

CHANGES IN MARITAL AND FAMILIAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE CHINESE CANTONESE COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY IN HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

This study examines marked changes in marital and familial viewpoints of the Chinese Cantonese community in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Chinese people dwelled in Saigon in the seventeenth century, established several busy areas for trade exchange, and made a considerable contribution to municipal economic and cultural development. Possessing a rich immigration history, the Chinese Cantonese people not only carefully preserved their culture but also fostered modern culture. This research was conducted using a qualitative and quantitative design with the assistance of eighty-two Cantonese participants' interviews and a questionnaire survey along with previous research to fill a lacuna of literature. The first conclusion is that the Cantonese Chinese people adopted new perspectives on marriage aims, gender equality, sexual division of labour, and family models. This highlights the importance of real love and mutual understanding when establishing a family. The Chinese Cantonese women hold a favourable social position and maintain gender equality in family income and child upbringing. When managing a family, the Chinese Cantonese show a strong inclination toward a nuclear family model, while putting their parents' role in high regard. Second, I justify three key reasons

that caused such changes; they are: (1) globalisation and acculturation; (2) urban lifestyle; and (3) the post-Đổi mới rising commercialisation of Vietnam.

Keywords: Chinese Cantonese, family, marriage, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

Marriage, in all societies, is a significant milestone in an individual's life, marked by the union of two people who intend to spend their lives together. It also reflects attitudes, beliefs, and notions of a specific society (Westermarck 1891). Despite a diversity of functions, marriage fundamentally and traditionally relies on the couple's responsibility for childcare. Malinowski (2001) introduces marriage as a contract for reproduction. Meanwhile, the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland (1951) defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman, recognising the children born to the woman as legitimate offspring of both partners. Furthermore, the terms "marriage" and "family" intertwine, as the birth or adoption of children and the acknowledged relationships of adults nourish a family (Gilliland 2020). The marriage-and-family process is a crucial evolutionary process that satisfies human sexual instincts and completes cultural and social reproduction. Contemporary marriage begins with love and develops on the basis of mutual understanding and sympathy. Marriage also reflects the culture's expectations about family, gender roles, and labour distribution. As such, children bear the responsibility for cultural inheritance and family traditions.

This study examines the major changes in relation to marriage and family among the Chinese Cantonese in Ho Chi Minh City, locally called and identified "Hoa people"¹ by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). This ethnic group is known as a typical example of native cultural preservation and strong social cohesion, as well as for their high values of marriage and family. The Chinese Cantonese who fled south were politically accepted by Nguyễn Lords and settled in former Cham territories in the late seventeenth century (Son 1994; Tana 1999; Phan 2005; Wheeler 2015; Lê 2018). Historical figures like Trần Thượng Xuyên (Chen Shangchuan)² and Dương Ngạn Địch (Yang Yandi),³ who were loyal to the Ming dynasty (Trần 2002a; Huỳnh 2018), settled down in Cochinchina⁴ and assisted the Nguyễn Lords to maintain trade-off in power with Trịnh Lords in Tonkin

(Son 2004; Huỳnh 2017). Thanks to the Chinese Cantonese refugees (Lê 2018),⁵ untilled lands were transformed into hectic towns like Mỹ Tho,⁶ Hà Tiên, and Đồng Nai⁷ in the late seventeenth century (Trần et al. 1987; Son 1994; Cheung 2002), and they maintained this advantage until the end of the Vietnam War (Trần 2002b; Nguyễn and Nguyễn 2020; Nguyễn C L 2022; Trịnh 2022). The end of the Vietnam War encouraged the Communist state to exclude the Chinese Cantonese from economic control.⁸ Despite the exclusion of many Chinese after the war, they continued to contribute to Ho Chi Minh City's economy (Nguyen 2013).

The Chinese Cantonese group is one of five main Chinese-origin groups in Ho Chi Minh City, along with the Teochew, Hakka, Hokkien, and Hainanese (Hà 2022a). Despite little spoken and written evidence, it is possible that the Chinese Cantonese people still followed their historical perspectives on marital and familial customs. Wang (2014) hypothesises that there were two main Ming dynasty models: the royal family and the clan family. Confucian ethics continue to be rooted in traditional Chinese family models and cultural practices. However, living in a mixed-race environment, such as southern Vietnam, means their cultural patterns are subject to change. Lê Quý Đôn's (2018) writings reveal the Chinese Cantonese refugees' adaptability to other cultures while maintaining their identities. They did so by forming a system of pagodas and social associations, at Hội Quán (congregation halls), for example, to organise their communal activities and meetings as well as pay homage to their ancestors and traditional deities (Nguyen 2013; Hà 2022a). They still attempt to establish social and family cohesion and have thus maintained the spirit of family. Traditionally, the Chinese Cantonese people hold marriage and family in high regard, and a matchmaker plays an essential role in marriages. Parental orientation and relatives' bias also play a decisive role in their children's wedded lives (Li 2016). However, parents occasionally make suggestions for their children's partners, and in most modern societies, younger people tend to prefer love and mutual understanding as the basis of their marriage.

In this article, I examine their transformation with regard to marriage and family, which hold importance to their life cycle and are associated with happiness, children, and wealth (Watson and Ebrey 1991; Shigega 2003; Wang 2014; Chen et al. 2018). Focusing on the cultural changes based on the factors of globalisation and acculturation, urban lifestyle, and commercialisation, I propose two key research questions in this project: (1) How have Chinese Cantonese marriage and

family views changed in Chi Minh City? and (2) How do factors such as globalisation, acculturation, urban lifestyle, and commercialisation influence these perspectives?

EXISTING LITERATURE AND ACADEMIC LACUNA

There is a substantial corpus of studies on the Chinese in Vietnamese literature. According to Wang (2014), family rules play a vital role in traditional families, based on the aristocratic model of the Ming and Qing social hierarchy. Besides, the importance of marriage and family is stressed by Shan (2013) in that “the ruled and the young were legally and ethically subject to the unilateral ‘dressing-service’ to the ruling class represented by the Son of Heaven and the aged personified by parents” (821). Family members pay tribute to their antecedents and strictly conform to traditional family rules, despite differences in social strata and continuing industrialisation as key reasons for marital and familial reforms in Chinese cultural practices (Xu et al. 2014). These authors generally conclude that the Chinese Cantonese have firmly upheld their family traditions and complied with Confucian principles.

Vietnamese-written articles and books also shed light on Chinese lives in Vietnam from the past to the present. Trần Khánh (2001) traces the Chinese diaspora’s history in relation to territorial expansion, festivals, rituals, and traditional creeds. Not only do they foster a thriving market in the major cities of Cochinchina (Dương 2006), but the Chinese have also built coalitions with the Kinh (another name that describes the ethnic Vietnamese) and the Khmer to enrich their culture (Ethnic Minorities Association of Literature and Art 2014) and heighten familialism, compatriotism, and community support (Hà 2021). Nguyễn Duy Bình (2005) investigates the Chinese Cantonese’s efforts in maintaining traditional ritual preservation and the model of a patrilineal family. However, the process of industrialisation challenges the capacity of these cultural practices. Trần (2013a) furthermore examines the Chinese’s psychological, social, and educational background to explain recent changes to their social and cultural norms. Similar to Nguyễn’s study (2005), Trần (2015) asserts that filial piety and Confucianism still have a broad impact on Chinese residents’ daily lives, even if Phan An (2005) worries about the erosion of traditional customs among the young generation. Phan An (2005) examines the changes in marital and familial relationships among the Chinese Cantonese people, asserting that marriage serves as

a guarantee of loyalty. This statement was verified by 64.4% of An's respondents. In a 2005 survey, 77.6% of participants emphasised the significance of love as their primary motivation for marriage, while only 56.0% expressed a preference for parental selection of their marriage partner. The remaining group did not respond. I surmise that the unique display of Chinese Cantonese marital and familial customs in Ho Chi Minh City offers a fresh perspective on marriage, challenging the common belief among the Chinese Cantonese population that they would not start a family, and presenting two different perspectives on this matter.

Many studies also focus on Chinese Cantonese social paradigms and cultural changes, such as Nguyễn (2000, 2005) and Phan (2005). However, these studies, spanning a vast geographical area, did not yield specific conclusions applicable to all Chinese groups. Although the statistics and analyses of Trần in 2013 and 2015 have contributed scholarly insights into the Chinese Cantonese, the current literature still lacks a comprehensive analysis on marital and familial status. Addressing this gap, this article aims to examine how the Chinese Cantonese people's concept of marriage and family in Ho Chi Minh City has changed and the factors that influence this change.

METHODOLOGY

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this study employs the method of participant observation (Fourniau 1991; Nguyễn 1994) executed in Chợ Lớn, a “China town” of Ho Chi Minh City, which is covered by Districts 5, 6, and 11. I collected data from 82 Chinese Cantonese people in January 2022, May 2023, and June 2023.⁹ During my field trip, I consistently kept in touch with my informants. One of my close Cantonese-speaking friends helped me with my communication with the informants. I conducted my fieldwork three times. The first time, I requested the informants to complete a well-prepared survey form. For the second and third times, I visited selected participants' homes and implemented an in-depth interview. The selection of participants in the interview was based on their age group, educational background, and gender. When performing this task, the informants confirmed their participation. However, I had two main problems. First, there are different opinions between the young and old generations based on their own educational background, age groups, and gender. Second, there is a dearth of Sinophone writing materials, so I was unable to utilise textual analysis.

I categorised my informants in terms of their age range, gender, educational background, and marital status. A total of 82 people confirmed their participation. Concerning age groups, I recruited 55 participants who were 18–25 years old, 25 participants who were 26–55 years old, and those who were over 55 years old. This selection helped me gain the interviewees' different perspectives. Besides, there were 43 male participants (52.4%) and 39 female participants (47.6%), with 36 married and 46 unmarried participants. Regarding educational background, graduate interviewees accounted for 86.6% (seventy-one informants), and the rest were ex-graduates with 13.4% (eleven informants).

After collecting data, I utilised qualitative and quantitative methods. First, I designed a questionnaire with detailed information on age, gender, educational background, and opinions. Also, I combined this with an in-depth interview. I asked the participants three questions: (1) What are your perspectives on marriage? (2) Can you work out in your mind an understanding of marrying an outlander? and (3) What is your opinion on the sexual division of labour inside a family? I also maintained a bilingual environment, and my Cantonese-speaking interpreter helped me overcome the language barrier during the interviews.

Furthermore, I used a simple quantitative method. Particularly, I imported completed paper-based surveys into the Google Form application. This application successfully retrieved data from the questionnaire, but its primary drawback is its simplistic data visualisation, which may not be as reliable as other platforms like the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) or Stata. To achieve the results below, we recorded and edited all interview files in accordance with ethical compliance.

RESULTS

Marriage Aim Changes

In traditional Cantonese culture, parents or matchmakers often arrange marriages with the primary goal of securing a stable family life and ensuring the continuation of family lineage. Furthermore, as families sought to maintain social standing and reputation by selecting a suitable spouse, children's passivity in their spouse selection was evident in their dependence on parental arrangements (Phan 2005). The Confucian philosophy, which emphasises the importance of social hierarchy, respect for authority, and family loyalty,

has profoundly influenced Cantonese culture, giving marriage and family historical and cultural significance. Confucian values stress the importance of marriage and family as the foundation of society. The Cantonese people believe in the importance of honouring their ancestors and respecting their lineage. For them, marriage and family are essential for preserving family lineage and ensuring the continuity of ancestral traditions. Traditionally, the family lineage is traced through the male line, which is why marriage and family are crucial for maintaining the family's social status and reputation.

However, in Ho Chi Minh City, there are two different opinions on the importance of marriage and family in current Cantonese societies. Not all people agree to consider marriage and family as a compulsory stage of their life. Most young people choose to either stay single or delay marriage until later in their lives. Additionally, young people prioritise love and mutual understanding as the primary reasons for initiating a parental arrangement within their family. To examine this assumption, I conducted a survey and have shown the data as presented in Figure 1.

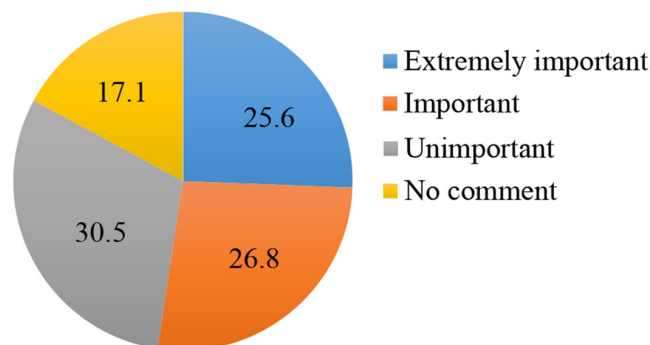


Figure 1: The marriage importance response percentages of Cantonese people in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (January 2022).

While 30.5% of interviewees do not consider marriage significant for a considerable percentage, 52.4% total, 26.8% for importance, and 25.6% of extreme importance, these percentages generally occur in all interviewees. Younger generations have reevaluated the traditional emphasis on marriage and family. Changing societal values, economic factors, and cultural influences partially drive this shift. Although this percentage is lower than other percentages, it shows that as the local economy has grown and urbanisation has increased, young people may prioritise their own goals, interests, and personal freedoms over traditional obligations. However, many informants still value the importance of marriage and family. This means that they still view marriage as a critical aspect of their life cycle and make plans for it.

I conducted an in-depth interview to examine the influence of marital status and age in this case. Unmarried interviewees particularly reject marriage; in contrast, married respondents; assume marriage is a key life event.

To be honest, I do not respect marriage. Marriage can happen in my life, but getting married is not a weighty challenge. Marriage is a bind, and I feel uncomfortable. (interview with a Cantonese male, unmarried, 37 years old, District 5, 18 January 2022)

However, when asked to share personal opinions, married couples stated that reproduction and ancestor worship were aspects that marriage brought to their lives.

Normally, I believe there are slight differences between married and unmarried people. Unmarried individuals view marriage as a restrictive obligation, while married individuals strive to secure their marital happiness and desires before getting married. True happiness should be founded on mutual understanding, respect, and selflessness. (interview with a Cantonese male, 32 years old, married, District 5, 23 May 2023)

Based on the evidence presented, I argue that the Chinese Cantonese people hold conventional views regarding the importance of marriage. In the past, young Cantonese people used to start a family sooner (Phan 2005). Despite delaying marriage and starting a family, the Chinese Cantonese people still hold strong cultural values regarding family building, ensuring that the traditional Confucian values of filial piety, respect for elders, and family harmony are deeply ingrained in many Cantonese people. Individuals continue to prioritise family and marriage as a way to maintain cultural continuity and connection with their heritage, often passing these values down through generations. This perspective is evident among married couples as well as middle-aged and elderly people who have experienced marital life. In contrast, unmarried people tend to show a lack of regard for the institution of marriage. However, as people age, this perspective may shift. Traditional wisdom strongly emphasises the importance of family and community bonds in influencing family norms (Trần 2013b).

In terms of reasons for starting a family, the Chinese Cantonese people in Ho Chi Minh City have undergone significant changes driven by various factors, such as acculturation, urban lifestyles, and economic considerations. In traditional Cantonese society, the primary marriage goals were to secure family lineage, maintain social status, and ensure economic

stability. However, new marriage aims emerged as romantic love became more widely accepted, and many young people began to prioritise emotional compatibility in their partner choices (Hull et al. 2010). Moreover, people viewed marriage as a tool for achieving personal fulfilment and happiness, not just for securing family lineage or social status. The concept of mutual support and partnership became more important, with couples valuing each other's emotional and practical support. This situation is also observed in many Vietnamese and other ethnic groups in Vietnam (Nguyễn 2019; Nguyễn and Đình 2021).

Moreover, reasons to start a family differ across age groups. As Cantonese society became more modern and urbanised, individuals began to value their own choices and preferences over traditional family expectations. This led to a decline in the importance of parental arrangements and matchmakers. The concept of romantic love gained popularity, and many young people began to prioritise their own feelings and emotions in their partner choices.

Marriage requires mutual understanding and appreciation. It is a silent agreement between a man and a woman to create marital happiness. (interview with a Cantonese female, 26 years old, District 11, 18 January 2022)

Ann Swidler (2001) asserts that marriage continues to have a significant impact as a social institution in maintaining a romantic model of intimacy, despite the existence of alternative models of intimacy and love. This has a causal relationship with the cultural resistance of the Chinese Cantonese people as the turbulent history of Vietnam did not weaken its social structure (Nguyễn and Đình 2021). Ancestor worship is at the core of the spiritual life of the Chinese Cantonese. Lê Quý Đôn (2018) examines a series of rituals practiced by the Chinese, which are well-preserved through a network of pagodas and temples associated with their community. The Mother Goddess, for example, is believed to assist the Chinese Cantonese in resettling and improving their business (Võ 2008; Trần 2013b). Due to strong kinship and family ties, certain aspects of globalisation and new lifestyles do not reflect a rational shift in marital norms. Due to their lack of exposure to modern lifestyles and social media, the older generation has largely upheld their traditional values and marriage goals. When I asked an elderly Chinese Cantonese interviewee about this, she provided a detailed explanation.

There is a significant difference in marriage between the 1980s and now. In the past, I was still free to choose my partner. Sometimes, a few parents appealed for the assistance of a matchmaker, but I affirmed that I would attempt to make a lasting love. A man could marry another woman once his wife was unable to bear a son. In contrast, young people can now choose a partner that aligns with their life perspectives. However, they may easily reach a divorce when they encounter discord. Some couples try to adjust their behaviour to maintain marital happiness. (interview with a Chinese Cantonese female, married, 63 years old, District 11, 18 January 2022)

Older people hold marriage and family in high regard, viewing them as cornerstones of their centuries-old traditions. They often oppose the responses of younger individuals, who tend to prioritise marriage and family less in their lives. They believe that these values are essential for maintaining a harmonious family life and preserving social stability. Filial piety is a deeply ingrained value in Chinese culture, emphasising the importance of children caring for their parents. Older Cantonese people may place a strong emphasis on this value, expecting their children to prioritise their needs and well-being over their own desires. Benjamin Wedsworth underscores the importance of mutual responsibility and love in family dynamics (Cancian 1987). Upon closer examination, the concept of “confluent love” (Giddens 1993: 14) emerges as a significant factor in fostering satisfying relationships. However, this same love can also lead to break-ups when relationships deteriorate or are driven by personal motives. In contrast, traditional rituals, social norms, and strict regulations are losing their influence (Giddens 1993). Giddens’s 1993 book *The Transformation of Intimacy*, highlights this shift. Hence, while pragmatism may play a role in the decline of traditional family values, it is not the sole cause. Instead, young people are actively shaping new norms around family and marriage, often without parental intervention.

The Chinese Cantonese community in Ho Chi Minh City is generally involved in disputes over marital and familial matters. Traditionally, parents or matchmakers often arranged Chinese Cantonese marriages, focusing on securing a stable family life and preserving family lineage. Romantic love was limited, and people prioritised practical considerations when selecting a spouse, such as social status, economic stability, and family reputation. However, in recent decades, Cantonese people’s marriage perspectives have undergone significant changes. Some younger individuals may devalue or delay marriage and family, but they may change their views as soon as they start a family. Besides, the younger generation puts greater emphasis on

romantic love, gender equality, greater freedom in partner selection, and the decline of arranged marriage, although the importance of marriage and family values are still well preserved.

Changes in the Sexual Division of Labour, Gender Roles and Family Models

In Eastern societies, agricultural communities rely heavily on labour sources and farm production, requiring collective effort to overcome nature. Meillassoux (1981) argues that the sexual division of labour leads to the socio-political subjugation of women who are expected to submit to men. In this case study, the role of women is influenced by Confucianism, with lasting effects on contemporary life. This influence is apparent in personal beliefs, family hierarchies, and educational systems, with a moderate impact (Barrett 2012; Nguyễn et al. 2021). It also remains prevalent in kinship and other social relationships (Hà 2021). Due to strong social networks, traditional values and beliefs are not easily challenged by outside influences (Lucassen and Laarman 2009). While endogamy is preferred (Pfau-Effinger 2012), the Chinese Cantonese community does not universally accept exogamy or gender equality within families, as shown in Figure 2.

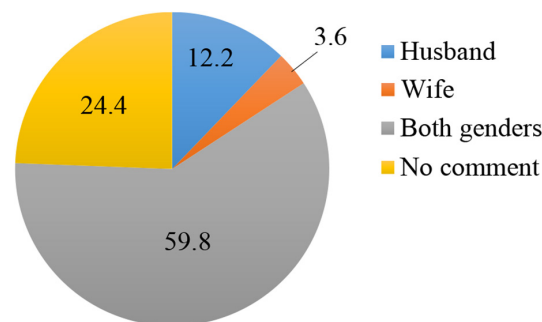


Figure 2: The percentage of sexual labour division in the Cantonese family (January 2022).

After interviewing informants, I discovered that approximately 59.8% of respondents support the idea that both men and women can play roles in the family division of labour. While 24.4% of participants did not provide a comment, 12.2% emphasised the importance of a man's role in the family. Overall, the Chinese Cantonese community has shifted its traditional views on gender roles, with husbands now sharing economic responsibilities with their wives. This is a stark contrast to the past (Johnson 1985), as patrilineality has lost its influence in Ho Chi Minh City, and the younger generations

embrace the idea of a more equal partnership between husband and wife. Their progressive mindset and higher levels of education have led to a more inclusive perspective on marriage.

The focus of marriage used to revolve around determining the sex of children. Traditionally, Chinese culture placed importance on having a son to ensure family labour and increased productivity, in line with Confucian beliefs (Qin 2012). Respondent's opinions on son preference and sex selection are shown in Figure 3.

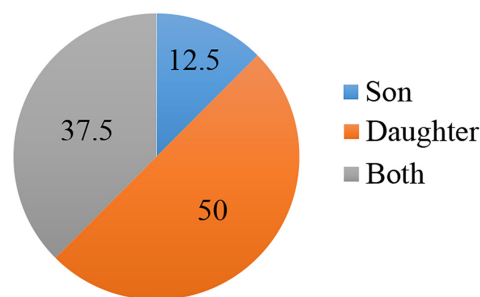


Figure 3: The percentage of sex selection in the Cantonese family (January 2022).

According to the statistics, the group of informants chosen by their daughters dominates, accounting for 50% of the total. Patrilineality was not found to be a strong determinant of family happiness, as half of the respondents expressed a desire for a daughter, while 37.5% hoped to have children of both genders. Ellen Oxfeld Basu (1991) argues, that patrilineality remains prevalent in Chinese Cantonese communities in certain Southeast Asian countries. However, respondents in Ho Chi Minh City seemed to prefer a more active role for women. Hu and Scott (2016), in contrast to Basu, suggest that this shift is due to the influence of overseas Chinese communities living in urban areas with higher levels of education, leading people to challenge traditional beliefs.

As Figure 4 illustrates, half of the respondents hoped to have both a son and a daughter. Meanwhile, 25% of respondents wanted to have a son for labour power. An equal number of respondents, 12.5%, desired a daughter to care for them in their old age and hoped to have a son for primogeniture. The awareness of gender equality in ethnic societies in Vietnam is usually associated with the Communist policy on industrialisation and modernisation in rural areas which also advances women's role in family and workplace (Nguyễn 2005).

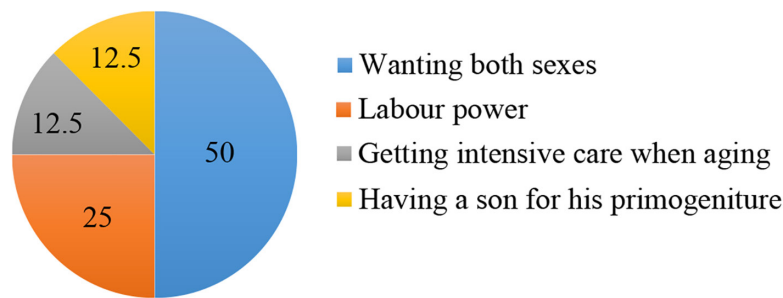


Figure 4: The percentage of sex selection perspectives in the Cantonese family (January 2022).

To further investigate this statement, I conducted interviews with Chinese Cantonese men and women. I found that both genders acknowledge the importance of shared responsibility between husband and wife within a family, regardless of age and gender. Women expressed a willingness to participate in both economic and household chores.

In our modern society, we should not rely solely on men to fulfil traditional roles. Women also contribute to family income and play vital roles in providing for their households. Additionally, men should prioritise participating in household chores. (interview with a Chinese Cantonese female, unmarried, 30 years old, District 5, 20 January 2022)

This is a significant change. By addressing daily matters, such as financial issues, sources of income, and cooperation with parents, women have developed stronger voices in their family and social concerns about the right of women and their political and economic involvement. Chen (2005) and Shu (2004) suggest that gender roles in modern families are influenced by various factors, including education, personal experiences, and social accomplishments. The presence of Chinese Cantonese women in leadership positions on the executive boards of economic associations in Ho Chi Minh City serves as a clear example (Hà 2022b). However, despite their social achievements and higher levels of education, women are still expected to adhere to traditional gender roles and fulfil their duties in family rituals. The interviews conducted revealed similarities to Phan An's (2005) findings, indicating that while both spouses share responsibility for family matters, yet the Chinese Cantonese women continue to adhere to traditional roles. A married Chinese Cantonese explained:

The natural endowments of women include being a mother and providing family care. However, they should not neglect their social relationships. Women can choose a preferred job that allows them to earn income from home, such as through handmade crafts or online markets. (interview with a Chinese Cantonese female, married, 43 years old, District 11, 20 January 2022)

In the meantime, married, and unmarried Chinese Cantonese men also concurred that women had a higher position in the family. They confirmed that patrilineality has been minimised in their society.

I no longer excessively value the need to produce a son to maintain a male-centred family pattern. Both husband and wife should take on their parental and financial responsibilities to raise their children. (interview with a Chinese Cantonese male, unmarried, 26 years old, District 6, 20 June 2023)

This viewpoint on the familial status of women, who fulfil the role of a mom/wife was also supported by the responses of married Chinese Cantonese men. When getting married, men admit women's financial contributions and their involvement in childcare as stated in the following interview:

In my family, my wife and I both work and educate our children. Although I would prefer to have a son over daughter to maintain a male-centred family and teach him about ancestor worship, it would be fine if I had a daughter. I believe that a daughter can also fulfil this role. I have one daughter. Regardless, family is incredibly important to me. (interview with a Chinese Cantonese male, married, 36 years old, District 11, 20 June 2023)

The Chinese Cantonese men carefully consider gender roles and place women in higher social positions in terms of family decisions and business running. Modern trends in urbanised areas of China also reflect a similar situation, where families restrict patrilineality and discourage inappropriate marital customs (Hu and Scott 2016). This common phenomenon indicates a significant cultural shift that diminishes the importance of the principle known as “出嫁从夫” (a married woman must obey paternal regulations).¹⁰

Similarly, Chinese Cantonese family models have also changed from an extended family to the nuclear family, which has spread across their modern societies. Fundamentally, a stereotypical family includes: (1) the “stem family”, consisting of parents, their unmarried children, and one married son with his wife and children; and (2) the “joint family”, including parents, their

unmarried children, their married sons (more than one), and sons' wives and children (Lang 1946). Mary Kay Gilliland (2020) describes this as a large family with several descendants living under one roof. Traditionally, such an intergenerational household was established on filial piety and patrilineality (Schein 1997; Yeh et al. 2013). In Vietnam, a less Confucianism-driven cultural climate, favourable natural conditions, and intercultural exchanges in the southern region have accelerated new family patterns and forms of organisation in the Chinese Cantonese community (Hà 2022a). While kinship has a significant influence, nuclear families have clearly surpassed extended families (“三代同堂/四代同堂”) in this city. In my analysis, I categorised respondents' family types into three groups: nuclear families, extended families, and joint families (see Figure 5).

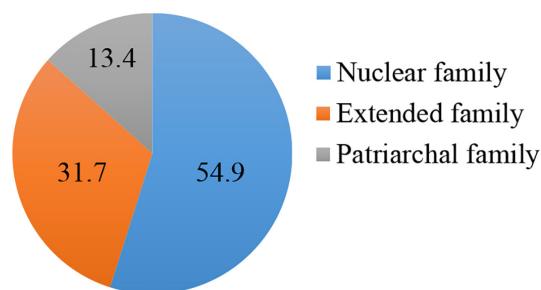


Figure 5: The percentage of the Cantonese family models (January 2022).

Figure 5 shows that the ratio of extended families is significantly lower than that of nuclear families, at 54.9% and 31.7%, respectively. Nevertheless, extended families still make up one-third of the total. This suggests that both types of families co-exist in Chinese Cantonese societies within Ho Chi Minh city. With 13.4% following the patriarchal family model (which is a family controlled by the father or eldest male or group of males), it appears that showing respect for the older generation remains important to some individuals in modern families, serving as a significant aspect of filial piety (Whyte and Parish 1985; Deutsch 2006).

During interviews with informants, there were no noticeable distinctions in age or gender.

Personally, the decision to live with or apart from parents does not concern me greatly. Despite living far from my parents, I anticipate inviting them to live with us when they require assistance or feel unwell. Fulfilling my filial duties is important to me, as because I do not wish for them to live alone. (interview with a Chinese Cantonese male, married, 36 years old, District 11, 20 June 2023)

I prefer a nuclear family because I value my independence and do not wish to respond to my parents or parents-in-laws. However, it is essential to maintain our cultural traditions by honouring our ancestors' and visiting our parents regularly. I also appreciate their advice on marital matters in certain situations. (interview with a Chinese Cantonese female, married, 43 years old, District 11, 20 June 2023)

When speaking with the elderly, a similar sentiment was shared:

I do not want to impose on my children by living with them. They have their own families, and I do not wish to burden them. Instead, I prefer to remain in my own home and enjoy my life with my husband. Nonetheless, I do hope to see them often and have them visit on important family occasions, such as the Lunar New Year, anniversaries, and gatherings with relatives. (interview with a Chinese Cantonese female, married, 63 years old, District 11, 20 June 2023)

I believe in giving them space, and I believe it is unnecessary for parents to interfere in their marriages. However, I encourage them to uphold our family traditions and our language and eagerly await their visits. Occasionally, I stay with them for a few days before returning home. If they request it, I am open to living with them when I am in need of assistance or feel weaker. (interview with a Chinese Cantonese female, married, 55 years old, District 5, 20 June 2023)

The traditional patriarchal family structure is slowly transforming due to women's improved status and changing sociocultural views on gender roles and relations. Besides, the nuclear family has become common among both young and old individuals. However, this change has not resulted in a loss of culture. Family identities are still well-preserved, and children continue to practice filial piety with their parents and maintain ancestor worship. As Eberstadt (2019) explains, the Chinese family structure is no longer consistent in its organisation, and must adapt to a new environment when a family emigrates to another country. While seniors lose their decisive role in the family, their advice and suggestions remain critical to their children's decisions. Despite a rapid decline, 13.4% of respondents recognise the profound significance of the close-knit relationships between the old and young among the Chinese Cantonese, indicating that the traditional family model still influences people's beliefs to some extent.

In general, the sexual division of labour, gender roles, and family models are three major aspects of cultural changes in marriage and family that have undergone a dramatic transformation in Chinese Cantonese society. Due to a long history of immigration and exposure to external influences through globalisation and urban lifestyles, the Chinese Cantonese have developed new cultural norms for their new marital rituals and family dynamics in different cultural settings. Additionally, industrialisation and modernisation in Ho Chi Minh City, while promoting ethnic cultural preservation, have also encouraged modern lifestyles (Bé 2019; Hà 2022b). Specifically, there has been a decline in the traditional patriarchal family structure and arranged marriages, as redefined perspectives have been shaped on gender equality, marital expectations, and the sexual division of labour. Most marriages are now based on mutual understanding, genuine love, and shared responsibilities. While the male-centred lineage is still preferred, it no longer fully accommodates all family expectations. Young people are less likely to prioritise marriage at a young age, but they show a growing tendency towards later mindset changes. Due to strong kinship networks, however, these dramatic marital and familial changes have not led to the erosion of Chinese Cantonese culture.

DISCUSSION

When developing new identities, the Chinese Cantonese have made significant efforts to move beyond their historical political conflicts and differences with other Chinese and ethnic groups to preserve their shared identity. In many Chinese Cantonese families, members still continue to speak their native language and participate in annual festivals and family events, which reinforce their commitment to nurturing and maintaining their cultural heritage. In examining changes in marital and familial issues among Chinese Cantonese people in Ho Chi Minh City, three key factors are considered: globalisation and acculturation, urban lifestyle, and commercialisation.

Globalisation and Acculturation

Globalisation can facilitate cultural exchanges and introduce new cultures to ethnic groups. It is perceived as a fundamental cause of cultural transformation, triggering significant changes in cultural norms among ethnic groups (Mackey 2004; Jensen et al. 2011; Pieterse 2019). Globalisation has been

shown to explain major changes in cultural norms and since the early 1990s, it has exerted considerable influence in Vietnam. Historians have argued that the rapid pace of the labour force and economic development created state interdependence, so internal culture is also heavily impacted by outside cultures (Đỗ 2011). This has also led to the expansion of foreign cultures and the promotion of interracial cultural exchanges.

As the largest city in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City has become a hub for foreign investment, with several multinational corporations establishing their regional headquarters or manufacturing facilities. In 2022, according to statistics from the Ho Chi Minh Statistical Office, foreign investment in the city reached USD4.331 million (Ho Chi Minh City Statistic Office 2022). This influx of foreign investment has also spurred the development of infrastructure, leading to the need to improve transportation and communications systems to accommodate the growing population and economic activities. For instance, the Chinese Cantonese community now has access to various communication platforms, such as social media, travel websites, and the internet allowing them to become more interconnected and gain a broader understanding and appreciation of different cultural practices and values.

When examining globalisation, it is imperative that we discern the interconnection between Chinese Cantonese people and other ethnic groups. More broadly, there is also an intercultural relationship between the Chinese Cantonese in Vietnam and other similar groups in Southeast Asia. The Chinese Cantonese perceive these relationships in two distinctive ways between young people and older people and these two groups are also aware of their acculturation to adapt to new contemporary lifestyles. This situation originates from diverse Ho Chi Minh City culture as the rapid immigratory process multiple ethnic groups moving to this city for their livelihood creates a mixed-race cultural space (Ngô 2011). Concurrently, the openness of Ho Chi Minh City played a crucial role in receiving foreign cultural flows and producing new identities. The Chinese Cantonese grasped the opportunity for cultural acquisition. Nevertheless, globalisation and acculturation does not reduce their traditional folk culture. Effectively educated by family rule, the Chinese Cantonese have laid a firm groundwork for their traditional identities and display an acute sense of conventional preservation. Despite the Đổi Mới, which facilitated cultural diversity on account of the open-door policy for economic growth and foreign investment (Irvin 1995; Tan 2003; Nguyễn M D 2022), their cultural uniqueness is palpable as a typical illustration of a well-established family culture and enduring kinship system.

When asked about the possibility of adopting Vietnamese wedding customs, the majority of respondents clearly did not support this assumption, with 65.2% (Figure 6), expressing their disapproval. In addition, 27.0% of respondents also do not agree with Vietnamese wedding customs, while only 7.7% of respondents supported them. Informants indicated that they adapt to local Vietnamese culture by learning the Vietnamese language, embracing local customs, and participating in traditional events and festivals; however, these actions do not imply a departure from their own conventional culture.

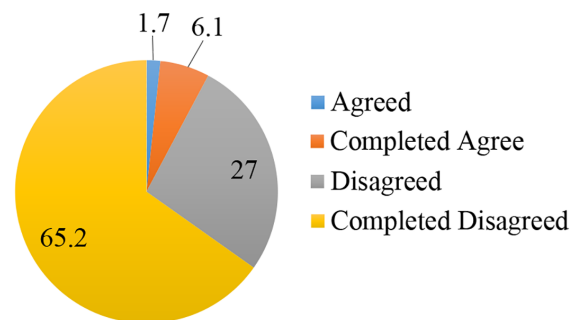


Figure 6: The percentage of people's reactions that Chinese Cantonese people should follow Vietnamese wedding customs (May 2023).

Furthermore, robust connectivity with overseas Chinese Cantonese groups has also strengthened the preservation of their native culture. The migration of Chinese Cantonese refugees to Southeast Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries established a widespread network of Chinese Cantonese immigrants. By speaking a similar dialect, the Chinese Cantonese have maintained their cultural traditions through teaching and communicating in their mother tongue, as well as by following traditional Chinese practices (Hà 2022b). Living in major cities, such as Ho Chi Minh City, where the Kinh/Vietnamese-speaking population dominates, Chinese Cantonese individuals have improved their Vietnamese language skills to effectively communicate with the Kinh. This has also resulted in bilingualism and the integration of both languages into daily life, which is beneficial for business and trade networks. On the other hand, the Chinese Cantonese still maintains strong ties with Chinese groups outside of the mainland to exchange experiences, advice, and information with others who share their background and cultural nuances (Chin 2000). Through these connections, they stay informed about news, cultural events, and developments in China and other Cantonese-speaking communities around the world. This helps them maintain balanced perspectives on their cultural heritage through cultural exchanges with other ethnic groups.

Furthermore, acculturation also explains changes in mindset concerning marital and family. Acculturation occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged contact with each other (Pieterse 2019). I believe that strong Chinese Cantonese sense of cultural preservation and survival in the mixed cultural space of Ho Chi Minh City helps them fulfil cultural preservation and development. They form their social relationships and embrace new customs, norms, and values, which in turn influence their daily behaviours and habits. Specifically, acculturation highlights the differences between the Chinese and Vietnamese. The Chinese share similar views with Vietnamese people on gender equality, the sexual division of labour, and family models; however, they have overcome cultural differences to learn new identities and preserve their deep-rooted beliefs. Acculturation experiences may vary among different generations, as older generations tend to have a stronger attachment to the traditional roles of family and marriage, while younger generations are more adaptable to new familial and marital patterns. Younger individuals may, however, revert to traditional ways as they age. Despite the challenges of globalisation and acculturation, which involve adapting to new family models, gender equality, and a more equal sexual division of labour, the Chinese Cantonese have managed to maintain cultural ties to their heritage.

Urban Lifestyle

Residents of Ho Chi Minh City experience urban lifestyles and have become pioneers of new cultural trends and adaptation (Nguyễn T T T 2022). In comparison to other racial groups living in unfavourable geographical and living conditions, ethnic groups residing in major cities achieve a higher degree of cultural exchange, potentially altering their ethnic identities (Browning 2003; Yang and Neal 2006; Rahman and Zhang 2017). Individuals who have grown up in urban areas are less influenced by their ethnic backgrounds than their parents due to improved living conditions (Jenkins 2006), so this factor has also influenced Chinese Cantonese behaviours.

The primary driving force behind these changes is career priorities. The fast-paced urban lifestyle in Ho Chi Minh City places a strong emphasis on career advancement and financial stability. The preference for business activities helps individuals engage in economic endeavours, career growth, and delay marriage while seeking a compatible life partner. According to the questionnaire results, 30.5% of respondents believed that marriage is not

a priority for them (Figure 1). However, the importance of family increases as people age, with marriage later becoming a significant aspect of their life journey. The shift in the age at which individuals marry is likely due to their desire to find a partner who shares similar career aspirations and values, rather than reflecting traditional cultural expectations.

Education and personal development also play significant roles in shaping perspectives on marriage and family. Living in an urban environment provides greater access to educational opportunities and personal growth. The Chinese Cantonese workers have become a valuable part of the skilled workforce in Ho Chi Minh City. They not only manage medium-sized family businesses but also participate in the activities of foreign companies and industrial zones (Trần 2005). Additionally, they have established Chinese-speaking schools in the city. Moreover, within the Vietnamese-speaking universal education system, they can take Chinese language classes and converse with their friends in their native tongue. Education also contributes to the preservation and passing down of traditional cultural norms and business practices. Within their families, they make a conscious effort to speak Cantonese with their children, ensuring the continuity of their mother tongue (Hà 2022a). Therefore, young people in this environment are actively engaged in both formal education and family upbringing. This dual focus often leads to higher levels of education, which can positively impact their careers. Additionally, they tend to seek partners who share their commitment to learning and self-improvement, influencing their marital choices regarding and perspectives on relationships.

Financial independence among the young is also significant in shifting gender roles and the sexual division of labour. Residing in a city with thriving economic growth has allowed the Chinese Cantonese people to achieve higher levels of income (Trần 2016). The involvement of women in economic activities, along with men's acceptance of women's changing roles in the family and society, allows women, in particular, to achieve higher social positions and their increased financial independence. In urban settings, women also gain better access to formal education and employment opportunities, thereby producing a greater sense of self-sufficiency and equality within marriage. Such awareness about gender roles has valued the economic contribution of Chinese Cantonese women. Once a more egalitarian approach to marriage is accepted among Chinese Cantonese groups, individuals become more open to sharing household responsibilities and decision making. In this study, both married and respondents affirmed the equality of women in their society.

Nonetheless, Chinese Cantonese women still display a strong sense of responsibility towards their families and show respect for their parents-in-law. This commitment to duty, influenced by the value of filial piety, stems from a cohesive society, and ensures that younger generations do not lose sight of important customs and responsibilities. The views of the Chinese Cantonese people on marriage and family are shaped by their practical experiences, thought processes, education, and perceptions of modern lifestyles, all of which expand their perspectives on gender roles. Core marital values have shifted away from favouring sons and the traditional patriarchal family structure. As social networks expand, there is also greater acceptance of diverse marital practices, such as polyamory or open relationships. People now embrace different cultural influences while still maintaining a strong belief in the importance of marriage and family. The drive to produce a son is no longer the primary focus (Phạm 2018), so it is indicated that family is still respected in varied perspectives between young people and older generations.

Additionally, urban lifestyles have led to smaller families, further transforming the concept of the family. This shift is influenced by factors such as limited space in urban areas, financial constraints, and a desire for an improved quality of life. As a result, many Chinese Cantonese families in Ho Chi Minh City now have fewer children. While young families tend to gravitate towards nuclear family structures, they uphold their duty of filial piety and value their parents' advice. Due to enduring social cohesion in the Chinese Cantonese community, they also prioritise formal education and actively participate in social associations (Hà 2022a).

Commercialisation

The Chinese Cantonese have prospered in the era of commercialisation due to their innate business acumen and a strong business culture (Trần 2005). In Ho Chi Minh City, commercialisation is focused on local economic growth and improving quality of life (Trần 2016). Commercialisation has also transformed cultural norms through the incorporation of business values (Clarke 2016). In this context, the post-Đổi Mới economy has contributed to the prosperity of Ho Chi Minh City, unlocked vast economic potential, and promoted regional and international economic integration. The Chinese Cantonese community also plays a vital part in driving Ho Chi Minh City's economy and facilitating ongoing cultural exchange (Hà 2022b).

While there is debate about how the Chinese Cantonese people perceive the relationship between economic and cultural implications (Trần 2015; Trần 2016; Hà 2022), I emphasise the growing role of materialism in explaining their changing perspectives on marriage and family. The Chinese Cantonese have generated considerable revenue from their businesses and maintained connections with overseas groups to establish commercial networks (Trần 2016). Their involvement in municipal economic growth and the successful management of profitable enterprises not only shapes urban lifestyles but also accelerates cultural transformation (Kong 2000). As commercialisation increases, there is a stronger emphasis on material wealth and status. This highlights the importance of financial stability and social position when choosing a life partner. Couples may prioritise career success and financial security over traditional values, which can impact their marital choices. Younger people are likely to seek partners who shares their career aspirations and vision for the future. Because of the rise of commercialisation, the Chinese Cantonese people are moving away from arranged marriages and discovering compelling reasons for selecting partners based on love and mutual understanding. Commercialisation also contributes to delayed marriage, as individuals focus on building their careers and accumulating wealth in order to elevate their social status and attain financial stability before starting a family. To some extent, commercialisation also fosters a growing individualism in Cantonese societies, as individuals prioritise their personal growth over collective needs.

Additionally, commercialisation leads to a shift in family dynamics, as seen in the increased participation of women in the workforce. Research shows that both men and women, regardless of age, support gender equality in the division of labour and recognise the importance of shared family responsibilities and women's economic involvement (Nguyễn 2005; Trần 2005; Hà 2021). Due to economic factors, the Chinese Cantonese are gradually departing from extended family setups and opting for nuclear families, resulting in changing living arrangements. Over the years, commercialisation has also influenced changes in marital norms, including marriage purposes, divorce rates, and cohabitation trends (Watson and Ebrey 1991), shaping views on marriage and family dynamics. Commercialisation challenges traditional family structures among the Chinese Cantonese, where men were traditionally seen as breadwinners and women as caregivers.

Nevertheless, rapid commercialisation has not diminished the importance of kinship and family. While materialism and a prosperous economy have significantly changed the concept of marriage and family in younger generations, core family values have remained intact for most

Chinese Cantonese people. Commercialisation facilitates the spread of products, ideas, and cultural elements across borders (Moore 2005). It has also increased the economic presence the Chinese Cantonese, and produced cultural homogeneity. However, due to durable social cohesion, older Chinese Cantonese people have still maintained family traditions in some aspects of cultural practices and social interactions. Although individuals may prioritise material success and personal achievements, but traditional family values still influence their mindset and behaviours. The economic participation of the Chinese Cantonese helps promote their commercial products, creates wealthier individuals, and ensures the preservation of their native culture. For the Chinese Cantonese in Ho Chi Minh City, this represents a trade-off between economic dynamics and cultural transition.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, this research essay outlines recent significant changes in the concepts of marital and familial issues among the Chinese Cantonese people in Ho Chi Minh City. Through anthropological fieldwork conducted in Chợ Lớn, Ho Chi Minh City, in January 2022, and May and June 2023, utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods for data analysis, two major conclusions have been reached.

First, while the Chinese Cantonese are now embracing marriage and family at a younger age, they emphasise the importance of love, mutual understanding, and shared responsibilities in these relationships. Modern social settings no longer strictly adhere to Confucian family structures, resulting in increased gender equality and a more balanced division of labour. While the preference for having a son still exists in some cases, there is a noticeable decline in the traditional patriarchal family structure and reverence for senior family members.

Secondly, factors, such as globalisation and acculturation, urban lifestyles, and post-Đổi mới commercialisation have influenced cultural norms and behaviours regarding marriage and family roles among the Chinese Cantonese. Globalisation has broadened perspectives on these roles, while acculturation through interactions with other ethnic groups has contributed to cultural diversity. Urban living, improved education, and quality of life have also shaped marital and familial changes. In addition, commercialisation has led to the growth of a family-operated businesses and economic networks, preserving family traditions and cultural practices.

However, this study has limitations that warrant further research. The small-scale nature of the research makes it challenging to generalise findings to the larger Chinese Cantonese community in Vietnam. The use of simple statistics from the Google Form application may not capture the nuanced influences on individuals' perceptions of marriage and family. Future research should consider a detailed qualitative design to address these limitations. Additionally, an exploration of interracial families and governmental involvement in the Sino cultural sphere in Ho Chi Minh City could present promising avenues for further scholarship. Finally, an analysis of the panoply of Sino texts, stele evidence, and archaeological findings could provide valuable insights into the traditional marital and familial practices of the Chinese Cantonese.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

This study was conducted in Districts 5, 6, and 11 of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam in 2022 and 2023. The data collection was implemented according to the field study standards in anthropological studies with the approval of all informants and strictly adhered to previous studies as well as other research ethical standards.

NOTES

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- ¹ Chinese Cantonese people are one of the groups of Chinese diasporas in Vietnam. They are widely *Người Hoa* (Hoa people) by Vietnamese people instead of Chinese people to distinguish this group from the Chinese people in mainland China now.
- ² 陳上川 (1626–1720) was a loyal Chinese mandarin of the Ming dynasty. After the dethronement of the Ming dynasty, he reneged on the homeland and went southward. When anchoring in Cochinchina (Đàng Trong), Nguyễn Lords approved of his residence and encouraged him to aggrandise the southern land of Vietnam.
- ³ 楊彥迪 (?–1688) was a loyal Chinese mandarin of the Ming dynasty. He was a leading movement of “Phản Thanh phục Minh” (overthrow of the Qing dynasty and restoration of the Ming dynasty) and left his native country with his entourage in 1679. Like Trần Thượng Xuyên, Dương Ngạn Địch was approved by Nguyễn Lords, and he made a tremendous contribution to aggrandising Mỹ Tho region, a county of the Mekong Delta in Southern Vietnam.
- ⁴ Also known as “Đàng Trong” or Southern Vietnam.
- ⁵ By the time Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh established Gia Định in 1698, there was a Minh Hương village in what is now the Chợ Lớn area, which means Chinese immigrants occupied this area as early as the seventeenth century.
- ⁶ The old name of this place is M’Tho.
- ⁷ This is an old island in Đồng Nai province, Vietnam.
- ⁸ Đổi mới means “reformation”, which was a political and economic transformation of Vietnam from a state-based ownership economy into a socialism-oriented market economy from 1986 to now. This is an initiative of the Vietnam Communist Party to rescue Vietnam from a political and social crisis after the Vietnam War and to lay Vietnam in its international integration in the context of globalisation.
- ⁹ According to the local statistics of the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Ethnic Affairs (2019) in Ho Chi Minh City, these districts are dominated by a significant number of Chinese people. There are 66,833 Chinese people in District 5, 67,386 people in Districts 6, and 96,789 people in District 11.
- ¹⁰ In Vietnamese language, this phrase means *xuất giá tòng phu*.

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