

# Vietnam's 'socialization' policy and the moral subject in a privatizing economy

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## Abstract

The Vietnamese term for socialization, *xã hội hóa*, is grounded in its history of socialist construction, originally referring to the collectivization of property and resources. Since the country shifted to a market economy, yet remaining under the leadership of the Communist Party, the term has come to imply the individualization of responsibilities and the privatization of public goods. As a policy, however, it continues to evoke the idioms of 'the whole society' or 'all the people' as the basis of wellbeing and development. This paper examines the practices of socialization as part of broader shifts in welfare provision and local dynamics of exemplarity. I show that socialization concerns not only the mobilization of resources, but also the production of a moral subject that is self-optimized and yet sensitized to helping others, self-governed and yet governable by the party state. In a socialist country that is rapidly marketising, this moral subject plays into governing rationalities that blends new-prudentialist logics with socialist genealogies, privatization with a notion of society within which individual actions can be made morally meaningful. While the tension and contestation induced by people's greater burdens are immanent, the continued reference to collective idioms appeals to people's moral sensibilities, and thus makes *socialization* meaningful to some extent, even as they resent the turn away from broad-based structures of wellbeing.

Keywords: socialization; morality; new prudentialism; governance; market socialism.

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## Introduction

A recent discussion titled 'Socialization of education and health sectors' on the listserv of the Vietnamese Studies Group illustrates the confusion the term *socialization* (*xã hội hóa*) evokes<sup>1</sup>: 'I only just realized what people in this thread are talking about when they say "socialization". This is a piece of Communist Party double talk, borrowed directly from China. What it actually means is "privatization"', wrote one contributor. This statement prompted disagreement among others, who pointed to public-private partnership and multilateral cooperation in the provision of public goods, to argue that it was not coterminous with privatization. Officially a state policy to mobilize resources for public goods and social services, the term *xã hội hóa* (socialization) frequently comes up in everyday discussion, the media and social media in recent years. One commonly hears phrases such as 'the socialization of the traffic infrastructure', 'the socialization of universities' or 'the socialization of public hospitals' in public statements of government officials. In a televised National Assembly session, a deputy prime minister was asked whether *socialization* means the same as privatization, given the increasing dominance of private actors in all economic and social sectors. He said: 'No, it is about the mutually beneficial cooperation between the government, the people and private investors', before adding: 'In the past, when we fought the foreign aggressors, the Party called on all the people [to fight them]. Now we have to build the economy, develop the culture and maintain national security, these tasks are similarly the mandate of all the people'.<sup>2</sup>

There are good reasons to think that socialization is a linguistic device to mask actual politics of privatization. In many cases, socialization does imply the involvement of private actors, similar to the term 'equitization' (*cổ phần hóa*) that refers to the gradual privatization of state-owned enterprises (Gainsborough, 2010; Nguyen, 2015; Tran *et al.*, 2016). Why are government officials compelled to insist that socialization is not the same as privatization? If it is just another piece of double talk by party cadres, as the scholar above contends, why would they go to such lengths to avoid the word 'privatization'? Perhaps there is indeed something essential to the whole state-led project of a 'socialist oriented market economy', the system of market socialism that Vietnam, like China and Laos, claims to be pursuing.

After four decades of state socialism, Vietnam introduced a series of reforms in the mid-1980s, gradually replacing socialist central planning with market mechanisms, allowing non-state actors to participate in the national economy. This has occurred alongside the country's greater integration in the global economy and the increased presence of global capital and corporations. Meanwhile, there has been a subtle, yet fundamental, shift in the approach of the party state, away from draconian attempts to control citizens' private lives towards greater focus on self-governance and self-responsibilization (Nguyen-Vo, 2008). People nowadays have greater personal freedom to pursue entrepreneurial goals and private choices, yet the party state's will to mould citizens who

are compliant to the political limits it sets remains ever present. Diverse forms of governmentality that blend neoliberal logics with socialist genealogies thus characterize the country's political and social life today (Schwenkel & Leshkovich, 2011). The shift in the Vietnamese party state's 'governing rationalities' (O'Malley, 2006, p. 12) has never been straightforward, nor is it aimed at eventually fully embracing a set model of privatization (see also Gainsborough, 2010; Hayton, 2010).

Considering the logic of socialization as internal to these governing rationalities, this paper takes an ethnographic approach in order to examine the practices of implementation as well as the meanings and contestations it generates. It shows the ways in which the state draws on cultural and socialist repertoires of meanings to mobilize resources. This work of mobilizing is primarily based on the construction of a moral subject occupied with self-optimization and private responsibility and yet possessed of a heightened sense of duty to community and society. The moral subject is self-governed in accumulating human capitals for the sake of the market, yet loyal to family and community while being governable by the party state. In a country that bears the name 'the Socialist Republic of Vietnam', socialization represents a rallying point of both material and moral resources for the state's agenda and its contradictory goals of maintaining legitimacy while unloading responsibilities onto 'all the people'.

In Vietnam, moral education has historically been focused on shaping certain kinds of person for the sake of governing (MacLean, 2013). State socialism, in particular, was occupied with visions of the 'socialist person' with good health, creative ways of working, and civilized way of living,<sup>3</sup> a self-optimizing subject who pursued their happiness as part of collective goals. As we shall see, the moral subject to be produced through socialization is a modified version of the 'socialist person' that is at once akin to the 'ethical citizen' Muehlebach sees emerge in post-industrial Italy (2012) and the 'striving individual' that Yan identifies in market socialist China (2013).

This paper uses ethnographic data collected in Vietnam from August 2011 to July 2012 and again for two months in 2015, and observations derived from my engagement with the country as a transnational Vietnamese scholar over the last 15 years. Beyond the formalized periods of intensive ethnographic field work, I am in the country every year to visit family and friends, including former informants, and closely monitor public and private discussions on the topic from abroad. The fieldwork was part of a five-year research project that examined care and migration in a rural community in the Red River Delta, specialized in urban waste trading, which I refer to as Spring District (Nguyen, 2018). The intimate linkages between household care and welfare that I identified during the research prompted me to ask questions about people's access to and negotiations with available forms of welfare (Nguyen, 2015). The theme of socialization emerges as a central organizing principle of the country's post-reform welfare system, with direct implications for the life of my informants and many others that are likely to be intensified in the years to come.

### The post-social moral subject?

*The social* emerged in the nineteenth century as an arena of collective actions at societal level aimed at rectifying social problems of industrialization in Western Europe (O'Malley, 1992; Rose, 1999). During the twentieth century, the state in industrialized countries acted on such rationalities of *the social* through welfare systems targeted at improving the life of all social groups and protecting them from poverty, unemployment and other social problems. Thereby, citizens were constructed as subjects of rights and needs, to be governed through collective responsibility, social justice and social solidarity (Inda, 2006). Later in the last century, *the social* was subject to fierce critiques, especially those of the social state's tendency to foster dependency on welfare and its interventionist and cumbersome bureaucracies (Offe, 1982). Consequently, the idea of public provision of welfare as central to state governance lost its sway – the state should step back from taking responsibilities for social problems that are better addressed by a range of social and market actors, a logic that international financial institutions such as the World Bank actively promote. As a result, *the social* gradually became contracted through reforms that diminish state-provided social welfare and social protection in post-industrial countries, a situation described by the term 'post-social' (Inda, 2006).

Along with the transformation of the social into the post-social state, a new idea of the moral subject emerges as citizens with 'choices and yearning for self-fulfilment' rather than those with rights and needs (Inda, 2006, p. 16). Individuals should use their private resources to attain wellbeing and rely on market options to deal with uncertainties and risks (Rose, 1999). This logic is known as *new prudentialism* (Kaya, 2012; O'Malley, 2006). New prudentialism casts social problem as private responsibilities; private choice and self-optimization are thus idealized while those who fail on these terms are considered socially and morally inferior, stigmatized for their moral failings (Kaya, 2012). Yet, as Andrea Muehlebach's (2012) analysis of volunteer care in the context of neoliberal industrial restructuring in Italy suggests, the post-social moral subject is constructed in the very terms of solidarity that had been underlying the social. A form of ethical citizenship premised on these values emerges at the same moment that structures of solidarity decline and leave people to fend for themselves. The ethical citizen, embodied in the figure of the unwaged volunteer caregiver, is drawn to public fantasies of belonging through the work of volunteering, thereby picking up the responsibilities of a state that has been cutting corners on their social rights and those of the people they help. The construction of the moral subject with a heightened sense of compassion, as Muehlebach argues, has been instrumental for the restructuring process.

These dynamics are not confined to post-industrial settings; post/late-socialist contexts display similar tendencies (Nguyen & Chen, 2017; Read & Thelen, 2007; Wong, 2005). In Vietnam and China, in particular, welfare responsibilities are now divested from the state to a wide range of social actors and the direct welfare relationship between the state and citizens has been minimized

(Ding, 2015; Nguyen & Chen, 2017). Under state socialism, a parallel form of *the social* had been characterized by a broad definition of social rights as universal access to work, income and social services, underpinned by the collectivization of production and reproduction. Yet, while this form of *the social* contracted immediately following the reforms, the dynamics of socialization suggest that there has been no one-dimensional switch between *social* and *post-social* rationalities. *The social* under market socialism instead has been reinvented via a mix of neoliberal techniques of self-governance, socialist mechanisms of mobilization and moral economic sentiments. The state thereby continues to claim a central role as guarantor of wellbeing, yet through facilitating individualized solutions and enforcing social categories rather than a broad base of provision. Out of these dynamics emerges a moral subject akin to that self-responsible and compassionate agent of new prudentialism and ethical citizenship, which however is embedded in the particular exemplary frameworks of market socialism (Bakken, 2000; Muehlebach, 2012; O'Malley, 2006). At a time when everything seems possible except for the trespassing of political limits, this moral subject is equally driven by an ethic of striving that compels people relentlessly to work hard and improve themselves in order to access wealth and power (Yan, 2013). A drive for success and a fear of failure characterize the striving individual; 'the two work together, to push the individual to strive, with or even without the chance to succeed' (Yan, 2013, p. 272). The resultant tension and anxiety give rise to an enhanced desire for cultural belonging and also at times recourse to the collectivist values of state socialism, a desire that the mechanisms of socialization effectively appeal to.

### Socialization and Vietnam's changing welfare landscape

In Lenin's writings, the term socialization refers to the collectivization of the means of production for the service of the whole society (Ngo, 2006). Under state socialism, it was in this sense that the Vietnamese equivalent was officially used to indicate 'the process of being made into collective property',<sup>4</sup> the ideological bedrock of what 'socialist' means. Following the reforms, the term has taken on rather different meanings, sometimes conveying the opposite of what it used to mean. Official documents often explain socialization as *the state of being under the responsibility of the whole society*; a government decree in 1997<sup>5</sup> formalized socialization as the guiding principle in the provision of social services and public goods. The prime minister in office between 2006 and 2016 stressed the 'socialised implementation of social policies', or 'the involvement of all social actors in welfare'<sup>6</sup> as the cornerstone of the state's development strategy. The party state still has the largest stake in the means of production through majority holding in major corporations and ownership of land and natural resources, supposedly on behalf of that *whole society* (Vietnamese Constitution, Chapter III). Yet, the legitimation of the socialist state is not only premised on collective ownership but also on the state's investment

in care for the people. The Vietnamese Constitution, which was revised in 2013, continues to stipulate the responsibilities of the state in ensuring a broad base of wellbeing for the people, especially in matters of health and education (Chapter III).<sup>7</sup> The twist in the meanings of *socialization* indicates that the second principle has been redefined towards individualization of responsibility. But it appears that as long as the party state continues to have a stake in the system, its divestment from care must be accounted for by terms that refer to the values of collective wellbeing.

This observation seems to contradict the emergence of universalizing welfare programmes in Vietnam since the mid-2000s (Nguyen & Chen, 2017; UNDP, n.d.). If the socialist welfare system went into disarray immediately after the reforms, it now boasts a landscape characterized by new arrangements and actors. There is a combination of state programmes that provides means-tested social protection for a small section of the population (especially for poor households) with 'basic floor universalism' (UNDP, n.d.). In the current system, all citizens are supposed to have access to basic education and health services through the universalization of lower secondary school (up to grade 9) and contribution-based health insurance. Nevertheless, just as privatization does not equal the retreat of the state in governing the economy (Gainsborough, 2010), the re-expansion of welfare programmes does not necessarily mean that the state is again becoming invested in care. The professed commitment to the universal norms of socialism notwithstanding, actual practices indicate an entirely different notion of universalism that is infused with new prudentialist logic. Instead of indicating a broad base of access to state provided welfare as before, universalism in most cases now refers to the availability of insurance and services for purchase by all concerned.

Let us take healthcare as an example. Since the mid-2000s, health insurance has been promoted to a large section of the population which had never before been insured: formally employed people are legally required to co-pay for their health insurance while others can choose to buy 'voluntary insurance'. By now, about 80 per cent of the 93-million-strong population are enrolled in health insurance; current voluntary contribution per person is around 700,000 VND (about 25 euro) per year, with deductions for other members of the household (the contributions of formally recognized poor households and children under six are subsidized). The insurance can only be bought on a household basis and total yearly payments for a four-person household amounts to about two million VND (about 70 euro): 'Members of a family must support each other first before requiring the assistance of the family', said the Vice Director of Ho Chi Minh City's Social Insurance Department in a public question-answer session.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, the so-called 'voluntary health insurance' turns out to be quasi-compulsory. In 2016, hospital fees for services and treatment went up between two and seven times; in 2017, they increased further for those who had no health insurance.<sup>9</sup> Given the high treatment costs that can push a household into indebtedness, to buy health insurance seems the only choice; that is, if one can afford it. In 2017, a major change in healthcare was

introduced: the health personnel in public hospitals, including doctors, ceased to be paid out of the state budget; their salaries (among the most significant costs of healthcare) now come from health insurance and out-of-pocket payments. According to the Minister of Health, the budget that used to be spent on salaries can thereby be freed up for subsidizing the health insurance of the poor and the disadvantaged.<sup>10</sup>

Under the guise of socialization, meanwhile, public hospitals allow private companies to install medical equipment on their premises and charge patients at higher rates for services that are not covered by health insurance. The so-called ‘service treatment’ or ‘service examination’ at public hospitals is sometimes priced even higher than in private hospitals; better-off patients can choose to pay for well-catered and well-equipped private rooms in public hospitals, often foregoing what can be reimbursed through health insurance. The financing of health care has now been practically transferred from the state to ‘all the people’ (see Duong, 2015; London, 2011; Tran *et al.*, 2016 for similar tendencies in education financing). Over more than a decade, the direct provision of health care seems to have been disowned by the state in a move that had been prepared by gradually building up and enforcing the new health insurance system while slowly turning public hospitals into partially private businesses. How could this happen without significantly undermining the legitimacy of a state whose constitutional duty it is to care for its citizens? The answer, I argue, lies in mechanisms of *socialization* that cultivate private responsibility along with heightened social awareness among citizens, which punish those who fail and glorify those who excel on these terms.

### Socialization and the intellectual level of the people

A subcontractor for a rural electrification project in northern Vietnam told me that he had been owed a significant amount by the local government for the work his company had performed in a rural commune. Since people there are ‘poor and of low *dân trí* (intellectual level)’, he said, it was difficult for the local government to collect local contributions to pay for the construction items. The Vietnamese term *dân trí/trình độ dân trí* (intellectual level of the people) is resonant of the Chinese term *suzhi* (human quality); it categorizes people and regions according to their levels of human capital development. Like *suzhi*, *dân trí* similarly suggests a gradient of human development measured on people’s educational level, their knowledge of science and technologies, their social and bodily behaviour, their awareness of the law, and so forth (Anagnost, 2004; Kipnis, 2007; Nguyen & Locke, 2014). In the party state’s views, raising the level of *dân trí* is considered essential to developing the human resource needed for the nation’s causes of industrialization and modernization.<sup>11</sup> In popular discourse, residential areas with a high concentration of educated middle-class people are said to be of high *dân trí*; rural and mountainous areas are poor, because they have low *dân trí*; certain people commit crimes

and violate the law for the same reason. *Dân trí* is supposed to have a causal correlation with human development, i.e. because you have low *dân trí*, you are poor and unruly, and vice versa; low *dân trí* thus is deemed both the cause and the effect of poverty, disorder and underdevelopment (see similar discussions of population quality (*chất lượng dân số*) by Gammeltoft (2014) and consciousness (*ý thức*) by Harms (2016)).

Underlying *dân trí* is the ability to self-govern and self-improve, which has since the early twentieth century been viewed by many Vietnamese as important for the development of their country. As Erik Harms (2016) shows, for example, residents of an up-market residential quarter in Ho Chi Minh City frequently make the link between the individual ability to self-govern and the level of civility that a community can attain. To raise the standards of *dân trí* lies at the heart of the socialization project. As articulated in the 1997 government decree (Note 5), *socialization* involves mobilizing the whole society to improve the standards of education, health and culture, as well as the physical and spiritual development of the people. It aims at 'building communities of responsibility' that include government agencies, mass associations, economic organizations, local enterprises, individuals and families. Its goal is to ensure social justice, which 'is not only expressed in terms of enjoyment, meaning that the people are cared for by the state and society, but also in the sense of the people contributing to society depending on their actual capacity'. Further guidelines in the 2000s encouraged private investment in social services and public goods through the waiver of income tax, land rental fees or other incentives.<sup>12</sup> These documents insist that *socialization* does not mean that the state steps back from its responsibility for the wellbeing of the people. It still cares, they reassure, but the state's care has to be optimized through the responsibility of the people to care for themselves, their family and their community. The moulding of the 'socialist person' continues to be the goal of development, it seems, yet the methods to achieve it have been recast as a matter of citizens striving to accumulate human capitals to be worthy members of society.

### **Moral mobilization, socialist practices and community processes**

The responsabilization of individuals for their own wellbeing goes hand in hand with steering their moral orientation towards benevolently helping other people, as Muehlebach (2012) observes in post-industrial Italy. What differs in this case is how *socialization* simultaneously draws on the impetus of the new economy, socialist ideals and a reinvention of traditional values. To contribute to the socializing project is often framed as a moral obligation rooted in the Vietnamese tradition of mutual support. Official letters sent out to garner contributions to socialization causes often start out with the following phrase:<sup>13</sup>

In the spirit of 'whole leaves covering for torn ones' [*lá lành đùm lá rách*, Vietnamese idiom on mutual help], sharing the burden of the households and regions



that are still in difficulty, assisting in the improvement of the material and spiritual life of these households and providing the conditions for them to overcome the difficulties in order to have a stable life [...].

The Fatherland Front is a national organ that coordinates mass associations such as the Women's Union or the Elderly Association, state-sponsored grass-roots institutions created under state socialism for political mobilization that remain important for political communication. The Front issues yearly calls for donations to various funds, the most well-known of which are the Fund for the Poor and the Fund for Child Protection. Often, it sends an official letter down the administrative hierarchy to villages or urban residential units, following receipt of which local leaders collect donations from individual households. In most cases, the minimum donation is fixed locally, often 20,000 VND in the country and 50,000 VND in the city. Lists of donors are then publicly displayed; the ones I came across showed that quite a few people donate more than the recommended sum. Mass associations also collect from their members; companies, administrative sectors or private businesses from their employees. Emulative campaigns are staged within sectors, communities and organizations, producing titles and prizes for those who best express their socializing spirit. State managers are asked to write down their reflections on the implementation of *socialization* in their units, identifying its achievements and shortcomings.<sup>14</sup> These practices are reminiscent of state socialist emulative drives in which moral incentives were used to encourage mass actions for the sake of socialist production (MacLean, 2013).

A movement of 'doing charity' (*làm từ thiện*) in urban Vietnam has also emerged, involving numerous spontaneous groups of people collecting donations for the poor and the disadvantaged. Individuals with some level of stardom or media attention vie to demonstrate their acts of charity in the eyes of the public. Quite a few middle-class professionals I know often organize charity trips within small groups of friends or families, bringing clothes and food to the poor in mountainous areas; these deeds are chronicled in their Facebook posts. Frequently, I receive invitations to charity dinners or events, often by professionals or business people who want to help orphans, poor ethnic minorities, disabled people, or people struck by natural disasters. Private businesses do not spare efforts in making themselves known as socially responsible; large corporations, such as VinGroup or Vinamilk, all have their own charity programmes. On the state-controlled media and social media platforms alike, the talk of 'doing charity' (*làm từ thiện*) is pervasive, and actually performing it in some form marks one's moral status. While this gives the impression that the moral impetus of giving has taken on hitherto unknown urgency, it displays parallels to the charity movements by the native elites of colonial Vietnam, which solidified their social dominance *vis-à-vis* the poor masses (Nguyen-Vo, 2008).

Contestation and tension do arise around *socialization*; people commonly express scepticism, pointing out its underlying privatizing logics and the

contradiction between these and the collectivist references. Hanh, a professional woman, noted the irony that as an unmarried woman in her late 30s, stigmatized for her singlehood, she had recently been given a 'cultured family' title, which is awarded to harmonious families with law-abiding, hard-working and educated members (see Leshkowich, 2014 for an elaboration of the 'cultured family'). It turned out she had received the title due to diligent contributions to her residential unit's donations to *socialization* causes. When I asked what she thought of the socialization policy, Hanh said: 'Socialization of what? It is just nonsense to get money out of your pocket!' All the same, she diligently contributes the sums that local cadres ask for, primarily to be on good terms with the cadres, who are also her neighbours, and because the sums are relatively insignificant in respect of her income.

Those who are not as well-off as Hanh, for example migrant parents with children at school age, are not able to take the burdens of *socialization* so lightly, given the onerous payments for social services and social causes. A parent recently posted on Facebook a printed list of contributions for the school year 2017–2018 that their child's school demanded. Amounting to more than nine million *dong*, almost 20 times the formal yearly school fee, the list includes items such as extra lessons, school repairs and contributions to charity and educational funds.<sup>15</sup> By posting the list, however, the parent was defying the excessiveness of the expected contributions rather than the contributions *per se*; half of that amount, about 10 times the school fees, would still be seen as somewhat acceptable. My informants frequently cite such school contributions as one of the main household expenditures that they have to earn cash income for (see also Duong, 2015). Yet, they would rather not criticize it publicly: 'If you make a noise about it, the first ones to suffer will be your children. Better try to meet the demands so that your children can study in peace', said Hoa, a migrant waste trader, mother of two sons in lower secondary school.

Besides, defaulting on contributions can mark one down as a social deviant. There are cases of people having local authorities' damning assessments inserted into their autobiographical statement (*lý lịch*), due to their failure to contribute to *socialization*. The autobiographical statement is a form of *curriculum vitae* that used to be the basis for assessment of one's class status and political standing. Although now of reduced significance, it continues to be used in important procedures (see Leshkowich, 2014). To be valid, the statement requires certification by the local authorities, which in most cases the latter would readily provide. In these instances, however, the authorities included commentaries such as: 'The family has not followed the line of contributions collected by the village' (in the statement of a young woman preparing for university admission); or, 'he has no previous criminal records, but he and his family have not been observing the regulations of the local government' (in the statement of a young man preparing for employment in Japan). After these accounts had been publicized on social media, prompting critiques about the compulsory nature of the 'voluntary contributions', a representative of the local authorities concerned made the following response:<sup>16</sup>

Some contributions are considered voluntary, yet in practice they had been voted for by more than 90% of the local people, and the calls for contribution are implemented as part of the resolution of the Commune People's Council. Mr Hung's family had the right not to make the voluntary contributions, yet the commune authorities had called on them many times to contribute. Mr Hung's family owes the missing contributions not because of their difficult circumstances, but because of their refusal to accept the [legitimacy] of the contributions.

Implicit in the local leader's response is a logic that he seems to take for granted: by not accepting the legitimacy of the contributions that had been endorsed by the community and the local leadership, Mr Hung's family is violating a certain code of conduct as community members. Whereas the aforementioned statements of senior leaders indicate an underlying intent in involving private actors, this local cadre, as many others, seems to be more driven by the idea of a society in which individual actions can be made morally relevant and socially meaningful. This idea clashes with the privatizing undercurrents of *socialization*, and yet its continued relevance makes the contradictory goals of socialization possible. More than the likelihood of punishment, this implicit code of conduct explains the reluctance of the migrant mother above to complain about the plethora of school contributions and Hanh's reticence to refuse the 'voluntary contributions' to her residential unit. Despite their awareness that *socialization* implies a turn towards individualized responsibilities, their wish to 'stay in the good books' of the local government or the school is not distinguishable from that to be seen as persons responsible for their families and to society. What is noticeable in these accounts is how individuals' actions and behaviour have moral repercussions for their families and how the family's moral standing is held accountable for the social outcomes that individuals might achieve. It suggests that familialism, the idea of the family as a naturalized locus of care and responsibility, often provides the cultural ground for new prudentialist logics (Nguyen *et al.*, 2017). The following vignettes from Spring District (see also Nguyen, 2018, Chapter 7) further attest to this complex mixture between mechanisms of control and moral means of mobilization in the production of the Vietnamese 'ethical citizen' under *socialization*.

### **Socialization in Spring District: an exemplary person and the poor household**

Spring District is known for local people's long-term engagement with the migrant waste trade, dealing in recyclable wastes from urban households and businesses. Following the reform, urban waste trading has developed into a thriving economy in which local people are closely involved as itinerant waste traders, transporters and depot operators (DiGregorio, 1994; Mitchell, 2008; Nguyen, 2018). Waste trading is precarious and stigmatized. Yet, the viable

income it generates and the spirit of giving driven by local people's aspirations for public recognition in the home place have facilitated *socialization* in this locality.

### **Vignette one: an exemplary giver**

Thanks to the help of Ms Thao, an experienced waste trader from Spring District, I finally had the opportunity to meet the legendary Madam Q., whom I had heard about since the beginning of my fieldwork. Whenever I told local people, including government officials, that I was researching the waste trade, they would invariably mention her as the pioneer, the path-breaker, the patron of the trade, often in deferential tones. Stories about her assumed an almost mythical quality, depicting her as an extremely wealthy waste trader from the district who started out as a trash picker, then operated one of the few waste depots in Hanoi throughout the subsidy period (*thời bao cấp*), and raised her sons to be successful private entrepreneurs in the steel-making business after the reform. Apart from her mythical rags-to-riches life, she appears saintly on account of her well-known good deeds for her natal village of Green Spring. Besides the worshipping temple of her lineage, she had financed the construction of the commune's graveyard for war martyrs and the former nursery of the commune (the nursery has been now rebuilt once more into a modern facility through a financing package from a large corporation whose director comes from the village). She also made major contributions to the reconstruction of the local Buddhist pagoda. Her giving seems strategically aimed at selective public works that have strong emotional relevance to local people, including those that are directly under the mandate of the local government.

I met Madam Q. in her house on a main road, where Hanoi's first waste depots used to be. She looked like a queen, dressed in shiny silk attire, looking pale-skinned and well-nourished amidst her antique wooden furniture. In a rather patronizing tone, she answered my questions briefly, giving the impression that her career and reputation were so well-known that there was no need asking about them. Her two sons were operating major iron-producing factories in Hai Phong City, she said, and her family had performed innumerable deeds of public virtue (*công đức*) that everybody in the district knew about; I just needed to ask such and such person in the local government. In our conversation, I learnt that she was in fact born in Hanoi rather than in Spring District, as I had often been told, although her parents had come from there. Madam Q. said that she had never had to work hard in her life, but always had other people do things for her; she spoke of her family's political connections during the central planning period that allowed her business then to thrive. She had been successful because of her ability to 'think big', she said, not just labouring away like people from Spring District do. Even as Madam Q. sought to distinguish herself from the people who so venerate her, she had become an inspiring myth for them, a kind of patron saint for the waste

trade, an ideal that they looked up to without knowing, or the need to know, exactly who she really was. People's belief that she had persisted and became so wealthy against all odds inspires them to emulate her economic and social success. The myth about her seems a plausible account of how they could transform themselves as people working with waste through accumulating wealth and contributing to the development of their home place. Her life and deeds of 'public virtues' exemplify the place and its moral essence: the will to rise out of poverty and low social status due to one's enterprising spirit and self-reliance; an exemplar of striving.

Such myth-making not only carves out a social space for people's actions (Harms, 2011), but also constitutes a moral resource through which local people give meanings to their actions, meanings that are essential for the socializing project. Ms Thao, my enthusiastic guide on that day, was an avid admirer of Madam Q. At over 50, she had been operating a waste depot together with her husband in Hanoi for 15 years; her two sons and daughter were all married and operating their own depots in different parts of Hanoi. Although the whole extended family practically lived in Hanoi, their social and public life mainly took place in the village, where their houses were empty most of the time, but where, in Ms Thao's words, 'our ancestors and grandparents are'. The family regularly returned for communal and familial events and local leaders could then easily collect their contributions to local causes. When we once discussed the reconstruction of Green Spring commune's Buddhist pagoda, Ms Thao proudly announced to me that her family had contributed one of the impressive timber pillars on the upper floor of the pagoda's new pavilion.

The readiness of Ms Thao's family to make these contributions was not exceptional, nor is the exemplary case of Madam Q. Belonging to the home place constitutes a defining feature of the Vietnamese moral person and gaining recognition there constitutes an important moral incentive (Schlecker, 2005). 'Public giving for virtue' (*công đức*) is a tradition that extends far back into the pre-colonial past (Nguyen-Vo, 2008). People's motivations for giving are varied, either to gain prestige for their family, to accumulate virtues for their offspring, or to showcase their success. Often these motives are all present, as Binh Nguyen (2016) shows in a poignant account of giving by a wealthy female owner of a private enterprise in Ho Chi Minh City who sought to build a network of patronage in her northern native village. Similar to the case of Madam Q., her giving is promoted by the local government through community and administrative processes that glorify the generous givers, by default successful self-enterprising individuals, as exemplary persons for others to emulate. Meanwhile, the localized practices of *socialization* help to give a public face to the act of giving targeted at the home place. Most of my informants, including those who have migrated more than a thousand kilometres to Ho Chi Minh City, respond positively to the appeal of local authorities for donations to social causes or public works. As looked-down-upon waste traders in the city, contributing to these causes is for many a token of belonging and membership.

The outcomes of the mobilization that deftly plays into these translocal dynamics and exemplary mechanisms are such that the local government has been able to mobilize significant resources for improving public facilities. Schools and kindergartens in Spring District are well-equipped, its roads are smoothly paved and wide; to the pride of local people, they are visibly superior to other localities in the region. Local cadres told me that unlike poorer localities where the local government struggles to mobilize funds, their calls for contributions tend to be met with positive responses. Indeed, the socializing project is made meaningful for local people through mechanisms that appeal to their sense of belong to the home place and its people. The next vignette reveals how the same processes construct the anti-hero of *socialization*, namely the poor households, as not living up to the benchmarks of citizenship in the new economy.

### **Vignette two: in support of the poor households**

One evening, I was asked by Ms Giang, a commune Women's Union cadre, to accompany her by motorbike on an assignment that she was supposed to fulfil quickly. The provincial Women's Union had received a housing grant from a private bank for 25 poor households in the province (each to receive 40 million VND), and Ms Giang's commune was to nominate five households out of which one would be chosen for funding. The list had been drawn from the commune's official records of poor households and had to be handed in the next day, countersigned by all the village heads and Women's Union leaders of the candidates, so that their eligibility could be further assessed.

When we came to the first village, Mr Duy, the village head, a young man in his late 20s, and his mother received us. Previously urban waste traders, they were now relatively large agricultural producers, owning a harvester and hiring five labourers during critical periods. Ms Giang explained the selection process, upon which his mother confirmed that the household proposed from their village was 'very miserable' (*khô lắm*). The two went on to describe that the wife was almost paralyzed and the husband was chronically ill; the couple could not do anything for their own livelihoods while their children did not help much, being dirt poor themselves: their house was one of the worst in the village. While they were clearly genuinely interested in helping the family, a tone of pity and exasperation was noticeable in their rendering of the family's circumstances.

We then came to the house of Ms Mai, another village head, where we were also joined by her husband, a retired cadre. Ms Mai asked why the man she had earlier recommended to the commune social protection officer for any available support was not included in the list. The man's two children were disabled, she said, and he had an Agent Orange allowance (soldiers or combatants who were potentially exposed to the defoliant called Agent Orange sprayed by the US

forces during the war belong to a welfare category). Ms Giang responded that his name had been mentioned but the commune leaders had said that he did not deserve the support, since he had left his wife for another woman. But, Ms Mai said, it was the man's brother who left his wife; he himself still lived with his wife and they were in dire circumstances – their house needed repairs urgently. Ms Mai's husband added that the couple were 'mentally slow' (*đơ đờ*) and their children are 'pretty doomed' with their own disabilities, shaking his head: 'they are not up to much by way of making a living'. Ms Giang assured them that she would try to add this household to the list in consultation with the commune leaders. She then asked Ms Mai whether the household already had the land use right document for their residential land; if they had not, it could be a complication for the programme. The two women also talked about the possibility of support by their relatives. Since building a small house costs at least 100 million VND, it would be pointless to secure the housing grant for somebody who could not mobilize additional resources.

And so it went. The mere collection of these signatures seemed to set in motion community processes in which people are sorted into categories and networks of patronage are formed. One striking feature of the conversations between Ms Giang and the village leaders was the latter's quasi-competition for 'speaking suffering' (*kể khổ*) on behalf of the poor households they put forward, namely to demonstrate that each of them was the poorest, the most pitiful and the most incapacitated. It seems that their sufferings must be made into a kind of spectacle in order for them to be rendered worth helping. The subtext of this strange competition was a comparative evaluation of the ability to enterprise (*biết làm ăn*) between the poor households and others. The housing grant that Ms Giang was administering was not from regular programmes of the Union. One of its main activities is to work with the Bank for Social Policy (*Ngân hàng chính sách*) to dispense credits for poor households (with per-capita monthly income less than 700,000 VND) and near-poor households (per-capita monthly income less than 1 million VND). The credit amounts to 15 million VND for near-poor and 30 million for poor households, at 0.6 per cent annual interest over three years (to be repaid in instalments from the fourth year). Ms Giang said that most poor households were rather 'desperate' (*bần cùng*); some did not dare to take the credit, not knowing what to do with it. As I commented that 30 million VND would help if one wanted to open an urban waste depot (which would cost 50–80 million VND), Ms Giang smiled and explained: 'People who dare thinking about opening a waste depot would by no means be in such a situation as to be classified as a poor household'. In her logic, if one is enterprising enough to 'go out' and brave the hardships to earn money as the others do, one would not end up being poor; one would be a contributor to the welfare of others rather than the receiver of others' support.

The discourse of poverty in these local processes frames it as a matter of moral strength: the poor are either incapacitated, or they are passive, unable to take a long-term perspective, and do not have the will to work themselves

out of poverty. At the same time that support is given to a small number of the 'deserving poor', such as families affected by Agent Orange, their capacities are measured against the terms of self-enterprise and self-responsibility. As in other settings, the division of the poor into deserving and underserving has the effect of reinforcing the moralization of poverty as the result of one's failure to meet the expectations of citizenship in the new economy. In a time when the value of the person is increasingly cast in the terms of market-oriented self-optimization, the conditions of being helped seem rather punitive: it comes with the pejorative assessment of one's capacity to be a worthy member of society. This is captured in the following statement of the subcontractor mentioned earlier: 'It all boils down to one's level of knowledge and one's will to improve (*ý thức vươn lên*). If you are already uneducated, and on top of that you are lazy, do not want to work, and just spend all that you have, if you do not strive, then it is no wonder that you are poor'. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the informant is articulating the very term that Tania Li (2007) uses for the title of her book (*The will to improve*) on development in highland Indonesia: the discourse of self-improvement is powerful in creating distractions from fundamental social inequalities.

### **The moral subject in a privatizing economy**

The mobilization of resources through *socialization* is underscored by a governing rationality that marries self-governance with socialist control, privatization with a vision of society in which individual actions can be made meaningful for people as members of families and communities. It weaves together ideas of the *new prudentialist* self, an ethic of the striving individual and the socialist ethos to produce the moral subject that is at once enterprising and giving; self-governed and yet governable by the state. The moral foundation of citizenship communicated through *socialization* is an ability to care for one's family through private means and a heightened sense of compassion for the disadvantaged other. What had been collective responsibilities have been redefined as private responsibilities, much as has happened in other global contexts, both post-socialist and post-Keynesian (Muehlebach, 2012; Nguyen *et al.*, 2017). If *socialization* used to be about the collectivization of resources for the joint ownership of the *whole society*, it now evokes *the whole society* not for the ownership of the means of production, but for the ownership of responsibilities in care. But even as *socialization* emphasizes individualized responsibilities, it continues to refer to 'the whole society'. Clearly, the sensibilities that are linked to a long history of moral education in which people were sensitized to the goodness of collective welfare, and by extension that of the socialist state, continue to need fostering.

The moral education enacted through *socialization* deploys exemplary mechanisms that historically have been the mainstay of governmentality in



Vietnam (MacLean, 2013). Through the glorification of exemplary givers, an ethos of giving is promoted, building on community processes and moral economic ties that people construct with the home place. The same mechanisms construct the anti-heroes of *socialization* through the category of ‘the poor household’, the beneficiaries of others’ compassion and state care. This dualism in the construction of the ethical subject is essential to the *new prudentialism* at work elsewhere (Inda, 2006; Kaya, 2012); in Vietnam, it is also grounded in a moral framework emerging from the anxieties and aspirations of market socialism, that of the striving individual (Yan, 2013). As such, *socialization* divides people into contributors, cast as responsible, capable and morally superior citizens, and those failing to do so, constructed as either irresponsible or lacking in human capitals (*dân trí*), and thus morally inferior. Through producing the category of the poor household, the Vietnamese state puts forward the idea of welfare as conditional on the most essential incapacities, similar to the *dibao* (Five Guarantees) recipients in China (Chaudhry, 2016; Cho, 2013; Nguyen & Chen, 2017). If the constitution of poverty as a field of knowledge and intervention for the sake of government had led to the emergence of *the social* in the last century (Dean, 1992), nowadays the means-testing weaves in with moral discourse to justify the state’s divestment from care. A community of the poor is thereby invoked as an object of compassion for *the whole society*, while insinuating that the state’s burden lies with those unable to care for themselves, deflecting attention from its turn away from responsibilities for a broader base of wellbeing. Meanwhile, the self-responsible and self-enterprising subject championed through *socialization* is reaffirmed through the moral construction of the poor as unable or unwilling to accumulate the human capitals demanded by the market.

Notwithstanding the contestations and tension it generates, *socialization* strikes a chord with enduring moral ideas about social life. Couched in the terms of helping the disadvantaged and developing the home place or building the nation, the moral logics communicated through *socialization* resonate with people, especially insofar as they are embedded in localized social dynamics and relations. New prudentialist logic appears to sit well with enduring structures of feelings and moral economic practices, giving a moral face to restructuring and privatization in one of the remaining outposts of socialism. In 2016, the Vietnamese government sped up the liberalization of the economy through a series of new policies. While the further ‘equitization’ of state-owned enterprises received attention (Le, 2017), the equally significant, yet hardly noticed, shift in healthcare financing towards full reliance on out-of-pocket payment and health insurance was part of this move. The idea of replacing school teachers’ tenure with a contract system also came up during this time<sup>17</sup> – it has not materialized so far, but the likelihood of a similar shift as in healthcare seems around the corner, all in the name of *socialization*. Privatization, it seems, can only thrive by feeding off the values of what it is aimed at undermining, namely solidarity structures and collective ideals that underline what used to be its antidote, *the social*.

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## Notes

- 1 VSG discussion thread on Socialization of Education and Health Sectors, February 2011.
- 2 See article at <http://thoibaotaichinhvietnam.vn/pages/thoi-su/2015-06-13/xa-hoi-hoa-khong-dong-nghia-voi-tu-nhan-hoa-21723.aspx> (Socialization is not coterminous with privatization), accessed on 20 February 2018.
- 3 See entry by the Communist Magazine at <http://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/Tri-thuc-viet-nam/Tri-thuc/2013/20369/Vi-con-nguoi-xa-hoi-chu-nghia.aspx> (Towards the socialist person).
- 4 See discussion at [www.thesaigontimes.vn/127757/Hieu-the-nao-ve-xa-hoi-hoa.html](http://www.thesaigontimes.vn/127757/Hieu-the-nao-ve-xa-hoi-hoa.html). (How to understand the term socialization?), accessed on 23 February 2018.
- 5 Government Decree No 90-CP, 21.08.1997 on 'The orientation and policy in socializing activities in education, health and culture'.
- 6 Nguyen Tan Dung, 'Ensuring better social security and welfare is a major component of the 2011–2020 socio-economic development strategy', available at <http://www.dcrd.gov.vn>, accessed on 3 March 2014.
- 7 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, available online at <http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/NuocCHXHCNVietNam/ThongTinTongHop?categoryId=920&articleId=10052989>, accessed on 23 February 2018.
- 8 Online question-answer session on health insurance at <https://tuoitre.vn/bao-hiem-y-te-xua-tan-noi-lo-tang-vien-phi-1356703.htm> (Health insurance takes away the worries about hospital fees).
- 9 See reports at <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/kinh-doanh/vien-phi-tang-2-7-lan-tu-thang-3-2016-285659.html>; <https://suckhoe.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/suc-khoe/tu-1-6-50-benh-vien-tang-gia-dich-vu-khong-bao-hiem-y-te-3593257.html>.
- 10 <http://soha.vn/dua-tien-luong-bac-si-vao-gia-dich-vu-y-te-thanh-tuu-nam-2017-cua-nganh-y-20180119144903458.htm> (The incorporation of doctor salaries into the prices of health services is a success of the health sector in 2017), accessed on 28 February 2018.
- 11 The Party's views on the development of the country's human resource during the times of rapid industrialization and modernization. *Tap chi Cong San (The Communist Review)*, available at [www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/Nghiencuu-Traodoi/2012/](http://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/Home/Nghiencuu-Traodoi/2012/)

17716/Quan-diem-cua-Dang-ve-phat-trien-nguon-nhan-luc-trong-thoi.aspx, dated 10 September 2012.

12 Government decree No 59/2014/ NĐ-CP on ‘Amendments to the government decree No 69/2008/ NĐ-CP on the policy to encourage socialization of activities in education, training, health, culture, sport and environment’; Government decree No 69/2008/NĐ-CP on ‘The policy to encourage socialization of activities in education, training, health, culture, sport and environment’.

13 Field note, call for contributions to the Child Protection Fund on a notice board.

14 See for example ‘Some measures for good implementation of socialization work: A Report on the application of initiatives’ by Kim Long B Kindergarten, Can Tho province, available at [http://cantho.edu.vn/thpthotnot/\\_content/tin\\_tuc\\_don\\_vi\\_khac/detail/\\_11189700614327552798.html](http://cantho.edu.vn/thpthotnot/_content/tin_tuc_don_vi_khac/detail/_11189700614327552798.html), accessed on 27 February 2018, or ‘Report on the implementation of socialization by Trang Luong Kindergarten, Dong Trieu District, Quang Ninh province’, dated 18 May 2016.

15 See coverage at <http://kenh14.vn/vu-phieu-thu-hon-9-trieu-dong-hoc-dau-nam-ban-thong-bao-khong-phai-truong-phat-ra-nhung-la-nhung-khoan-thu-truong-du-kien-20170909120543461.chn>, accessed 27 February 2018.

16 <https://tuoitre.vn/cha-no-7-trieu-dong-gop-con-khong-duoc-ket-nap-dang-20171119114225826.htm> (Father owing 7 million in contributions, son not admitted to the party), accessed on 27 February 2018.

17 Coverage of National Assembly discussion at <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/thoi-su/quoc-hoi/bo-bien-che-giao-vien-moi-la-de-xuat-cua-bo-giao-duc-378504.html> (Abolishing Teachers’ Tenure is Only a Proposal from the Ministry of Education), accessed on 28 February 2018.

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