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An overview of non-commercial flows in contemporary northern Vietnam: forms, characteristic and role

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Abstract: This chapter deals with non-commercial flow in Vietnam, specifically all presents and exchanges (in kind or in money) based upon interpersonal relationships that take place outside both the commercial marketplace and the official State channels. Based on empirical surveys conducted in rural northern Vietnam combined with other scholars' case studies on social exchanges in rural and urban areas, this chapter argues that non-commercial transactions in general and gift-giving practices in particular occupy a prominent place in Vietnamese people's everyday life and reflect the importance of personal relationships in today's Vietnamese sociality. The first part describes, through a "descriptive catalog" of non-commercial transactions, the various forms and practices of social exchanges in Vietnam. The second part examines the main features, the principles and the functions of Vietnamese non-commercial flow. Finally, I hypothesize that, in a context of the global change of the Vietnamese society marked by the development of State laws and market rules, social exchanges and personal relationships still play a predominant role in the organization and the regulation of the society.

Keywords: Non-commercial flow; gift-giving; reciprocity; social relationships; Vietnam.

10.1. Introduction

This chapter deals with the non-commercial flow in contemporary Vietnam, specifically all presents and exchanges (in kind or in money) based upon interpersonal relationships that take place outside both the commercial marketplace and the official State channels¹. I argue that non-commercial transactions in general and gift-giving practices in particular occupy a prominent place in the everyday life of the Vietnamese people and are significant indicators of social organization.

Only a few empirical studies have been conducted on this subject in Vietnam (Ngô and Mai 1997; Tessier 1999, 2009; Mc Elwee 2007; Luong 2010 & 2016; Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010; Pannier 2013, 2015; Soucy 2014); however, this topic is emerging as a central concern among Vietnamese studies, as witnessed at the International Conferences on Anthropology organized in Vietnam², where a significant number of papers dealing with this issue were presented. The recent Vietnamese translation³ of Marcel Mauss' pioneer book *An Essay on the Gift: the Form and Reason of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1924) is also a sign of the new interest in this subject for Vietnamese scholars.

For Mauss, "the gift" is governed by the triple obligations to give, to receive and to return; stating this practice is "one of the rocks on which our societies are built" (Mauss 1999:148). He shows how, in archaic societies, gifts embody that fleeting moment when society sets. This discovery leads him to inquire "what force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?" (*Ibid.*). His explanation being "the spirit of the gift, infused with the individuality of the giver, that obliged the recipient to make a return" (Soucy 2007:7) has since been criticized by fellow scholars, because he confused the *emic* explanation of Maoris in terms of "hau"—a mystic force imbued in gifts which punishes anyone who fails to reciprocate—and the scientific one (Lévi-Strauss 1950; Firth 1959; Sahlin 1972; Godelier 1996; Babadzan 1998; Testart 2007). Lévi-Strauss (1950) states that this "force" is the expression of a fundamental rule of human social life: the principle of reciprocity. For Testart (2007), it is *only* the effect of obligations, i.e. the social ties and social control. But for many scholars, Mauss paved the way for the understanding of the importance of "the intervention of a third person" (Mauss 1999: 159): if the explanation of this force should not be based on a mystical force, it relies on what is now called the "third element" or the "third mediator" (Anspach 2002:36-42). It is an element

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¹ This chapter is a revised and expanded version of "An overview of non-commercial flows in contemporary Vietnam", *Vietnam Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 1(3): 229-245.

² "Modernities and the Dynamics of Tradition in Vietnam: Anthropological Approaches" (University of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City; University of Toronto, Bình Châu, 15-18 December 2007) and "Anthropology in Vietnam: history, present and prospect" (University of Social Science and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 29 September, 2015)

³ *Luận về biếu tặng*, translated by Nguyễn Tùng, Nhà xuất bản Tri thức, 2011.

which transcends the two individuals involved within the transaction and which persuades the receiver to reciprocate (*Ibid.*). This “third element” can take on many different forms in each society (spiritual entity, honor, law, custom, friendship, and morality). It can either be included within the relationship, and be directly generated by the interactions, or it can exist prior to the relationship and regulate people’s practices from outside (Temple and Chabal 1995; Sabourin 2012).

When Mauss’ observations are placed in the context of Vietnam, there is a strong correlation between Mauss’ theories and the Vietnamese social practices. Indeed, empirical studies confirm that mutual gifts are both “spontaneous” and “constrained”, and express both “self-interest” and “generosity” (Luong 2010; Pannier 2015). Studies also confirm that non-commercial transfers in Vietnam contribute to building, maintaining or reinforcing personal ties and thus reaffirm social relations and status (Tessier 2009; Pannier 2013; Soucy 2014) as well as strengthening social capital (Luong 2010, Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010). Finally, like the Maussian gift, the political function of the Vietnamese non-commercial flow consists of allowing the transition from “open violence” to peaceful exchange or “symbolic violence” (Pannier 2015). If Vietnamese non-commercial transfers do concur with Maussian theory on gift and reciprocity, there are also important differences. For example, in Vietnam, as in China (Yan 1996a), the receiver is not systematically put in an inferior position, even if he fails to return, especially in a hierarchical context. When a superior receives a gift from a subordinate, he gains prestige and remains in the higher social position.

Because Mauss focused on the essence of the gift within a cross-cultural perspective, he neglected the diversity of the forms of transfers in different cultural contexts and eras. Moreover, while emphasizing the contrast between the traditional, personalized gift economy and the modern, impersonalized system of commodity exchange, he did not make any clear distinction between the different forms of transfer. For instance, he confused gift and exchange, which are two different social forms characterized by different types of obligation (Testart 2008). That is why, instead of focusing on which common principles of “the Gift” Vietnamese social exchanges exemplify, this article presents which specific forms of transfers occur in the Vietnamese society and how they operate in this particular context. Within Silber’s (2004) perspective of historicizing the transfers of particular societies, this chapter aims to grasp the specificity of Vietnamese non-commercial flows in regards to the Maussian gift theory. For instance, it will deal with the question of the “force” which compels the recipient to make a return in the Vietnamese system as well as the question of the nature of the transfers (gift or exchange) which was neglected by Mauss.

The second major issue in this chapter consists of understanding what role non-commercial transfers play in this society. While Mauss (1999) and others (Godelier 1996;

Lordon 2006) have shown that the role of gift-exchanges in the social order tends to decrease with the modernization of the societies, especially with the development of State and economic markets, I will show that the Vietnamese case presents a different situation. To address these issues, this chapter will first describe the various forms and practices of these interpersonal transactions, then identify the main features of Vietnamese non-commercial flow and finally analyse its role within Vietnamese society. In conclusion, I will argue that the analysis of these transfers allows us to highlight specific features of the Vietnamese social fabric, in which personal relationships based on reciprocity and embedded within strong material, moral and social obligations occupy a central position strongly connected to the State and the market.

Because this chapter aims to draw on the overall pattern of non-commercial flow in contemporary Vietnam, it does not develop detailed case studies. Nevertheless, all information and analyses are based on practices and situations directly observed during my fieldwork that were later combined with other scholars' case studies on social exchanges in rural and urban areas in both northern and southern Vietnam.

10.2. Fieldwork and methodology

My fieldwork was conducted from 2007 to 2010 in a rural commune in the Red River Delta (Giao Thủy district, Nam Định province), where inhabitants⁴ mix agriculture (rice fields, husbandry, gardens, aquaculture, etc.) with off-farm activities outside their villages. A qualitative anthropological survey was derived through classical tools such as immersion in local life, direct observation of practices, in-depth open interviews, informal talks and written sources. All have been combined and used to generate analysis.

Twenty-two surveys lasting from several days to three weeks were conducted in the commune. A total of 168 households were interviewed. I began to work with a translator, but I was gradually able to conduct interviews without support. The choice of people interviewed was made either randomly according to daily interactions and encounters, or because they were able to provide specific information needed for the investigation: for example, households who held a ceremony, local authorities, head of a lineage, the person responsible for a rotating credit association, etc. I thus interviewed women, men, elderly and young people, without trying to define any homogeneous sample. The aim of the study was not to seek for a representative sample, but to investigate the diversity of the phenomenon while identifying common principles.

⁴ According to the socio-economic report of the People Committee of the commune, the total population was 8010 inhabitants (2300 households) in 2009.

During my surveys in the commune, I lived with a family chosen by the local authorities. Step by step, ties with this family grew stronger until they accepted me as their “adopted son” (*con nuôi*). I was therefore involved in their kinship and lineage affairs, and in their daily sociability. I was however particularly careful not to fall into the trap of the “encliquetage” (Olivier de Sardan 2008), i.e. to be limited to the point of view and the situation of a specific social group. I participated in agricultural activities, different kinds of local celebrations (weddings, funerals, a house-warming party, ancestor commemoration, village and commune festival, etc.), official meetings, lineage and voluntary association meetings, many banquets and some ancestor rituals.

I also conducted some specific case studies on transfers during celebrations. Based on gifts registers (*sổ*) on which people record the name and address of the donor as well as the value of each gift received, I took a census of amounts of received gift and of the relationship between donor and the receiver for 14 households during funerals (6 cases), weddings (7 cases) and hospitalization (1 case). I also conducted a systematic survey on labor exchanges groups during rice transplanting in March 2008 (sample of 85 households) and during rice harvest season in July 2008 (sample of 70 households). In order to study the rotating credit association, I interviewed 22 heads of these informal groups and deeply analysed 11 registers in which association regulations, names of the participants and all transactions are recorded.

At the beginning of my research, non-commercial transaction was not the main topic. I was studying social networks. But during the surveys, social exchanges rapidly appeared as a major phenomenon and a significant indicator of social relationships. Thus, it became a central concern of my research. In other terms, this topic emerged empirically. It reflects one of the cores of my approach which consists of building and defining my subject according to the discoveries made on-site and leaves the door open for the unexpected (Bourdieu, Passeron and Chamboredon 2005). Moreover, my observations and interviews didn’t focus only on one aspect, even if it was the main issue of my research (gift or personal relationship). I tried to understand different dimensions of the daily life of the villagers (life course, history and activity of their lineage, sociodemographic and economic situation, agricultural and extra-agricultural activities, sources of income, migratory path, local power organization, etc.). The goal of that “opened perspective” was not to delve deeply into all the activities of the villagers’ life. It was simply to assume that the various areas of social activities are interconnected and interdependent. Therefore, the understanding of a particular aspect is possible only if one grasps the other dimensions linked to this particular aspect. This methodological principle is even more needed in the case of the study of non-commercial transfers in Vietnam, which is what Mauss (1999) called a “total social phenomenon”, i.e. the researcher faces a social practice that reflects and combines a multitude of abstractions related to economical, juridical, moral, religious, mythological and esthetical dimensions.

This empirical data gathered from the Red River Delta was then completed by information gathered from other fieldwork I conducted in northern mountain areas (Lào Cai and Sơn La province) and in the Bavi district between 2010 and 2014. The survey in Lào Cai province focused on social change dynamic in a Tày village in the Bảo Yên district. During 115 days of fieldwork, a total of 90 interviews were conducted and a set of major events where non-commercial transfers flowed were studied⁵. The research in the Sơn La province (Mai Sơn district) and the Ba Vi district aimed to understand relationships between actors (input dealers, breeders, collectors, slaughterers, and retailers⁶) involved in the livestock sector (cows and pigs). Through 88 interviews and observations, many kinds of social exchanges and informal credits were explored. These various sets of data were then combined and cross-checked with other scholars' case studies on social exchanges in rural and urban areas in Vietnam.

10.3. The variety of the forms and practices of non-commercial transfers

The flow of non-commercial goods and services in contemporary Vietnam encompasses a wide variety of transactions, in various different guises, all with many different ways of transferring. They can be transfers in kind, in cash, in labor or in services. We find both reciprocal transactions and unilateral ones. Some are presented directly in cash, others in an envelope or on trays of offerings. Some are carefully recorded in a register; others are simply memorized, while many of them are caught up in an endless cycle of reciprocity. They can occur between individuals, households, groups; as well as between people and spirit beings. I established a classification based on both the form of the transfer and the occasion for social exchanges. Eight main categories of transfers were identified. Each category contains several kinds of transfer. This non-exhaustive catalogue aims to list the various forms of transfers and so does not focus in detail on the way in which each of them operates.

10.3.1. Transfers within informal credit activities

Informal credits occupy an important place in the villagers' economic and social life as well as in the whole of Vietnamese society. "Currently, a third of all credit transactions takes place informally, consisting mainly of loans from relatives and friends, credit from pawnshops and professional money lenders, and savings from Rotating Savings and Credit Associations" (Lainez 2014: 148). Given the difficulty of having reliable data on this type

⁵ Five weddings ceremonies, five funerals, three house-warming celebrations, one banquet to celebrate departure for armed services, one banquet to celebrate university entrance examination success and some rituals.

⁶ These actors were Kinh, Thái and Mường people.

of credit which falls somewhere between the informal and the illegal, it is very likely that these figures underestimate their importance. There are many different forms of credit and loans depending on the relationship involved (friends, family members, neighbors, professional money-lender, usurer), interest rate, repayment modalities, ways to use the fund, etc. During my surveys in Northern Vietnam (Red River Delta and northwest mountain area), I observed five different kinds of credit transactions.

Transfers within “rotating savings and credit associations” (*hụi, hợ* or *phường*) are contributions occurring within informal associations “made up of a group of people who agree to regularly contribute money to a common ‘pot’ that is allocated to one member of the group each period” (Okae 2009: 20). Contributions of the members can be in gold, cash or paddy rice and occur every month, every six months or after harvest season. Interest rates are paid only when participants receive the ‘pot’. In the commune where I conducted my survey in Nam Định province, they varied between 0.3% and 2.2% per month. They can reach higher amounts, especially in urban areas. The faster a member takes the ‘pot’, the more interest he pays. And conversely, those who take the funds in the last few rounds benefit from the interest paid by others and eventually get more than they have contributed. Since the rotating savings and credit association can last several years, the Đông inflation rate and gold price fluctuations also determine what everyone can get. Thus, if some villagers participate when they need financial capital, others, generally the wealthiest, participate to get benefit from their savings. “The capital obtained through the rotating credit association meets different needs, varying from covering expenses for major family events to accumulating money in order to invest in the household’s business and production” (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2013: 20).

In addition to these associations, I identified four other forms of informal credits. Informal loans with interest (*cho vay tiền*) are one of the most important sources of financial capital for many rural households. The amount of interest varies according to the degree of closeness between the lender and the borrower and the duration of the credit: from 1% and 150% per month (Okae 2009; Lainez 2014). Informal interest-free loans (*cho vay tiền không có lãi*) are generally provided by close relatives and friends. They can serve to face a temporary financial difficulty as well as to help for an important investment. Informal advance payments bearing no interest (*ứng*) occur when the buyer pays the producer before receiving the commodities in order to help him or to win his loyalty. If the transfer occurs within a commercial framework, the acceptance to pay first is an interpersonal arrangement which involves social obligations, as well as a sense of moral indebtedness, without any legal frame. For instance, most of the milk in Bavi district, one of the most famous dairy-sheds in northern Vietnam, used to be purchased from farmers by dairy collectors through this kind of arrangement. Credit sale with interest (*cắm*) follow the same logic as the informal advance payments but the utilitarian dimension is much

stronger. For instance, this kind of loan often occurs when an agricultural inputs seller offers advances of products to a farmer who then repays after harvest.

To sell products on credit terms denotes social obligations between the protagonists as well as instrumental strategies. The seller must know his customer personally in order to grant him credit and ensure his ability to pay back. Selling on credit is risky because many advances are never repaid. But this practice is often necessary because many farmers do not have the means to pay cash and it is an effective way to “bond” customers and ensure a loyal customer base. It can finally generate significant profits thanks to high interest rates⁷.

10.3.2. Ceremonial transfers for major life-cycle rituals

This kind of transfer appears to be the most important, given both the economic and social implications. They occur during the three major celebrations of a villager’s life: weddings, house constructions and funerals. If many kinds of different transfers flow during these celebrations (Pannier 2015), the two most important ones are the so-called *giúp đỡ* (support) transaction, performed before the celebration, and the *đi tiền* (give money) transfer which happens the day of the main banquet feast.

The *giúp đỡ* transaction, deeply studied by Olivier Tessier (2009), consists of a material support in kind (rice, rice alcohol, chickens, ducks, and pork meat) or money which is given to the organizer of an event before the feast. These transactions are generally arranged by the most intimate circle of relatives and friends. All gifts received will then be reciprocated. According to the *emic* point of view, they are presented as “contributions” (*góp phần*) for the expenses. Tessier (2009) has shown that these transfers help to organize the ceremony but their main function is to reaffirm ties and social obligations within kinship and neighbor networks. During my surveys in the Red River Delta villages, I noticed that this kind of transfer tends to be combined with the *đi tiền* transfer given when guests attend the celebration. Now, instead of giving twice—once before and once during the celebration—people who make a *giúp đỡ* transfer give a larger lump sum once, which combines *giúp đỡ* and *đi tiền*.

Đi tiền transfers, called *mừng*⁸ for weddings or a house-warming party and *tiền phúng*⁹ for funerals, are the popular cash gift that all guests offer to the host to express sentiment (*tình cảm*) and to help to cover the costs of the celebration. The value of each gift received as well as the name and address of the donor are meticulously recorded on a gift-list (*sổ*), and then later reciprocated with an additional increment (*đi thêm*). This additional increment consists of giving back larger amounts than that which was received. According to theoretical analysis (Mauss 1999; Caillé 2000), the additional value aims to challenge

⁷ In Mai Son district in northwest Vietnam, the interest rates for agricultural input varied in 2014 between 2% and 4.5% per month.

⁸ “To congratulate”.

⁹ “Money for condolences offerings”.

the first donor or to reverse the debt. But, according to villagers, this additional increment is described as a way of compensating for inflation. Considering inflation is a constant feature of the Vietnamese economy, within the gift-giving system, giving more than receiving is perceived as a means to return the same value. I noticed that when a villager returned a *mùng* soon after receiving one (less than 3 months), the amounts were similar; and the longer the period of time between two transfers was, the greater the counter-gift was.

Beyond this question of equivalence and time gap between two transfers, the value of the transfers depends on the established norms governing social relations, based on practical considerations and on sentiments. The type of event (funerals, weddings, house-warmings), the estimated costs of a banquet meal for one person, the financial means of the donor and the state of the reciprocal relationship between the giver and the recipient are all factored into deciding the value of what is given. The degree of closeness in general, and with relatives in particular, also determines the amount of the gift. Thus, the higher the level of sentiments (*tình cảm*) within a relationship, the larger the gift. For relatives, the closer the recipient is in terms of kinship, the larger the gift. For example, for weddings in the northern rural area, in the 1980's *mùng*-gifts varied between 0.5 and 2.5 USD, following the degree of closeness. Today, in the Red River delta rural communes, for a wedding held at home, guests give between 2.5 and 10 USD for "normal" relationship and a minimum of 15 USD for close relatives and close friends. For weddings held in a restaurant in Hanoi the average gift amounts are twice as much.

10.3.3. Matrimonial prestations or marriage payments

According to Govoroff "the phrase 'matrimonial prestations' refers to the culturally codified material transfers or services that in most traditional societies render a marriage juridically valid." (2007:1006). In today's Vietnamese society, only an official registration at the People Committee can juridically validate a union. However, though State policy has attempted to discourage these practices (Malarney 2002; Teerawichitchainan, and Knodel 2011) many forms of matrimonial presents are still executed during the wedding process and still serve to validate the union in the eyes of the local society.

The bride price is economically and socially the most important transaction between the spouses' parents (Teerawichitchainan and Knodel 2011). Before the engagement ceremony as well as before the wedding celebration, the groom's parents give money (or gold), food and ritual items (betel leaves, areca nuts, pork, glutinous rice, tea, rice alcohol, cigarettes, etc.) to the bride's parents in order to ask for their consent and obtain the bride's hand. This aims to provide means for the celebration at the bride's house and to ritually validate the union between the groom and the bride as well as the alliance between the spouses' parents. Today, these payments are not directly considered as a way to compensate the loss of a member of the bride's family and her labor potential (Kleinen 1999), but just as a material contribution to facilitate the wedding ceremony for the bride's

family. Thus, people do not use the terms *thách cưới*¹⁰ anymore. After years of campaigns led by the central government from the 1950's onwards to abolish this practice¹¹, this so-called "feudal" custom has a pejorative connotation of claiming huge amounts of money from the groom's parents and thus "selling one's daughter". In the commune where I conducted my surveys, villagers prefer to use the phrase *tiền đền* ("compensation money"), which is described as a "cordial arrangement" (*thống nhất*) between the two families. Nevertheless, the practice has not disappeared; it has just evolved in its forms and protocols.

The dowry (*của hồi môn*) is another important marriage transfer executed during weddings. The bride's parents can give jewelry, gold or a sum of money and various pieces of furniture (mosquito nets, bedding furniture, house equipment, etc.) to their daughter. These gifts represent the contribution of the bride's family to helping the children to start their new life as an independent household. Some interviewed villagers told me that they use a part of the marriage payments received from the groom's parents to make up the dowry.

10.3.4. Ritual transfers during secondary events

In addition to transfers for major life-cycle rituals, many others different types of ritual transfers flow during specific events. Some of them aim to congratulate (*mừng*) happy events. It is the case for the ritual transfers for a baby, which are executed for the birth, one-month or one-year birth anniversary. Though they used to be in kind (food, clothes, equipment), they are now more and more frequently exchanged in cash. The ritual transfers for longevity celebration (*mừng thọ*) have been steadily increasing. In the village where I conducted my survey, guests who participated in the banquet gave an in-cash gift, while guests who just came to honor the elder man at his home, without eating, brought in-kind gifts (fruits, cakes, etc.). Transfers to congratulate (*mừng*) a new situation, such as a departure for the armed services, university entrance examination success, a new diploma or securing an important employment position are becoming more and more popular. To celebrate these events and "share the happiness" (*chia vui*) villagers invite close relatives and friends to a banquet. In many cases, guests bring an envelope with money to congratulate the recipients and to help to defray the banquet costs.

Other transfers are related to "sad events" (*việc buồn*). The ritual transfers during death anniversary ceremony (*giỗ*) are more and more frequent. They involve not only relatives, but also close friends, especially if they used to be connected with the honored ancestor. If guests bring offerings (*đồ lễ*) for the ancestor worship, they also bring an envelope with money in order to express sentiment and to participate in the banquet costs. The ritual

¹⁰ Literally "wedding challenge".

¹¹ The new family law of 1959 officially banned bride price.

transfers for health problems (*quà thăm hỏi*) occur when a member of one's personal network has health problems which require medical care (nursing or hospitalization). Until the 1990's, *quà thăm hỏi* was generally sugar and condensed milk, or diverse useful foodstuffs for the convalescent. Now these presents are mostly exchanged in cash.

There are also many transfers related to national celebrations or various "new" festivities. The ritual transfers for lunar New Year (*quà Tết Nguyên đán*) are one of the most important. They concern two kinds of gifts. The *mừng tuổi* gift (or *lì xì*) is a sum of money generally put into a red envelope that expresses happiness and luck for the New Year. If children or old people have priority in receiving this kind of gift, it can circulate between everybody. *Quà tết* are foodstuffs and ritual items that guests bring to a member of their personal network during the ritual visits of the lunar New Year. If these transfers express personal sentiments (*tình cảm*), some of them have a purpose that is more instrumental¹². New Year gift are a good way "to feed" *quan hệ* (personal connection). They offer the opportunity to make a gift to people in positions of power to thank them for past services or to oblige them for future solicitations. Because they are carried out on the occasion of the New Year, they do not constitute corruption, though they have similar effects. Gifts made to celebrate national and international days, for instance Women's Day (08/03), Vietnamese Women's Day—which marks the inauguration day of the Women's Union (20/10) – or Teachers' Day (20/11), are also very popular and, similar to most of the social exchanges listed here: they mix obligation, sentiment and instrumentality. Finally, transfers related to occasions inspired by western culture, such as birthdays, Valentine's Day, or Christmas, are recent phenomena mainly occurring amongst young people.

10.3.5. Offerings for spirits, gods or ancestors

Offerings (*đồ lễ*) for spirits, gods or ancestors occur during specific rituals as well as in everyday life (Kendall 2008). Their forms vary greatly according to the event, the spirits to whom they are offered, the person who performs the ritual, the economic situation of the donors, etc. It can be foodstuff (fruits, meat, rice wine, chicken, pig head, glutinous rice, beer, biscuits, and cakes) as well as incense and votive items. These offerings are a means to communicate with the entity of the "other world" (*thế giới khác*). The most generic term used to describe the act of performing offerings is "*cúng*", which can be translated as "to connect with the spirits through the presentation of offerings" (Sorrentino 2010). These ritual transfers can express the gratitude (*tạ ơn*) of human beings for the protection of the spirits (*phù hộ*), they can be executed to avoid reprisal - especially from ghosts (*con ma*) or wandering souls (*oan hồn*) - and they can be performed in a propitiatory scheme, in order to gain the protection and benefits (*lộc*) from the spirits or to foster good fortune. In all these cases, they are based on a notion of reciprocity between humans and spirits.

¹² Instrumentality refers to the fact of giving as a means of pursuing personal interests or as a means to attain utilitarian ends.

10.3.6. Transfers related to belonging to a social group

Villagers belong to many different social groups, both formal and informal organizations. Some of them require transactions. This is the case of the transfers within voluntary associations (*đóng góp hội tự nguyện*) which can attain important financial resources (Luong 2010; Đặng 2015). Voluntary associations are permanent groups of people who share characteristics, interests or common goals. For instance, they bring together same-age villagers, former pupils of the same class, former soldiers from the same military promotion, persons carrying on the same business, etc. Their main function is to build extra-family social ties and ensure material assistance. According to the rules of the association, each member regularly contributes a sum of money to fund the association's activities. Besides the banquet held during the Lunar New Year, this fund is used to finance ritual gifts addressed to those whose family is facing a health problem. Members of an association also perform the ceremonial gift (*đi tiền*) when one of them organizes a wedding or funeral celebration.

Voluntary contributions for lineage groups or village activities (*đóng góp tự nguyện*) are monetary or labor contributions of the villagers to ensure expenditures related to activities of collective interest (*phúc lợi*). They occur for the construction of village infrastructure that the government doesn't fund, such as roads within the village, "house of culture" (*nhà văn hóa*) at the village level, cemetery or pagoda restoration, etc. Instead of paying money, villagers can offer their labor. Others voluntary contributions happen to fund patrilineage activities, such as the ceremonies and the banquets to honor the ancestors (*giỗ tổ* and *lễ họ đầu xuân*), the construction (or renovation) of the house dedicated to ancestor worship (*nhà thờ họ*) or of the ancestral tombs (*lăng mộ*), and to fund the "study encouragement" activities (*khuyến học*) dedicated to the students of the lineage. These contributions are called "voluntary", but it is difficult to withdraw from one's obligations: the amount of money (or of labor) is defined by the village or the lineage (per household or per member) and the payment, subject to strong social control, is close to a "claimable obligation" (Testart 2007). Besides these regular contributions, people can make other voluntary donations. These generally occur during the Lunar New Year celebration and during village or patrilineage festivities, to support the activities of these two local institutions. In this case, the obligation to give is not as strong as the previous one, and the name of the donors are displayed publicly, which is reminiscent of evergetism practices and "charitable donation" (*hậu*) during the imperial period (Papin 2008).

10.3.7. Informal transfers within the public administration

Many informal transactions occur within the public administration in view of getting a favor from a civil servant, to express gratitude to a teacher or a public official, to get an employment position in public administration, to promote relatives or acquaintances, to expedite a procedure, to obtain a business license, to get better medical care, to secure a

construction contract or to avoid a fine. They can involve citizens, firms, local authorities and public officials (World Bank and Government Inspectorate of Vietnam 2012). Some of them are related to bribery practices, and others are specific kinds of gift executed to maintain or strengthen a good relationship with a civil servant or an official. They are a way to build or expand one's social capital. Nevertheless, the border between what is or is not corruption is difficult to determine and depends on law as well as the people's perception of it. The fact that an envelope is used both to make a gift and for embezzlement is indicative of this entanglement of logic. Article 14 of the 19 prohibitions on Party members¹³, which states that cadres must not organize trips, offer gifts or entertainment to persons in order to obtain favors, also reveals the fine line between gift and corruption as well as the attempt of the government to address it.

10.3.8. Services and labor exchange

Services rendered are a daily assistance and support for many kinds of activities (child custody, motorbike borrowing, banquet preparation, watching the farm of a neighbor or relative when he leaves the village, etc.), which allow for avoidance of commercial transaction. It is difficult to measure the importance of these services, which represent considerable resources that are not taken into account in the statistics assessing the share of non-commercial transfers in the household budget.

Labor exchanges occur for agricultural or house construction activities. Labor exchanges are much more formal. Studies on this subject have distinguished two forms: *làm hộ*, which is a labor contribution which doesn't require any direct reciprocity nor equivalence, and *đổi công*, where labor quantity and length of time are comparable (Tessier 1999; Pannier 2015).

10.4. Main features of Vietnamese non-commercial flow

10.4.1. The intensity of social exchanges

This catalogue of interpersonal and non-commercial transfers highlights not only the diversity of non-commercial transfers within the same historical and cultural context, but also the great intensity of these social exchanges. In a study in a rural commune in Hà Tĩnh province in central Vietnam “rich people (...) reported spending 34 percent of their overall expenses on social obligations, including ceremonies, New Year's celebrations, and loans to relatives and neighbors, while poor households devoted only 15 percent of their total expenses to social occasions” (Mc Elwee 2007: 73). The author estimates that the average amount spent on social visit represents 20 percent of the total annual costs of living per household. A 2005 survey in a rural area shows that villagers attend up to 55.8 events per

¹³ See Decision No 47-QĐ/TW of the Central Executive Committee of the Party dated 1 November 2011.

year in a northern village located in the Red River province of Bắc Ninh and approximately 32.8 in a southern one in the Mekong Delta province of Long An (Luong 2016). Per capita spending on ritual expenditure represented an average of 13,3% of individuals' annual income. In another Northern rural commune, Truong Chi Huyen (2001) calculates that villagers spend 2% to 8% of their annual income for ceremonial transfers, which could rise to 10% to 40% when many special events occur during the year. A study in Hanoi (Pulliat 2013) indicates that respondents participate in an average of 25 celebrations a year and spend 6% of their budget on ceremonial transfers, without taking into consideration other forms of daily transfers.

These different sets of data highlight the economic importance of non-commercial transfers. Respondent's complaints about gift spending during the wedding season illustrate how obligation to give is strong and how gift-giving costs are heavy. Many of the respondents mentioned that they have had to borrow money in order to fulfill their obligation to give during celebrations. For poor households, non-commercial transaction can be a significant financial burden. But, if people still participate in these interpersonal flows, it is because they offer efficient forms of support in daily life as well as in ritual life, and can sometimes generate significant economic gains.

10.4.2. The utilitarian aspect of non-commercial flow: transfers as a material support

Non-commercial transactions almost always occur during costly private occasions, such as a wedding ceremony, a banquet to inaugurate a new house, in the event of sickness or hospitalization, when facing shortages or economic difficulties, during condolence visits for a burial or during a ritual for ancestors and spirits. For the participants, it is a question of donating in order to express sentiments, but also to share the cost incurred by the organization of an "important event" (*việc lớn*) or to help with expenses caused by an unexpected and expensive occurrence (medical care). Transactions then take the form of contributions (*góp*), made when someone is invited to participate in a celebration or event, or else when the situation calls for such contributions. The mechanisms of financial assistance and all other forms of material support can be clearly identified as key principles within the Vietnamese gift-giving system, which can therefore be said to fulfill important practical and utilitarian functions. This dimension distinguishes the Vietnamese system from the classic examples of the Potlatch or Kula where goods that circulate, usually precious things, are not intended to be consumed or useful: the non-utilitarian dimension takes precedence.

The comparison of the costs of the major celebrations and the amount of money received from *đi tiền* gifts allow for measurement of the utilitarian aspect of these interpersonal transactions. The costs of such events depend on the size of the celebration, i.e. the number of guests. Most of the households try to organize lavish banquets, for the

reasons that “a large feast shows the family’s esteem” (Malarney 2002:165) and because prestige and status competition is displayed through the size of the celebration (Ngô et Mai 1997; Malarney 2002; Di Gregorio et Salemink 2007; Soucy 2014). Such excesses occur in spite of the Government policies to contain the increasing cost of ritual celebration and even if such celebrations cause indebtedness. As Soucy stated, “while most people would criticize the trend to some degree, all want the biggest wedding possible for their own family” and thus “stretch all financial resources available to put on the best wedding possible” (2007: 5-6).

Regarding the wedding banquet, in a rural area of northern Vietnam, Luong speaks about an average of 300 people (50 trays) at the end of the 1980s (1993:277), and he estimates a minimum of 180 guests attending the groom’s wedding and a minimum of 120 guests attending the bride’s (1993:278). Later, in the 1990s, Malarney estimated the size of the wedding feast as being between 30 and 45-50 trays, i.e. 150 to 300 participants (2002:163 and 165). In the village where Kleinen studied, the number of guests in the 1990s was between 75 people and 300 people (1999:176). In cities, the number is much increased; Soucy indicates that between 1997 and 2005 the average size of the wedding banquet he attended in Hanoi was approximately 500 guests.

My survey in Nam Định Province (Red River Delta) shows that the average number of guests who attended the main banquet was 250 people in 2009 and the wedding expenditure varied from 250 to 1000 USD between 1998 and 2009. Nowadays, organizing a banquet in a four-star hotel in Hanoi costs a minimum of 25 USD per guest. Venue rental and catering hire for a medium quality banquet in Hanoi costs an average of 100 USD for a table of 6. The last wedding ceremony I attended in 2015 was hosted by a middle-class family and gathered around 500 guests only on the bride’s side. The banquet was held in the “house of culture” (*nhà văn hóa*) of a Hanoi district and cost 70 USD for a tray of 6, that is to say a total of 5830 USD for the celebration. In HCM-city, “affluent consumers can spend billions of Vietnamese Dong (hundreds of thousands of dollars) for a wedding [...]. Others use a reception for thousands of guests that cost about 1,000 USD for a table of ten.” (Russell and Thuc-Doan 2012: 112). Given the average income of the urban dwellers (150USD/capita/month) and rural ones (80USD/capita/month) in 2012¹⁴, these amounts are rather high. It is due to the support provided by the system of non-commercial transfers that households can hold worthy celebrations. Indeed, all the guests make an in-cash gift of which the value generally compensates the cost for a one-person meal. A case study of a middle-class family wedding in Hanoi in 1996 registered a total cost of 40.000.000 VND (2.000 USD) to host 800 guests while the total amount of *mừng*-gifts was 50 000 000 VND (2.500 USD) (Ngô and Mai 1997). According to the gift-list of a wedding hosted in the rural commune where I conducted my survey in Nam Định province in 2009, the

¹⁴ General Statistic Office of Vietnam.

husband's parents, who are farmer and builder, received a total of 18 325 000 VND (900 USD)¹⁵ from 125 donors. The total wedding costs were approximately 12 000 000 VND (600USD).

A systematic survey I conducted on weddings and funerals in the same commune shows that this case is not an exception. Indeed, the total amount of *mùng*-gift received over eight weddings organized between 2001 and 2009 ranged from 375 USD to 2280 USD while estimated expenditures ranged from 250 USD to 1000 USD. The total amount of the *tiền phúng* transfers received for four funeral celebrations held between 1998 and 2008 ranged between 380 USD and 1400 USD, while the total expenditure ranged between 350 USD and 1250 USD. Two detailed case studies of average-sized funerals showed that the total amount of received gift represented from 1.5 to 3 times the total expenditure. For instance, the funeral of Mrs Huyên organized by her five children in 2008 required total expenditures for the celebration of 825 USD, while the *tiền phúng* transfers recorded on the gift-list was 1240 USD. The comparison between what is received through the support of local society and what is spent confirms what my respondents told me during interviews: for weddings, transfers generally cover all expenses related to the organization of the banquet, excluding other expenses; and for funerals, the transfers widely defray all the costs.

The utilitarian aspect of non-commercial transfers is not only for ceremonial transaction; it concerns many other kinds of social exchanges. The endless process of ritual gift and counter-gift creates and reproduces both moral obligations and mutual indebtedness. This allows participants to turn to their interpersonal exchange network when they need support or face difficult times. As Luong explained “social relations and social capital, sustained and strengthened by gift exchanges, loom large as a part of solutions to numerous practical daily problems, ranging from medical care of a family member to informal or formal credit for business expansion” (2010: 397). A qualitative survey about food insecurity in Hanoi shows that 75% of informants reported borrowing or lending money within their personal relationship network (Pulliat 2013). Informal loans are quite common for households with structural food insecurity: 72% of them explain that they have to borrow money from members of their personal networks to buy food for daily meals, and 61% have to do so many times a month. More broadly, this study shows that non-commercial flow is central in facing food vulnerability in particular and to strengthen people’s capacity to cope with shock in general, be it economic, environmental, climatic or personal (illness, death). In the same vein, interviews with villagers and urban dwellers that faced sickness or hospitalization show that, in a society where public social security is not efficient enough (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2015), interpersonal transactions, from ritual gift to

¹⁵ The son received 3 000 000 VND (140USD) from his personal guests.

free-interest loans, play an important practical role and thus embody a significant economic and social support function.

10.4.3. Reciprocity

My study of the ceremonial transfers during major events shows that most of received transfers require a “return” (*trả lại*) or are in themselves a response to a previous transfer. The use of “gift registers” (*sổ*) are indicators of the importance given to reciprocity, as they are used to keep account of how much must be returned (*trả lại*), and to whom, when the occasion arises. As a villager explained, “for weddings, we should write the amount of received gifts because there are a lot of people, we cannot remember everything we received, but we have to give back (*phải đi lại*) or give more (*đi hơn*)”.¹⁶

The need to reciprocate received transfers is essential because, in the end, the organizer funds a large part of the event himself but, thanks to the system of gift-giving, the spending is deferred and spread out over a longer time period. In this respect, the ceremonial transfers system in Vietnam is similar to an informal credit system¹⁷. For participants, the feeling of indebtedness is very pronounced, even if the debt is moral more than legal. Villagers often speak in terms of debts (*có nợ*¹⁸ and *trả nợ*¹⁹) and use the expression "*có đi có lại*" (to give and to receive) to describe the system. In short, ceremonial transfers reflect a key principle of Vietnamese non-commercial flow: reciprocity.

One can distinguish two forms of reciprocity according to the degree of closeness of the relationship. The first form operates as a continuous flow of two-way transfer, where exact balance between what is given and received is not calculated. This form of reciprocity occurs within close relationships. With other members of one's personal network, the balance is carefully maintained, and all received transfers are mirrored as, otherwise, it may damage the relationship. In this case, all who were interviewed agreed, it is important to be "*sòng phẳng*" (“in due fairness”).

10.4.4. Common principles and nature of non-commercial flow in Vietnam

Emphasizing the great diversity of transfers and highlighting their main features, we can identify certain common principles. Non-commercial flows consist of forms of support (in cash or in kind) that occur in specific instances and which have the effect of contributing to the cost of an event, with the understanding that contributions entail a return and/or are already an answer to support previously given. Main characteristic features of Vietnamese non-commercial flow show an interpersonal and non-commercial transaction system based

¹⁶ Mr Thu, farmer in Giao Thủy district (Nam Định Province), interviewed in May 2008.

¹⁷ On this respect, the gift-giving system in China shows similar features. See Wilson (1997: 100) and Yan (1996a:10).

¹⁸ “To be in debt”.

¹⁹ “To repay a debt”.

on mutual aid (*giúp đỡ*), reciprocity (*có đi có lại*), moral obligation (*tình nghĩa*), and indebtedness (*nợ*).

According to Testart's analytical framework for classification of non-commercial transfers (2007), "exchanges" are regulated by legal obligation, i.e. the return is "claimable", while "gifts", whose return is always uncertain, are shaped by social and moral obligations. If we follow Testart, transactions within rotating saving and credit associations, various forms of informal credits and the bride price are "exchanges", while other forms of transfers are "gifts", because, contrary to the to the previous ones, no returns can be enforced, either socially or legally. In the case of no return, it is the person's reputation or the interpersonal relationship that is in jeopardy. But there is no authority, even an informal one, that can legitimately enforce the return of what was given. The possible sanctions are social, moral or public but never regulated by a legitimate use of force in the event of non-compliance with obligations (Pannier 2015). Voluntary contribution for village or patrilineage activities belong to another form of transfer, called "Transfer of the third Type" (T3T) by Testart, which concerns all transfers for which only the first prestation is claimable, not the counterpart.

10.4.5. The social functions of the gift-giving system

These distinctions between the forms of transfer being made, we will now focus on the gift-giving system. If gifts symbolize and recognize existing relationships between people or groups (Mauss 1999; Caillé 2000), they also influence and modify those social relations. The material supports that gift-giving provides, its intrinsic liberality²⁰, its part of disinterestedness²¹, the mutual obligations it generates and the moral debt it establishes combine to cement and maintain personal relationships based on material interest, sentiment and morality. Conversely, failing to reciprocate or avoiding social obligation of solidarity can damage the personal links (Soucy 2014, Pannier 2015). As a villager who received gifts after hospitalisation said "[...] I wrote all gifts in a register, because when the donors or their parents are sick, I have to give back, otherwise I'll 'lose sentiments' (*mất tình cảm*)."²² When my informants complained about the financial burden of the gift-giving system, I asked them why they still participate. The answer of an elder who was the head of the Fatherland Front at the village level reflects what I often heard: "We have to give and give back; it's a question of sentiment between people (*phải đi và đi lại vì đây là chuyện tình cảm với nhau*)."²³ More broadly, when I asked villagers why they give and return, they often answer "because of *tình cảm*".

²⁰ Liberality is here understood as free - i.e. non-legally obliged.

²¹ Partially disinterested means gaining material benefit in return is not the main reason to give.

²² Mr. Trung, farmer and musician for ceremony, ritual and festival in Giao Thủy district (Nam Định Province), interviewed in December 2008.

²³ Mr Tiên, Giao Thủy district (Nam Định Province), informal discussion in December 2009.

Vietnamese gift-giving in particular can be seen as indicators and symbols of specific ties running throughout the fabric of Vietnamese society, i.e. *quan hệ tình cảm*, which denotes moral and emotional personal relations filled with mutual respect, trust and obligation. Cultivating *tình cảm* is both the main effect of the gift transfers and their main cause. In others words, social exchanges create *tình cảm* and *tình cảm* generates social exchanges. Moreover, *tình cảm* relationships are under the control of the local society, but they emerge from interpersonal interactions as well as being reproduced through these interactions. This is why I consider that, in the Vietnamese context, the “*tình cảm* ethic” (Malarney 2002), which is a set of moral values, social norms and practices, all of which aim to build and strengthen sentimental relationships as well as social and moral obligation, plays the role of the “third element”, this force which compels people to give, to receive and to return. What Malarney observed about the social organization of the Vietnamese village before the Revolution is still true today: “sentimental relations [*tình cảm*] occupied a very important position in Vietnamese social order. The village world was extensively differentiated according to age, status, wealth, and other criteria. Sentimental relations were an assertion of solidarity and equality despite the criteria of difference that otherwise separated villagers” (Malarney 1996: 547).

In this respect, the gift-giving system observed in a rural commune in Northern Vietnam is quite similar to the gift-giving system studied by Yan in a Chinese village. He shows how gift exchanges cultivate personal networks (*guanxi*) and reflect *renqing*²⁴, which “entails a basic emotional empathy and understanding of others and, related to this, a set of moral obligations and social norms” (Yan 1996b:3). He then concludes that “It is *renqing* that gives meaning to everyday engagements, interactions and transactions within the *guanxi* networks. Under the guidance of *renqing* ethics, the pursuit of personal interest is intermingled with the fulfilment of moral obligations. The value of *guanxi* cultivation lies in its double role of sustaining a long-term order of social life and providing an effective means for achieving personal goals.” (*Ibid.* 28)

10.5 Role and place of non-commercial flow within Vietnamese society

The non-commercial transactions and the social relations which they initiate occupy an important place in the social and economic regulation of Vietnamese society. Indeed, by forming an assistance network to which everyone can resort to when facing a difficulty, they resolve numerous practical daily issues, such as providing a source of capital funding or strengthening resilience. More broadly, they ensure the allocation and distribution of resources useful for the material reproduction of households and the development of their economic activities.

²⁴ See also the Chinese word “*ganqing*” which is similar to the Vietnamese word “*tình cảm*” (Yan 1996a; Gold *et al.* 2002; Soucy 2014; Pannier 2015).

This economic function of transfers is connected to a social one, which becomes apparent through the "bonding effects" that these transfers entail. By reflecting, cementing and maintaining personal relationships filled with sentiments, obligations and self-interests, these social exchanges inject mutual trust, stability and predictability into a context in which other institutions (the market, the State, kinship, religion) simply cannot. Thus, they foster a broad cooperation between people, one that can withstand social fragmentation of the village social life and uncertainty of daily interactions (Pannier 2015).

In a context of deficiencies in the legal environment and market instability, legal obligations, official rules and contracts are not enough to generate trust, especially between anonymous people. It is often necessary to personalize the relationship and guarantee the commitments made, which is precisely what the system of non-commercial transfer allows. But, if these social exchanges are informal mediating mechanisms that compensate for the weakness of the official structure of rules, they are not only a response to the contemporary Vietnamese institutional framework. "Deeply rooted in local models for and of social reality" (Lurong 2016:43), they exist before the new institutional orders established by the State-Party and they shape the socio-political system. Thus, the networks established by these social exchanges counterbalance the uncertainty in the social environment but also undermine the establishment of solid formal institutions, in particular through corruption, nepotism, patronage and clientelism. In the same vein, the interpersonal exchange system plays an ambivalent role in the process of market economy development: it enables capitalism as much as it undermines its hegemony. In other words, even if they occur outside the official channels, non-commercial transfers are strongly articulated with both the State and the market dynamics. They operate as a complement to the legal infrastructures as well as limiting their ascendancy and their efficiency.

Thus, non-commercial transaction fulfills both economic and social functions, which appear to be central in the social fabric of modern Vietnam. This prominent role in both daily and ritual life is a clear indicator of the strength and importance that interpersonal relations (*quan hệ*) have on the Vietnamese social order. If in industrial western societies "gift-exchange exists, but it is now free from the burden of having to produce and reproduce the fundamental social relationships common to all members of society" (Godelier 1996:291), in contemporary Vietnam, interpersonal transfers still widely contribute to the production-reproduction process of the society at the local level.

10.6. References

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