Encountering "Hot" Anger

Domestic Violence in Contemporary Vietnam

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This article examines husband-to-wife violence within a rural Vietnamese community. In Vietnam, domestic violence is tied to a complex field of cultural forces that consists of a patrilineal tradition of ancestor worship, assumptions about females' versus males' character, Confucian virtues, and a history of war. Females are expected to encourage household harmony by adjusting themselves and, in so doing, make social life smooth. Males, on the other hand, are assumed to have a hot character, meaning that a male might fly into a rage and even behave violently. Local ways of constructing females and males, the article suggests, provide conditions for considering females as a corporeal materiality that can be manipulated into the right shape by the means of (male) violence. Domestic violence, like any other violence, by ignoring the corporeal limits thus brutally alters assumptions about the topography of the human body.

Keywords: *Confucian virtues; domestic violence; Vietnam*

This article considers the ways in which ideas of "hot" (*nong*) male "characters" (*tinh cach*) and "cool" (*lanh*) female "characters" (*tinh cach*) produce local logics concerning men's violence against their wives within a northern rural Vietnamese community called Thinh Tri (pseudonym).[1] Hot "male characters" (*tinh cach nam*) can "boil" (*soi*) or "explode" (*hang len*), which might entail that a

man flies into a rage and incidents of domestic violence occur. Cool female characters, on the other hand, are assumed to "endure" (*chiu*) and, by so doing, guarantee the "harmony" (*hoa thuan*) of a household. Such understandings of females and males, as I shall show, are bound up with a patrilineal social hierarchy as well as a past of brutal wars that together influence Thinh Tri men's violence within the domestic sphere. In other words, men's exercise of physical violence against their wives crystallizes a complex field of cultural forces.

Violence is a socially and culturally constructed manifestation, which takes different forms depending on the local context in which it is carried out. Local logics render meaningful the ways in which social agents interact with one another, and also if interactions are violent (Robben & Nordstrom, 1995). According to the World Health Organization (2002), violence can be defined as a physical force or power that either will result in or most likely will lead to physical and/or psychological injuries. Hence, violence is a matter of one person entering the horizon of another by the means of power and appears as a certain kind of social interaction, which encompasses whatever a person experiences as the illegitimate exercise of coercion, control, or exploitation (Handwerker, 1997; de Vries, 1997). As regards domestic violence, this particular kind of male-to-female violence, in addition, is characterized by being a genderized difference, which is manifested as a difference both in corporeal and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1977, 1992; Hester, 1992; Moore, 1994).

Entering the horizon of another person by the means of power and violence means that the limits of the abused person's body are ignored. Transgressing the limits of a human body is an act that redefines human corporeality and, in so doing, provokes understandings of the topography of the human body. When the physical horizon of a body is entered, this body is reduced to a material of plasticity, which the perpetrator treats as if it were possible to shape in accordance with imaginations of power, for instance, in

terms of men's domination over women (cf. Grosz, 1994; Linke, 1997; Moore, 1994).

All of this will be evident with respect to the local community of Thinh Tri, which I shall introduce below. After having done so, I shall outline the research on violence against women in Vietnam, before going on to look at the patrilineal societal structure and the applications of the notions of hot and cool characters within the local rural Vietnamese setting.

THE COMMUNITY

Thinh Tri commune is located in the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam in the province of Ha Tay and consists of approximately 12,000 inhabitants, who belong to the majority group of the Vietnamese population (i.e., Kinh). Virtually all inhabitants are farmers, although many adult household members also have small-scale income jobs to make ends meet.[2] The major crop of the commune is rice, which is harvested twice a year. The harvest seasons are stressful owing to the highly labor intensive work in the fields and concern about whether the harvest will be good, or a sudden shower will spoil the crops (see Kerkvliet, 1995). Rural Vietnamese women carry out a huge burden of work. Besides working in the fields and having small-scale income jobs, for example, as vendors, rural women also conduct the majority of the household work (i.e., 87%) (Tran Thi Van Anh & Le Ngoc Hung, 2000; United Nations Children's Fund, 2000).

As any other commune in Vietnam, Thinh Tri is governed by a local People's Committee (Uy ban nhan dan), and the Communist Party (Dang cong san) guarantees the ideological line of the commune. Communes even have mass unions (*hoi*), such as the Women's Union (Hoi phu nu) and the Youth Union (Hoi thanh nien).[3] A health care clinic (Tram y te), which deals with day-to-day medical problems in the community, and a reconciliation group (Uy ban hoa giai), which attempts to reconcile matters of discord, can also be found in a typical rural commune such as Thinh Tri.

In December 1986, Vietnam introduced the policy of *doi moi* (renovation), which aims at maintaining socialism in a market-oriented economy. The *doi moi* policy entailed new forms of man-

agement, reorganizations of the administrative sector, reconsiderations of the state and market, and increased globalization. Hence, with the policy of *doi moi*, Vietnam entered a rapid period of transition (Duiker, 1995; Ljunggren, 1997).

One effect of Vietnam's increased integration in the global economy is a widespread anxiety in Vietnamese society regarding whether Vietnamese values might be influenced negatively by contacts with the outside world. In this spirit, there have been public debates on social evils (*te nan xa hoi*), which is a term that labels official definitions of nonacceptable behaviors in citizens, such as drinking alcohol, gambling, drug addiction, violence, prostitution, pornography, superstition, and any criminal actions (Le Thi Quy, 1992; Marr, 1997). The social evil debate, however, does not only relate to new tendencies in Vietnamese society but also corresponds with national and local official Communist assumptions about reminisces of "backward" (*lac hau*), "feudal" (*phong kien*), or Confucian thinking and behavior in the Vietnamese population, which are thought to stimulate the production of social evils (Rydstrøm, 2001). Such categorizations refer to the prerevolutionary period in Vietnam (i.e., prior to 1945) and that Vietnam from 1075 to 1919 was dominated by a Confucian tradition, which included a feudal and patrilineal organization of society (Marr, 1981; Nguyen Khac Vien, 1975).

Vietnam has been subject to prolonged wars and so has Thinh Tri. The commune was deeply involved in an 8-year-long war of liberation (1946 to 1954) against French colonialism (1883 to 1954). According to inhabitants, the French occupational forces fought in the commune in 1949, 1950, and 1952, which involved torture, rape, and killing. In 1954, the French forces were expelled by Vietnamese troops; however, this did not bring peace to Vietnam. During the French occupation of Vietnam, the United States became increasingly involved in southern Vietnam by supporting a French puppet government in former Saigon (contemporary Ho Chi Minh City), which was meant to be a counterpoint to President Ho Chi Minh's Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam (declared in 1945, with its capital in Hanoi in northern Vietnam) (Duiker, 1995; Keesing Research Report, 1970; Marr, 1981). During the war against the United States (1965 to 1975), many of the men from Thinh Tri went to the front zones. Thinh Tri women and children

were protected from being directly confronted with American soldiers, although the whole province was bombed severely by the American air force (see Chaliand, 1969).

FIELDWORK

During my two periods of fieldwork in Thinh Tri, it became increasingly clear to me that physical violence is a kind of social interaction that influences not only the general history of Vietnam but also the relationship between husband and wife. This I came to understand in connection with my research on children, adolescents, and their household kin.

I conducted one period of fieldwork in Thinh Tri from 1994 to 1995 (14 months) and a second period of fieldwork from 2000 to 2001 (8 months). From 1994 to 1995, I continuously observed the social interaction of five extended or nuclear families to examine the ways in which children learn to become culturally appropriate females or males. The fieldwork consisted of intensive observations of all social interaction between the children, and their siblings, parents, grandparents, other kin, peers, and teachers, as well as in-depth interviews with all of these groups and also official representatives. These data resulted in more than 49 hours of cassette tapes and 15 hours of videotapes, all of which have been transcribed into Vietnamese (see Rydstrøm, 2003a).

From 2000 to 2001, I carried out another period of fieldwork in Thinh Tri in connection with a current research project on adolescents, violence, and sexuality. I worked with four extended or nuclear families and conducted in-depth interviews with adolescents, and their peers, parents, grandparents, other kin, teachers, and official representatives. In addition, I arranged focus group discussions and did participant observation. My data from this fieldwork resulted in 40 hours of tape recordings, which have been transcribed into Vietnamese (see Rydstrøm, 2002b, 2003b, in press).

Because I repeatedly encountered information about internal household conflicts, in particular men beating their wives, I decided to address the matter more directly while conducting fieldwork in Thinh Tri.

RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
IN VIETNAM

Vietnam has enacted legislation that prohibits the use of any physical violence against women and children (Law on Marriage and Family, 1986; Penal Code of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1989). Vietnamese officials and newspapers, therefore, strongly condemn violence against children and women (and men) (Le Thi Phuong Mai, 1998). However, the legislation may not have had the wished consequences at the local level. This is not a problem exclusively related to legislation on violence but rather reflects a general tendency regarding somewhat weak communication between decision makers at the national level, on one hand, and local provinces and communes, on the other (Bergling, 1997).

In 1992, Le Thi Quy, who is affiliated with the National Women's Union, introduced the term *domestic violence* into Vietnamese academic and political debate (Le Thi Quy, 1992; Vu Manh Loi, Vu Tuan Huy, Nguyen Huu Minh, & Clement, 1999). In her article, Le Thi Quy distinguished between visible and invisible violence against women. The first kind of violence refers to direct physical confrontation between a wife and her husband, and the latter refers to the kind of violence, which can be defined by paraphrasing Bourdieu (1977), can define as symbolic violence. Invisible or symbolic violence characterizes an exercise of power that goes beyond the realm of corporeal violence and, thus, affects the abused person in more subtle ways than does a direct physical confrontation (Bourdieu, 1977, 1992; see also Lahti, 2001).

Le Thi Quy (1992) concluded that "in Vietnam, the development of the commodity economy has had some remarkable successes. However, along with the market economy, many social evils—including domestic violence—are also on the rise" (p. 263). In addition to identifying social evils as a cause of any kind of domestic violence in Vietnam, Le Thi Quy also underscored that men's violence against their wives is an expression of old "feudal," "backward," and Confucian reminisces in Vietnamese society, which exist alongside the official communist ideology:

> Since the triumph of the August Revolution in 1945, a persistent struggle for equality of the sexes has been undertaken in all spheres, legislation, family, and society. This has led to a funda-

mental change in the position, rights and interests of women. However, any struggle has its difficulties, in particular, the struggle against backward perceptions and customs which have existed for centuries. It is then understandable that today, forty years after the liberation from the colonial and feudal yoke, vestiges of the Confucian attitude of "honoring men and despising women" still linger and have even regained vitality in some places. This attitude creates a kind of terrible violence against women. (p. 263)

Hence, domestic violence is considered to be a consequence partly of Vietnam's rapid transition, which is thought to have led to the emergence of social evils, and partly of prerevolutionary practices and ideas in Vietnamese citizens. (This parallels the discussions in China, for example, see Hester, 2000; Milwertz, 2003 [this issue].)

In an article from 1993, Ho Thi Phuong Tien from the Center for Family and Women's Studies (which is affiliated with the National Women's Union) stressed the importance of addressing the matter of domestic violence. She pointed out that in Vietnam, violence against women and children is often secret and that in the more extreme cases it has even pushed abused females to commit suicide. Ho Thi Phuong Tien argued that by highlighting men's violence against women, and also against children, precautions can be taken so that domestic violence can be eliminated.

In 1997, the National Women's Union carried out a study on domestic violence in Vietnam. The study was based on secondary data from newspapers and provincial institutes and verified that domestic violence is widespread in Vietnamese society (World Bank, 1999). Also in 1997, the Population Council in Hanoi conducted a study on violence against women in Vietnam to clarify the ways in which violence affects women's health. Le Thi Phuong Mai (1997), who carried out the study, emphasized that husbands' violence against their wives is a sensitive matter, which is the reason why many Vietnamese are reluctant to discuss the issue. Despite such obstacles, Le Thi Phuong Mai managed to collect data on domestic violence, which indicate the ways in which men's violence influences women's lives:

In Ho Chi Minh City. . . the majority of domestic violence victims are in a state of shock, exhausted, have given up on life, have no vitality left to work or care for their children and home and may be suicidal. Many see ending their life as salvation because they see no

way out of their desperate situation. They no longer believe in their ability to recover and to correct the situation. They feel humiliated and defeated—a mindset which drains their physical strength, confuses their thinking, undermines their confidence and leads them to blame themselves for what has happened. Women often use "divorce" to escape from a violent situation. (p. 44)

Women's experiences of domestic violence, thus, affect their lives in radical ways and may even lead to suicide, a point that Ho Thi Phuong Tien similarly underscored in her study from 1993. A recent World Bank (1999) report on violence against women in Vietnam noted that the level of violence within Vietnamese communities, according to local inhabitants' own estimations, is generally considered to be "low" (p. v). According to this "low" estimate, 5% to 20% of all households experience domestic violence regularly in terms of male-to-female violence.[4] In a 1998 report by Croll for the Swedish International Development Agency, it is mentioned that 30% to 60% of all divorce cases in Vietnam come about because of men's exercise of violence against their wives (Croll, 1998; see also Khuat Thu Hong, 1998; Nguyen Thuy Ngan, 2000; Vu Manh Loi et al., 1999). However, in so far as we do not have access to more detailed statistical data on domestic violence in Vietnam, such figures must be treated with caution

With regard to male violence within the particular setting of Thinh Tri, a representative from the local health care clinic stated that Thinh Tri women frequently visit the clinic after having encountered domestic violence, although the number of women per year is unclear.

Because domestic violence has only very recently become a matter of public debate in Vietnamese society, access to more elaborate statistical data on male-to-female violence in Vietnamese households are very limited. It is therefore difficult to estimate more precisely how common male-to-female violence is in contemporary Vietnam and, furthermore, the more exact ways in which an abused wife and even a couple's children suffer.

To examine domestic violence in Vietnam, and in the local setting of Thinh Tri, I suggest it is necessary to address the following: a patrilineal social hierarchy; the ways in which females, males, and their bodies are rendered intelligible as cool or hot; the Confucian virtues; and a violent history of war. All of this I shall discuss

in the following sections before moving on to look in more detail at domestic violence in Thinh Tri.

A PATRILINEAL COMMUNITY

The local community of Thinh Tri is pervaded by the tradition of Confucianism. Inhabitants practice patrilineal ancestor worship, which means that male progeny is highly appreciated. Males are assumed always to be superior to females because males are thought to be able to reproduce their father's lineage (males are said to be inside lineage, *ho noi*).

Because females are not perceived as able to continue their father's lineage, females hold an inferior position within the patrilineal social hierarchy (females are defined as outside lineage, *ho ngoai*). Therefore, males are usually heads of household and responsible for carrying out certain patrilineal rituals (e.g., in connection with funerals and the worshipping of ancestors). In addition, males make the important decisions, while females are in charge of minor day-to-day decisions concerning how to run a household (Gammeltoft, 1998; Rydstrøm, 2001, 2003a).

Males thus generally tend to hold a more dominant and powerful position within a household than do females. This is not to say that females do not speak up or get their own way—that is not the case—but males are deemed superior. This is indicated by what inhabitants frequently refer to as men's position as the "pillar of the house" (*tru cot*). Females learn from an early age that they are expected to act with a well-developed "sense" (*tinh cam*) and adjust themselves in accordance with the character of a particular social situation. In practice, this also means that Thinh Tri women frequently manifest that they posses a sense for their inferior position within the patrilineal hierarchy (Rydstrøm, 2002a, 2003a). If a woman is not capable of demonstrating a sense for how to enact herself verbally and bodily, she may encounter the common Vietnamese idea that it is a husband's right to punish his wife.

Because of an inferior status, a female is expected to comply with the wishes of her husband and to endure if he demonstrates anger. Women often emphasized to me that they have to "swallow the pill" (*nhin nhuc*) if their husbands become angry and/or violent. As 26-year-old Tuyet said:

> When a man gets angry, he always speaks in immoral ways like swearing and shouting. The woman farmers usually have to endure [*chiu*] and swallow the pill [*nhin nhuc*]. In many cases, one is under pressure and cries. If I don't endure a day when his [i.e., her husband's] moods are bad, he gets very angry, criticizes me severely, and can destroy everything. But it is only when he becomes very angry and if I oppose him that he beats me.

The patrilineally organized community, and the ways in which it subtly supports men's violent practices, is also amplified by a Taoist cosmology, which assumes that female bodies are cool and male bodies hot.

COOL AND HOT CHARACTERS

According to a Taoist (Dao) phenomenology of the human body, female bodies are associated with the forces of Am (Yin in Chinese). Am forces accord with categories such as the moon, earth, water, rest, cold, passivity, responsiveness, darkness, inwardness, inferiority, decrease, downwards, negativity, a centrifugal force, the North, right, and even numbers (Huard & Durand, 1954; Kaptchuk, 1983). On the other hand, male bodies are related to the forces of Duong (Yang in Chinese). The male principle of Duong correlates with categories such as the sun, heaven, fire, movement, heat, activity, stimulation, lightness, outwardness, superiority, increase, upwards, positivity, a centripetal force, the South, left, and odd numbers. Together, these two complementary forces are said to stimulate the maintenance of harmony at a local as well as universal level (Huard & Durand, 1954; Kaptchuk, 1983).

Owing to the dominant forces of Duong in a male body, a male basically is perceived to be "hot" (*nong*, also meaning bad tempered), whereas the dominant forces of Am in a female body mean that her body basically is thought to be "cool" (*lanh*). Bodies that are naturally hot, I was told, embody a "hot character" (*tinh nong*) that correlates with an active and centripetal force, which orchestrates social and physical space. In contrast, bodies that are naturally cool incorporate a "cool character" (*tinh lanh*) that is perceived to represent a more passive and centrifugal force and that does not conquer much social or physical space. In this way, males

are construed as masculine and females as feminine (cf. Moore, 1994; Rydstrøm, 2003a).

Such assumptions are also related to ideas about the consumption of certain drinks and dishes. Hot characters, that is to say, males, are expected to drink alcohol, which is said to be a hot drink. Cool characters, that is to say, females, only very rarely consume alcohol. It is not thought to be feminine to drink alcohol because of the "heat" contained in alcoholic drinks. Although alcohol is perceived to correspond with a hot male character, men can become too hot if they drink too much alcohol. As both women and men pointed out to me, an excessive consumption of alcohol might make men boil or even explode in terms of acting violently (cf. Le Thi Phuong Mai, 1997, 1998; Vu Manh Loi et al., 1999).

AN ENDURING WIFE

"A wife will fear her husband as she feared her father" (*coi nhu thang chong la bo*) a common precept dictates and about which Thinh Tri women would occasionally remind me. Similarly, inhabitants would emphasize the importance of following the dictum of "showing respect for the superior and self-denial for the inferior" (*biet kinh tren nhuong duoi*) (cf. Pham Van Bich, 1998).

Such Confucian precepts remind us that a wife is considered inferior to her husband and, therefore, should pay him respect. Those precepts, as well as the notion of the Four Virtues (Tu Duc), encourage women to demonstrate flexibility, the ability to adjust themselves so that harmony and happiness can be fostered within a household. As noted by the film director and author Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1992), the Four Virtues enumerate the following guidelines for females:

> First, *cong* [work]: you'll have to be able, competent and skilful—in cooking, sewing, managing the household budget, caring for the husband, educating the children—all this to save the husband's face. Second, *dung* [appearance]: you'll have to maintain a gracious, compliant and cheerful appearance—first of all for the husband. Third, *ngon* [speech]: you'll have to speak properly and softly and never raise your voice—particularly in front of the husband or his relatives. Then fourth, *hanh* [principles]: you'll have to know where your place is; respect those older than you and yield to

those younger or weaker than you—moreover, be faithful and sac-
rifice for the husband. (p. 90) (see also Nguyen Tu Chi, 1991)

By addressing recent development tendencies in Asia and
Southeast Asia, Stivens (2002) outlined the ways in which the
middle-class wife in many countries has been held out as a gen-
eral female ideal. This ideal refers to a woman who is responsible
for the harmony and happiness of her family and is, according to
Stivens, an explicit revitalization of Confucian ideas regarding the
ways in which a family should function. Women, she argued, are
acknowledged and praised as the bearers of this ideal family,
which is supposed to be a bulwark against invading dangers of
fragmenting national and individual identities in a changing and
increasingly global world.

Fahey (2002) noted that the tendencies, which Stivens (2002)
suggested can be observed with respect to a more general Asian/
Southeast Asian family ideal, can similarly be recognized in Viet-
namese society. Fahey thus concluded that owing to recent
changes in Vietnamese society, above all a developing market
economy, females' more traditional and Confucian roles to some
extent have been reconstituted.

In spite of such tendencies, family life is not always as ideal and
happy as desired. One reason why it may be difficult to maintain
harmony and, in turn, stimulate the vision of a happy and ideal
family life may be related to Vietnam's past involvement in many
prolonged and bloody wars.

WAR EXPERIENCES

Everyone in the local community has bitter memories of brutal
violence that in no way respected the limits of humans' bodies
and minds. Many men in the commune have been stationed for
long periods at the frontiers, up to 10 years in some cases. Many of
them have suffered physically and psychologically from their
experiences of participating in the different wars with, for exam-
ple, France and the United States. Although Thinh Tri women
were not recruited to the front zones, as were the men, they still
have painful memories of the many wars (cf. Bao Ninh, 1994; Tay-
lor, 1999; Turner, 1998).

A considerable proportion of the adult men in Thinh Tri are disabled and are provided with a pension. They suffer, for instance, from lost limbs, severe malaria attacks, and remains of bullets still embedded in their bodies. In addition, war invalids struggle with what inhabitants define as "bad temper," being too "hot" (*nong*), having "mental disorder" (*thanh kinh*) or "nerves" (*than kinh*). Such experiences and states of health may provide an explanation for why some Thinh Tri men are occasionally violent (cf. Robben & Nordstrom, 1995; Schröder & Schmidt, 2001).

First, because some men seem to have developed what is locally defined as bad temper, hot behavior, mental disorder, or nerves, they may from time to time act in unpredictable and violent ways. Second, some men perceive violence as an integrated dimension of a local patrilineal male culture, which includes ideas of harsh discipline and occasional violent punishment if deemed necessary (Moore, 1994; Nguyen Thuy Ngan, 2000; Rydstrøm, 2002b).

Episodes of confrontations between men and women, thus, may occur partly by virtue of some men's critical health condition and partly because display of anger is considered to be a typical hot male way of emphasizing one's superior position within a patrilineal hierarchy (Le Thi Phuong Mai, 1998). In the following sections, I shall examine male anger and violence within the specific context of Trinh Tri. A number of themes are apparent: bodily transgression, the outcome of hot and cool behavior, and minimization of domestic violence.

HOT ANGER

The narration that follows illuminates the ways in which a woman's body is rendered intelligible and treated as if it were a material of plasticity that can be manipulated into appropriate forms by being beaten and adequate behavior enforced. Such violent and powerful ways of interacting within the domestic sphere mean that a violent husband comes to redefine the topography of the body of his abused wife.

Hao is a 49-year-old Thinh Tri woman who told about the recurrent incidents of severe physical violence in one of the neighboring households. She was worried about the conflicts, which she could not avoid overhearing. It should be noted that houses in

Thinh Tri do not have windows made of glass and that houses are closely clustered with small narrow paths in between. By virtue of this way of organizing the commune, anyone can easily observe the whereabouts of one's neighbors. Moreover, neighbors are kin and friends, meaning that most people know what is going on not only in the neighboring households but also in the entire neighborhood.

Compared with other accounts of domestic violence from the local setting, the story that Hao told me appears extraordinarily violent, but it epitomizes nonetheless the course that domestic violence can take within a Thinh Tri household. Moreover, Hao's narration condenses some more general tendencies regarding the complex field of cultural forces that are at play whenever domestic violence occurs in the local community. Thus, Hao especially remembered what she considered to be some "terrible" (*khiep*) incidents of fighting between the neighboring couple:

> It [the violence] happens everywhere in the commune, especially when men drink alcohol. Then they shout and beat their wives and children. Some men also easily get jealous if they drink alcohol. Then they provoke conflicts.
>
> For example, our neighbor [because he was jealous of his wife, according to Hao], he once threw all the hot water from the thermos after his wife so that she was burned on her legs. He also smashed the cupboard [that was placed on the porch] and threw everything from the cupboard [i.e., china] on the ground. Very bad! [Later] when his children left the house to go and play with some friends, he got so angry so that he burned his own children's school books in the yard. This man has a very hot character [*tinh nong*].
>
> No one could prevent him from beating his wife. At that day, he beat his wife very severely and threatened her with a knife. If she hadn't avoided the knife, she would have been dead by now. She escaped to her parents' house where she stayed for 10 days.
>
> The husband is always very jealous. He talks badly about his wife. He also talks badly to her. One evening when the family was eating rice [i.e., having dinner], he shouted at his wife, "Fuck your mother; fuck your father" [*deo me may; deo cha*], and then he threw his rice bowl into the yard. Terrible [*khiep*]! Recently, there has been quiet over there [in the neighbor's house]. It goes up and down. Maybe, he is like this because he had a fall when he was a child? But he also drinks alcohol made from bear liver, which makes him very hot [*nong*].
>
> He treats her [his wife] very badly. Once, he also tried to strangle her. Then she once again escaped to her parents' house, but she

came back to him after a while, because she was concerned about her children. She lives with him because of the children. It is very hard for this wife because he beats her frequently. Sometimes, he locks the doors of the house, simply in order to beat her. She says, "Even I am almost dead, I have to fight back." This man has a very hot character, but his wife is also a little stubborn [*ngang ngang*]. Sometimes, some of their relatives come and try to stop the fighting and ask the couple to reconcile, but the man sends the relatives away.

If she did not have any children, the wife could get a divorce. But because of the children, she can't.

This narrative crystallizes the way in which a hierarchical patrilineal structure, on one hand, and ideas of hot, boiling males and cool, enduring females, on the other, entangle with one another. In the narration, it is apparent that the hot man transgressed the bodily boundaries of his wife in highly radical and abusing ways: first, by throwing hot water from the thermos at her; second, by threatening her with a knife; and finally, by attempting to strangle her (cf. Lahti, 2001; Moore, 1994; de Vries, 1997).

The actions in the narrative illustrate the ways in which a wife may be perceived by her husband in confrontations of domestic violence. Recall that a Thinh Tri female is assumed to be flexible in her behavior and actions by possessing a highly tuned sense concerning the ways in which she should enact herself in a whole range of social situations. Ideas concerning such capacities in females relate to expectations of their responsibilities regarding the maintenance of harmony within a household. Harmony and happiness must be stimulated by an enduring and cool female, who does not create frictions or provoke others. If transferring such social expectations to women and their bodies, we find that in cases of domestic violence, a woman's body is converted into a material symbol of a female's assumed social flexibility. Similar to the ways in which a female is thought to be flexible in her actions and words, her body is also signified in terms of flexibility whenever she finds herself involved in scenes of domestic violence. If a wife does not endure and stay cool by adjusting herself, a violent husband might literally want to shape her by manipulating her body into an appropriate "enduring" form. Hence, in cases of domestic violence, a woman's body is treated as a physical materiality of plasticity that a superior person could sculpt. Such

assumptions are echoed in local discussions about domestic violence and the ways in which men's violence may be minimized and denied.

WHEN THE RICE BOILS

When a nurse from the Thinh Tri health care clinic explained about domestic violence in the commune, it was clear that she was minimizing violent interactions between husband and wife. Although she regularly sees women who have encountered domestic violence, she does not consider the cases of violence to be very serious, despite obvious wounds: "We do not have very serious cases of violence between husband and wife in our commune. The women who come here only bleed a little." At the same time, this statement highlights the ambiguity and ambivalence with which official Thinh Tri handles the matter of domestic violence. On one hand, cases of domestic violence are not seen as serious because if they were, official policy and legislation would be contradicted. On the other hand, it is clear that the bodily and mental boundaries of women in Thinh Tri are occasionally transgressed, as illustrated in the episode above. Moreover, women do come to the health care clinic bleeding because of domestic violence, even though the women, in the words of the Thinh Tri nurse, "only bleed a little" (cf. Le Thi Phuong Mai, 1998).

Local assumptions of females' cool and enduring characters and males' hot and dominating characters were also stressed when the nurse, in our continued conversation, described how a hot male character correlates with a violent way of acting:

> Due to their hot character and hard work, it is normal that men get angry. . . . No woman dares to fight with her husband. The victims of violence should reconsider their behavior in order to prevent further violence. Women should hold back [*nhin*] themselves, and we [women] should not explode [*hang len*]. If we explode, a conflict will escalate, and things will become complicated. If the rice boils, the fire should be reduced [*com soi bot lua*] [i.e., women should stay cool if men get hot/angry].

Both female and male inhabitants stressed how it is common that Thinh Tri men occasionally explode because they become too hot. Conflicts are seen as proof of a lack of balance between the cool

and hot forces within a household. As is clear from what the nurse said, females are assumed to stay calm by holding themselves back (*nhin*) if their husbands become too hot and explode because of a boiling temper, in terms of being angry and perhaps even behaving violently. In this way, females are expected to maintain harmony within their households (cf. Gammeltoft, 1998; Rydstrøm, 2003a). The occurrence of violence within a household is thus ultimately associated with a wife's inability to stimulate harmony in the domestic sphere through a controlled and cool way of enacting herself. Males' "more uncontrolled temper" (World Bank, 1999, p. 18), on the other hand, is said to justify more violent behavior by males (cf. Le Thi Phuong Mai, 1997, 1998; Le Thi Quy, 1992; Vu Manh Loi et al., 1999).

The pressure on women regarding the attainment of household harmony is highlighted by ideas that foreground the importance of abused women's reconsideration of their own behavior, as mentioned in the quote above. In a similar vein, a woman from a Vietnamese community other than Thinh Tri also blamed women for the occurrence of domestic violence when she said, "Women who are beaten by their husbands must do something wrong or behave in a tactless way in order to make their husband lose control" (World Bank, 1999, p. 19; see also Le Thi Phuong Mai, 1997, 1998; Le Thi Quy, 1992).

In the same spirit, another nurse from the Thinh Tri health care clinic explained that if a woman contacts the clinic because of domestic violence, the nurses usually encourage her to return to her husband to try to solve the matter causing the violence. Reasons for such ways of dealing with women's complaints concerning a violent husband are related, as the nurse said, to the fact that "the health care clinic cannot prevent the fighting [between husband and wife]. This is a job for the reconciliation group." Generally, however, women's unions, health care clinics, and reconciliation groups in local communities in Vietnam rarely intervene in cases of domestic violence (World Bank, 1999). This may be a significant reason why women do not report domestic violence to the local authorities. A woman from another local community (not Thinh Tri), for example, remembered,

> When I reported the incidents at the local police station, we were talked to and sent home. The matter was considered a family affair

and not a public concern. Sometimes, a policeman would write up a record of the complaint but not follow-up, offering no support to ease the situation at home. The beatings would happen again, only more severely because it had the additional fuel of my "fault" for having contacted the police. . . . The local authorities seem unable to intervene. (Le Thi Phuong Mai, 1998, p. 37)

Women, then, are usually encouraged to go back home and recreate the harmony and happiness of their households. All of these statements about domestic male-to-female violence illustrate the ways in which ideas of a cool-hot dichotomy as well as males' patrilineally defined superiority over females are perceived to provide excuses for not intervening in violent conflicts within a household (see Le Thi Phuong Mai, 1998; Vu Manh Loi et al., 1999).

CONCLUSION

Domestic violence in rural Vietnam, I have argued, must be addressed with reference to a specific context of cultural complexity. This incorporates the following: first, ideas of female and male characters, which predict hot behavior in males and cool behavior in females; second, a tradition of patrilineal ancestor worship, which elevates sons and, in so doing, renders boys and men superior to girls and women; third, Confucian virtues regarding females' ways of enacting themselves; and finally, experiences of wars, which completely ignored the boundaries of humans' bodies and minds.

By being aware of her cool character, a Thinh Tri woman is assumed to offer a point of counterbalance to her husband and his (essential) hot character. Females, as we have seen, should not become hot, boil, or explode. Such more explosive ways of acting and, in turn, orchestrating domestic life are exclusively associated with males. Men's warfare experiences may also in some cases amplify local assumptions about males' hot characters. Many men suffer from war experiences that may encourage certain ways of interacting. Warfare experiences are stored in the individual and collective memory and, in this sense, may create a resource for perceptions about social interaction (Schröder & Schmidt, 2001).

Local assumptions about men's hot characters, however, also have to be connected with the power and position of females and males within a household. From an early age, girls in Thinh Tri are taught to approach social interactions and relations in a manner that includes a sense for when one should stay cool and, in so doing, endure. Such social capacities in females are assumed to create conditions of household harmony and, in turn, happiness. Boys, on the other hand, learn that they hold a celebrated and superior role within the patrilineal setting because of an emphasis on the importance of male progeny (see Rydstrøm, 2003a). Patrilineally determined values regarding females and males, thus, produce local logics regarding ways of treating one another.

All of these cultural forces, which are at play within the local community, may stimulate some men's imaginations about the ways in which their superiority and hot character should be manifested by the means of power and violence.

NOTES

1. Any names of persons from the rural community referred to in this article as well as the name of the commune have been changed.

2. In 1998, according to United Nations Children's Fund (2000, pp. 18-19), the average annual income per capita was less than U.S. $200 in rural areas; 90% of all poor families are estimated to live in rural areas.

3. In addition to the Women's Union (Hoi phu nu) and the Youth Union (Hoi thanh nien), the Front Union (Mat tran), the Ex-servicemen's Union (Hoi cuu chien binh), and the Farmer's Union (Hoi nong dan) are active in Thinh Tri. For a detailed account of Vietnamese villages, see, for instance, Kleinen (1999).

4. Studies of violence against women in, for example, Japan, Thailand, and Kenya indicate that figures for domestic male-to-female violence in these countries are higher than in Vietnam (see Le Thi Phuong Mai, 1998).

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