurred years before and

did not simply involve the United States. In relating them in early 2008, however, the issue of the impending moratorium prompted the mothers to frame their stories in terms of desired geopolitical outcomes. They told me that they wished adoption could be better regulated in the interests of children and birth parents, although it was not clear what parties might be best positioned to do this. They explicitly stated that they knew that there were broader material and political reasons why US and other foreign families were able to adopt children from Vietnam. They argued that structural inequalities created incentives for individuals like their bosses to force them to give up their children.

Several months later, one of the women agreed to let me circulate her story to NGO workers involved in attempts to negotiate a new adoption agreement between the United States and Vietnam. Although this mother might hope that a reform in adoption would eventually lead to information about or reunification with her child, her goals were broader. In the statement that I translated and edited with her approval, she asked me to describe her intentions as follows:

She agreed to let her story be shared because she hopes that the system of international adoption might be reformed in order to improve protection of the human rights of those involved, particularly so that birth parents might receive an occasional update or photo and hence not be completely severed from their biological children and so that the children, as they grow, might be able to receive information about their origins that will help them come to terms with their identities.

Two analytical frameworks emerge from this statement. The first is a conception of human rights that identifies the importance of a biological bond between parents and children and the need to respect it through an open flow of information in adoption. The second is a sense that the psychological interests of a child rest on an understanding of his or her origins. Both of these logics have been central to the framing of the dilemmas of international adoption, from the standards enshrined in the Hague Convention that define orphans and the rights of them and their families, to the current popularity of heritage education for international adoptees in the United States.

As noted above, ideas about appropriate child psychological development

have recently received increased attention in Vietnam in both the government's Cultured Family campaign and in programs of social work or psychological education at public and private universities. In both those contexts, however, economic status is defined as a crucial factor ensuring the stability needed for healthy maturation. This then problematizes the poor as inherently less able to be good parents. In her statement, the birth mother similarly suggests that she has not been able to provide the correct environment for her child's psychological development, but the culprit is not a poverty rendered (im)moral. Rather, she has been victimized by structural inequalities that have permitted others to deny her child and herself basic rights. Her argument resonates, on the one hand, with socialist claims that material inequality leads to unequal family relationships and the "bourgeois" problems of spousal and child abuse among the poor. She then makes recourse, on the other hand, to a notion often derided by socialists as bourgeois: that the individual is a locus of particular kinds of natural rights. She expands this concept of rights to include a right to appropriate psychological development and knowledge of biological kinship, the latter claim also indexing the increased legitimacy granted to scientific views of the importance of genes in determining individual identity and health. In articulating herself and her child as subjects of particular rights valorized internationally and scientifically, this birth mother counters the claim that her subjectivity can be reduced to the circumstances of poverty or ignorance. Her vulnerability lies not in her lowered morality or lack of self-discipline but in the ways that more privileged actors and a broader structure of inequality have been able to deny her and her child these basic rights. Her claim is reminiscent of Aihwa Ong's distinction between liberalism and neoliberalism. Both regimes take "free subjects as a basic rationale and target of government,"⁴³ but the former does so through a discourse of rights and civil freedoms, while the latter focuses on self-reliance and self-management.

Without overstating the presumed contrast between liberal and neoliberal notions of personhood, this birth mother's story does allude to the various conceptions of identity that Vietnamese might invoke to make sense of failed reproduction. In response to moralizing logics that might consign her to the margins for a combination of ignorance and moral defect, this birth mother draws upon logics that were circulating around the moratorium to

assert her membership in civilized society as a subject who ideally possesses the very same universal rights as her class superiors. Presenting her story as a testimony, she positioned herself as the victim of both particular circumstances (her job, her boss, her birthing history) and structural problems between two countries. The latter could be addressed through a new diplomatic agreement consistent with human rights principles.

Conclusion: Economic, Biological, and Moral Dilemmas in Failed Reproduction

Whether they appeal to images of the monstrous moral costs of extreme poverty, the excesses of market greed, or the inequalities in international structures and logics of rights, all these narratives attempt to explain contexts of failed reproduction in which a biological mother is unable to be a social mother. Biology and economics combine to shape motherhood in complicated ways in these stories. For example, in social workers' stories, the sense that poverty prompted desperate acts might be seen as a sociological account mitigating the mother's moral culpability. Yet there was a sense that poverty itself was the result of moral deficiencies or that it might bring to the surface preexisting defects.⁴⁴ Casual observers generally accepted the idea that there was something wrong with abandoning birth mothers and that this character defect might be passed on genetically to her offspring. I was told frequently that the problem of adoption was that most of a child's psychology and personality resulted from genetics—estimates varied from 50 to 90 percent. Adoptive parents could socialize the child wonderfully, but they still could influence only a part of who the child was. This was one key reason why domestic adoptive parents in Vietnam typically chose not to reveal the fact of adoption to neighbors, kin, and even the child.

A second issue concerns how a woman can physically carry a child for nine months and give birth to it, but then feel so little elemental connection to the child that she can "throw it away" without caring what might happen to it. Although biological links have long been important elements of Vietnamese kinship, this emphasis on the biological aspects of mothering increased after the war. For example, Harriet Phinney argues that single female veterans who desperately wanted children after the war decided

not to pursue adoption because sharing blood and physical closeness in the womb create a much stronger emotional bond between mothers and children.⁴⁵ Phinney suggests this to reflect in part state discourses that, after the destruction of the war, tended to construe motherhood in biological terms of blood and milk. Melissa Pashigian notes that biological visions of motherhood more recently have led the government to outlaw surrogacy since it could not condone legally removing from parentage the mother who had birthed the baby.⁴⁶

This dual emphasis on genes and womb makes the abandoning mother truly unnatural. And yet the portraits of her can be sympathetic as well: she had no choice but to abandon her baby. Why? Here is where another aspect of parenting has come to the fore: raising a child increasingly depends on money. As the Happy and Cultured Family campaigns suggest, family stability and quality have become increasingly linked to having sufficient resources to ensure proper education and health. Economic gain is seen as another aspect of moral cultivation: work hard so that you can have an appropriate, respectable family. The implication, however, is that those who have not achieved this kind of family must have something wrong with them. Poverty becomes a moral indictment.

These logics produce a contradiction: the maternal bond is essentialized as biological, but economics create the conditions for proper moral parenthood, so some biological mothers cannot in fact be appropriate parents. Even as they may be sympathetically credited for recognizing their inadequacies by engaging in a kind of sacrifice (*hy sinh*)—long a valorized feature of Vietnamese motherhood—to endure the pain of giving up a child, and to do so anonymously, there is still a sense that their poverty is also indicative of underlying failings.

Conflating monetary status with moral worth is a common tendency among emergent middle classes. The anthropologist Mark Liechty has argued that the in-betweenness of middle classes leads to anxiety about how others will view them.⁴⁷ They are in danger of sliding down, but they also need to explain why they are not in the ranks of the elite. This prompts claims that their status is not simply material, but that it rests on moral respectability. They behave in a more civilized way than either the masses of poor below them or the greedy, degenerate wealthy above.⁴⁸

Claims by social workers and others in Vietnam that poor, rural, uneducated birth mothers lack culture and understanding are a way of enframing the landscape of social inequality to render it moral and justify the relative privilege of the narrator. Percolating through these narratives seem to be models of personhood that we could easily attribute to the neoliberal, market-inflected logics that I have argued achieve currency because they convincingly render the family technical by rendering it moral: defining certain kinds of parents and certain family formations as morally appropriate. By identifying the abandoning mother as a failed neoliberal subject and hence an inappropriate parent, the monster stories told by the middle classes might suggest that transnational adoption can provide a happy ending. Through the technical mediation of trained professionals, children wind up in “appropriate” (*phù hợp*), foreign middle-class homes.

What complicates this tale of expanding neoliberalism is that such logic has been made available to people through the state’s own socialist and market socialist constructions of what family life should be like in order for Vietnam to become modern, civilized, and prosperous. The Cultured Family campaign so associated with the current period of market-oriented economic policies is, after all, a continuation of Hồ Chí Minh’s efforts to inculcate a sense of what the modern, developed socialist individual (and family) might be.

There are even deeper referents. Ann Laura Stoler argues that in colonial Indochina at the turn of the twentieth century, French authorities and residents became obsessed with the plight of mixed-race children who had been “abandoned” by their French fathers to be raised in the supposedly debilitating environment of their native mothers.⁴⁹ The Vietnamese mother raising a mixed-race child was seen as motivated by self-interest to raise her status by association with her child’s Europeaness. Her refusal to give up the child to state institutions was taken as a sign of her depravity and inability to acknowledge her racialized maternal unfitness.⁵⁰ Urban Vietnamese elites, particularly women, shared French concerns with childrearing and during the 1930s established a network of care centers that would use scientific education techniques to inculcate the children of the poor with modern knowledge, hygiene, and morality so they might contribute to the nation.⁵¹ The field of social work later emerged precisely to deal with the problem of

socializing such downtrodden and “abandoned” children.⁵² Today’s poor, illiterate mother who gives up her child could be seen as experiencing a parallel form of compassionate domination. The act of abandonment both establishes her own depravity, for what mother could bear to do such a thing, and mitigates it by representing at least a momentary, lucid recognition of herself as an unfit parent who hands her children over to more knowledgeable caregivers.

These historical patterns of defining parental fitness in Vietnam raise questions about what exactly might be new or old in the “neoliberal” conceptions of personhood and techno-moral renderings that permeate contemporary monster stories about abandoning mothers and the growing acceptance of transnational adoption. The processes of enframing and strategic articulation prompted by an impending moratorium on adoption between the United States and Vietnam have antecedents that enabled particular claims to be mobilized, and thus influenced whether those assertions were accepted as credible. At the same time, they are motivated by quite contemporary dilemmas of increasing class stratification that have left people desirous of articulating how privilege can be morally justified.

In generating monster stories to narrate the lives of birth mothers, their abandoned children, and traffickers, urban middle-class narrators—social workers, journalists, and casual observers—do not simply make sense of a particular occurrence or pattern. In their efforts to render the family a technical issue to be addressed through applying expertise in the form of visions of culture, civilization, or child psychology and welfare, they are also rendering moral. They attempt to rationalize growing inequality in Vietnam by establishing a conceptual map in which economic privilege is justified as reflecting its possessor’s morality, propriety, and respectability. Such claims can establish the speaker’s expertise, but they also provide space for contestation precisely because moral renderings can be exposed as vulnerable, flexible, and contingent. Furthermore, because neoliberal logics appeal to Vietnamese in part by resonating with prior socialist and other compelling moral visions, these very same claims can be mobilized to counter neoliberalism and to expose it as exceptional. Responding to gendered and classed moral indictments of her character, one birth mother’s appeal to universal biological and psychological rights should remind us of the structural

inequalities that have denied her and others the ability to express appropriate maternal femininity and moral personhood.

Notes

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1. *Trình độ văn hóa* (cultural level) is frequently used as a synonym for educational level (*trình độ học vấn*), meaning formal educational attainment. In common usage, however, *cultural level* refers to a wider range of characteristics that are deemed desirable, appropriate, respectable, or civilized (*văn minh*). Those lacking such characteristics are said to lack culture (*thiếu văn hóa*), be without culture (*vô/không có văn hóa*), or possess a low cultural level (*mức/trình độ văn hóa thấp*).
2. Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
3. Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.
4. See also Rose, *Powers of Freedom*.
5. Michael Blim, "The Moral Significance of Petty Capitalism," in *Petty Capitalists and Globalization: Flexibility, Entrepreneurship, and Economic Development*, ed. Alan Smart and Josephine Smart (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 264.
6. Andrew B. Kipnis, "Audit Cultures: Neoliberal Governmentality, Socialist Legacy, or Technologies of Governing?" *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 2 (2008): 275–89; see also Donald M. Nonini, "Is China Becoming Neoliberal?" *Critique of Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (2008): 145–76.
7. Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*.
8. For a discussion of Buddhist and Confucian notions of self-cultivation (*tu thân*) and their relationship to concepts of the individual (*cá nhân*) and collective (*tập thể*), see David G. Marr, "Concepts of 'Individual' and 'Self' in Twentieth-Century Vietnam," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 4 (2000): 769–96.

9. Carolyn L. Hsu, *Creating Market Socialism: How Ordinary People Are Shaping Class and Status in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
10. Stacey Leigh Pigg, "Inventing Social Categories through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 3 (1992): 495–96.
11. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "Monster Stories: Women Charged with Perinatal Endangerment," in *Uncertain Terms: Negotiating Gender in American Culture*, ed. Faye Ginsberg and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 282–99.
12. Faye D. Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, eds., *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
13. See, for example, Carla Freeman, "The 'Reputation' of Neoliberalism," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 2 (2007): 252–67; Lesley Gill, "'Proper Women' and City Pleasures: Gender, Class, and Contested Meanings in La Paz," *American Ethnologist* 20, no. 1 (1993): 72–88; Carla Jones, "Better Women: The Cultural Politics of Gendered Expertise in Indonesia," *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 2 (2010): 270–82.
14. Susan Greenhalgh, *Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
15. Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Susan Greenhalgh, "Planned Births, Unplanned Persons: 'Population' in the Making of Chinese Modernity," *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 2 (2003): 196–215.
16. Lisa Drummond, "The Modern 'Vietnamese Woman': Socialization and Women's Magazines," in *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, ed. Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstrøm (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), 164–65.
17. Ibid., 165–66.
18. Ashley Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire: National Identity and the Governing of Femininity in Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Drummond, "Modern 'Vietnamese Woman'"; Helle Rydstrøm and Lisa Drummond, introduction to Drummond and Rydstrøm, *Gender Practices*; Tine Gammeltoft, *Women's Bodies, Women's Worries: Health and Family Planning in a Vietnamese Rural Community* (Richmond, UK: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies/Curzon, 1999); Ann Marie Leshkowich, "Working Out Culture: Gender, Body, and Commodification in a Ho Chi Minh City Health Club," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 37, no. 1 (2008): 49–87.
19. Hsu, *Creating Market Socialism*; Yan Hairong, "Neoliberal Governmentality and Neohumanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labor Recruitment Networks," *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 4 (2003): 493–523; Ann Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi)," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 189–208; Andrew Kipnis, "Suzhi: A Keyword Approach," *China Quarterly* 186 (June 2006): 295–313.
20. Drummond, "Modern 'Vietnamese Woman,'" 162–63.
21. See, for example, Harriet M. Phinney, "Discursive Transformations: Maternal Desire

- among Older Single Women in Northern Việt Nam,” in *Le Việt Nam au Féminin: Việt Nam: Women's Realities*, ed. Gisèle Bousquet and Nora Taylor (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2005), 267–85.
22. This claim may also reflect a conscious decision to depart from the model of Chinese socialism. Several sociologists in the 1990s independently explained to me that, unlike in China, Vietnamese collectivization campaigns never attacked the family or sought to separate children from their parents. Regardless of their factual accuracy, such assertions suggest the centrality of family to depictions of Vietnamese cultural distinctiveness.
 23. For a discussion of the appeal of scientific discourses about sexuality to middle-class Vietnamese women, see Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neo-liberal Governance in Vietnam* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).
 24. Melissa J. Pashigian, “Conceiving the Happy Family: Infertility and Marital Politics in Northern Vietnam,” in *Infertility around the Globe: New Thinking on Childlessness, Gender, and Reproductive Technologies*, ed. Marcia C. Inhorn and Frank Van Balen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 134–51.
 25. Tsing, “Monster Stories.”
 26. Embassy of the United States, Vietnam, Adopted Children Immigrant Visa Unit, “Summary of Irregularities in Adoptions in Vietnam,” April 25, 2008, www.vietnam.usembassy.gov/irreg_adoptionso42508.html; see also E. J. Graff, “Anatomy of an Adoption Crisis,” *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2010, www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/09/07/anatomy_of_an_adoption_crisis.
 27. Embassy of the United States, “Summary.”
 28. Linh Song, post to Yahoo! Groups (chat room), www.groups.yahoo.com/group/a-parents-vietnam/message/25672, April 28, 2008.
 29. Quan Ân—Nhất Phương, “Buôn bán trẻ em: Tội ác mất tính người. Bài 1: Những trẻ sơ sinh bị bỏ rơi” (“Trafficking in Children: An Inhuman Crime. Part 1: Abandoned Infants”), *Người lao động (Laborer)*, January 16, 2006, 4.
 30. Nguyen Thi Oanh, “Historical Development and Characteristics of Social Work in Today's Vietnam,” *International Journal of Social Welfare* 11, no. 1 (2002): 84–91.
 31. Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Li, *Will to Improve*; Rose, *Powers of Freedom*.
 32. Aihwa Ong, *Buddha Is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
 33. The claim that social work expertise is crucial to addressing adoption dilemmas is the central theme of one agency official's response to the Adoption Law passed by Vietnam's National Assembly in June 2010. The country director of Holt International Children's Services questioned whether the Ministry of Justice, newly given jurisdiction over matching adoptive children with domestic and foreign parents, in fact has the “specific skills to understand a child's unique set of needs, and to then determine which prospective adoptive family can best meet the needs for that specific child.” Noting that professionals such as

- social workers and psychologists typically handle matching in other countries, she called for expanded college-level training in social work in Vietnam; see Dam Thi Thuy Hang, "Adoption Law Seeks to Match International Practice," *Vietnam Law and Legal Forum* 16, no. 191 (2010): 10.
34. Trung Hiếu, "Vụ giải cứu 2 trẻ sơ sinh: Cháu Hoàn gặp lại người thân" ("The Rescue of Two Newborns: Baby Hoan Is Reunited with His Loved Ones"), *An ninh thủ đô (Capital Security)*, February 21, 2008.
 35. Minh Luận and T. C. Nghĩa, "'Kinh doanh' kiểu 'chăn dắt' trẻ em" ("Selling' in the Form of 'Tending' Children"), *Tuổi trẻ (Youth)*, January 12, 2008, 5.
 36. Martin Gainsborough, "Corruption and the Politics of Economic Decentralisation in Vietnam," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 33, no. 1 (2003): 69–84; see also Ken MacLean, "Enacting Anticorruption: The Reconfiguration of Audit Regimes in Contemporary Vietnam," in this volume.
 37. Embassy of the United States, "Summary."
 38. "Viet Nam Will Not Renew US Child-Adoption Agreement," *Vietnam News Service*, May 2, 2008, vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/social-issues/176136/viet-nam-will-not-renew-us-child-adoption-agreement.html.
 39. This bifurcation of corrective versus coercive tactics parallels the class-specific ways that Nguyễn-võ Thu-hương claims the Vietnamese government has differentiated between good and bad forms of feminine sexuality. Middle-class women receive expert, scientific guidance to become good housewives and sexual partners, while prostitutes are incarcerated and reeducated (Nguyễn-võ, *Ironies of Freedom*).
 40. Such claims are similar to the culturally essentialist invocations of a long tradition of humanism that Vietnamese have used to counter US accusations that prisoners of war were tortured; see Christina Schwenkel, "From John McCain to Abu Ghraib: Tortured Bodies and Historical Unaccountability of U.S. Empire," *American Anthropologist* 111, no. 1 (2009): 30–42.
 41. Toby Alice Volkman, "Introduction: New Geographies of Kinship," in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. Toby Alice Volkman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 15.
 42. Although Vietnam's program to limit births to one or two children has been neither uniformly nor strictly enforced, it has been applied to civil servants and workers in state-run companies and factories, as these people are expected to be role models. Punishment for "breaking the plan" can include fines, loss of benefits, or dismissal.
 43. Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 2.
 44. Hsu and Kipnis note similar concern in China with the relationship between poverty and individual character. In contrast to neoliberal "blame the victim" discourse, however, they found that Chinese tend to blame the flawed morality of the poor on unequal structural conditions that prevent them from developing *suzhi*; see Hsu, *Creating Market Socialism*, 188; Andrew Kipnis, "Neoliberalism Reified: *Suzhi* Discourse and Tropes of Neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 2

- (2007), 388–90. My interlocutors decried growing structural inequality yet suggested that underlying deficiencies of character or intellect make certain elements of the poor more vulnerable and in turn perpetuate their material deprivation.
45. Harriet Phinney, “The Lure of Blood: Risking Reproduction, Eschewing Adoption at the Advent of Doi Moi” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Chicago, 2009).
 46. Melissa J. Pashigian, “The Womb, Infertility, and the Vicissitudes of Kin-Relatedness in Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4, no. 2 (2009): 34–68.
 47. Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
 48. The middle class is, of course, an internally diverse group that includes professionals, civil servants, and the petty bourgeoisie. In general, however, these different kinds of middle classes engage in some form of moralizing assessment of the virtues of not being at the extremes of the spectrum.
 49. Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 79–111; see also Erica Peters, “Colonial Cholon and Its ‘Missing’ Métisses, 1859–1919,” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 21 (September 2009), intersections.anu.edu.au/issue21/peters.htm.
 50. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 89–90.
 51. Van Nguyen-Marshall, *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 88–92.
 52. Nguyen Thi Oanh, “Historical Development,” 85.