Gender, Place and Culture
Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 283–301, June 2006

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group Ltd

Sexual Desires and 'Social Evils': Young women in rural Vietnam

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Abstract *Vietnam's increased integration into the global market economy entails rapid and dynamic changes that foster new ways of acting, interacting and rendering the world meaningful. This article addresses the ways in which an ongoing process of transformation in contemporary Vietnam is epitomised by the ambivalence and ambiguity with which female sexuality is imbued. Female sexuality is ideally restricted to marriage and motherhood, meaning that females' premarital or extramarital sexual relations tend to be associated with the category of 'social evils' (*te nan xa hoi*). The category of 'social evils' is vague in definition and was introduced into Vietnamese society by virtue of what was seen as the country's increased involvement in a morally polluted world. By drawing on two periods of fieldwork (1994–1995 and 2000–2001) in a northern rural Vietnamese commune, this article highlights the ways in which female sexuality in a local field site is intertwined with anxieties about the forces of a global and 'poisonous culture' (*van hoa doc hai*) that may lead young women to transgress moral limits: for example, by having premarital sex. For many rural female adolescents sexuality thus means a need of self-imposed and/or governmentally imposed control in order to guarantee appropriate morality. For others, however, sexuality means the involvement in premarital sexual relations and, hence, a crossing of moral boundaries.*

Introduction

This article elucidates the ways in which young Vietnamese rural women render sexuality meaningful as a desire that is imbued with self-imposed as well as governmentally imposed control. Young women are growing up in a peaceful country that has undergone rapid societal changes due to about 20 years of implementation of the *doi moi* (renovation) policy (Duiker 1995).[1] The *doi moi* policy, which was introduced by the Communist Party in 1986 and strives to maintain socialism in an economically prosperous way, entailed that Vietnam opened its doors to the global world; its commodities, products and images of sexuality. Urban magazines, Western imported goods and female beauty contests indicate clearly that manifestations of sexuality increasingly have become part

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ISSN 0966-369X print/ISSN 1360-0524 online/06/030283-19 © 2006 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/09663690600701053

of the public sphere in Vietnamese society. Also in Vietnam, not unlike the findings of Maila Stivens (2002) in a Malaysian context, sexuality is exposed most profoundly in urban areas; for instance, in terms of fashion, fondling in parks, pornography and prostitution (Drummond, 2003; McNally, 2003; Phan Thi Vang Anh & Pham Thu Thuy, 2003).

Like their young peers in other Southeast Asian urban places such as Kuala Lumpur, young Vietnamese women are provided with adult-free spaces in the cities such as cafés, discos, streets, shops and parks wherein they can express their sexuality (Stivens, 2002; see also Truong Trong Hoang, 1998; Thang Van Trinh, 2003). Rural Vietnamese young women, on the other hand, are not offered adult-free spaces wherein they can practice their sexuality. They encounter more kinds of social control in daily life than do young women in urban Vietnam and therefore have to carefully balance their verbal and bodily behaviour in order not to provoke well-established assumptions about appropriate female 'morality' (*dao duc*) (Rydstrøm 2003a, 2004; Thang Van Trinh 2003; see also Fongkaew 2003).

Despite recent transformations of Vietnamese society, the pervading tradition of Confucianism continues to influence especially rural women's lives.[2] Hence, patrilineal ancestor worship that celebrates male progeny is widespread and means that women and girls literally are rendered intelligible as 'outside lineage' (*ho ngoai*) and men and boys as 'inside lineage' (*ho noi*) (Rydstrøm, 2001, 2002, 2003a). Confucian precepts like 'men and women should remain physically distant' (*nam nu tho tho bat than*) even today are taken into consideration as guiding principles for appropriate female behaviour. Historically, Confucianism dictated that a Vietnamese woman should show good 'morality' by remaining a virgin until marriage and avoiding adultery, divorce, and abortion. A man, on the other hand, could practice polygamy and concubinary (Marr 1981; Le Thi Nam Tuyet, 1989).[3] Also, in communist pre-*doi moi* Vietnam, female sexuality was met with moral restrictions. During that period, according to Khuat Thu Hong, 'sexual desire was considered base and animal-like' and interest in fashions was condemned as expressions of 'sexual provocation' (Khuat Thu Hong, 1998, p. 24). Prior to *doi moi* 'premarital and extra-marital sex [...], were considered to be highly immoral and punishable by demotion, loss of employment and other public sanctions' (Population Council, 1997, p. 9; see also Phinney, 2003; Thang Van Trinh, 2003).

The ways in which moral codes and female sexuality intersect with one another in Vietnamese society mean that sexuality has been considered as a somewhat dangerous and immoral force that needs to be controlled. Sexual desires tend to be associated with the officially introduced category of 'social evils' (*te nan xa hoi*) which because of vagueness in definition covers various and arbitrary kinds of practices. Premarital and extramarital sex, homosexuality, pornography, prostitution, drug and alcohol addiction, gambling, theft, abuse and violence as well as paintings (e.g. pin-up calendars), music videos and music referring to sex thus have been linked with 'social evils' by the Vietnamese government. 'Social evils' is a category widely associated with the types of sexual practices condemned as being 'dirty' (*ban*) (e.g. premarital and extramarital sex, pornography, and prostitution) which, in turn, are linked with assumptions about HIV and AIDS (Marr, 1997; McNally, 2003; Population Council, 1997; Soucy, 2000; Truong Trong Hoang, 1998).[4]

In a Malaysian context, Stivens has observed a similar concern about morality and 'social evils'. She thus notes that Malaysian society has become increasingly

critically focused on the negative consequences on Malaysian culture of Western lifestyles, in terms of dressing and interaction between females and males. Such behaviours are recognised as threatening Malaysian values and social fabric and are categorised as ills that 'are to be countered by a stress on hard work, thrift, happy "Asian Families" and conventional morality' (Stivens, 2002, p. 188). As in Vietnam, young people are a matter of concern in Malaysia, not least female adolescents who are thought to be in grave moral danger because of bad influence from Western countries. The 'moral panic', which Stivens has identified in the Malaysian context, we thus also find in present-day Vietnam, as I shall discuss further after having introduced the local community in which I collected data.

The Local Community

My examination of female sexuality draws on two periods of fieldwork in a rural commune, which I call Thinh Tri.[5] The commune is located in the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam in the Ha Tay province west of Hanoi and consists of about 12,000 inhabitants, who belong to the majority group of the Vietnamese population (i.e. *Kinh*). Inhabitants typically are farmers, while they also supplement their agricultural income by working as vendors, hired labour, teachers and so on in the local community or on the outskirts of Hanoi.

The commune is divided into seven villages and is governed politically and administratively by the local People's Committee (*Uy ban nhan dan*) while the ideological line of the commune is guaranteed by the Communist Party (*Dang cong san*). In Thinh Tri, as anywhere else in Vietnam, the 'mass unions' (*hoi*) such as the Veteran's Union (*Hoi cuu chien binh*), the Women's Union (*Hoi phu nu*) and the Youth Union (*Hoi thanh nien*) are well-established bodies of the commune.[6] By local standards, Thinh Tri is a well-to-do commune that does not suffer from any particular social, economic or political problems. Hence, most households have radios and even televisions, due to which Thinh Tri inhabitants are somewhat informed about urban life as well as the world outside Vietnam (see Rydstrøm, 2003a).[7]

As is common in Vietnam, Thinh Tri inhabitants practice patrilineal ancestor worship and hence appreciate male progeny.[8] A son is recognised as a crucial link between his deceased patrilineal ancestors and the future descendents of his patrilineage. Therefore, a son, and especially an oldest son, holds ritual 'obligations' (*nghia*) towards his patrilineage in terms of being responsible for his parents' funerals and the 'annual death day celebration' (*bua gio/ngay gio*) of the deceased members of his patrilineage.[9] The widespread and strong desire for male progeny in contemporary Vietnam has consequences for the status of women and the ways in which female sexuality is associated with motherhood.

When a young woman gets married and gives birth to her first child, her status may change radically depending on whether she is able to provide a son. If she gives birth to a boy, a new mother usually will be praised for her demonstration of good female 'morality' in terms of having shown 'respect' (*kinh*) to the lineage of her husband. If a new mother, on the other hand, gives birth to a girl she may be blamed and even have to face the hostility of her husband and his parents due to their wishes for male progeny. Women tend to be understood primarily as mothers, which has implications for the construction of female sexuality. Before addressing the intersections between motherhood and female sexuality, I will describe briefly my periods of fieldwork in Thinh Tri (see Bélanger *et al.*, 2003; Croll, 2001; Rydstrøm, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2004).[10]

Fieldwork in Thinh Tri Commune

Leonore Manderson and Pranee Liamputtong (2002) note that asking people about the most private aspects of their lives, such as sexuality, demands a certain level of personal relationship. My contact with Thinh Tri inhabitants dates back to the early 1990s, and has been established by virtue of two periods of fieldwork conducted in the commune from 1994 to 1995 and 2000 to 2001. During both periods of fieldwork, I cooperated with the same host family in Thinh Tri, by and large the same families, and the same institute in Hanoi (i.e. the National Institute of Educational Science).[11] In this article, I draw especially on data collected in connection with my most recent fieldwork in Thinh Tri.

From 2000 to 2001, I carried out fieldwork for 8 months in Thinh Tri in connection with a study on adolescents, violence and sexuality in order to explore the ways in which those of the children with whom I had worked during my first fieldwork—now youth—managed the period of adolescence and the many questions the period of transition from childhood to adulthood may raise with respect to the past, the future, the body and sexuality. During this fieldwork, I worked together with young people from four families; three of the families I knew well already, as they had been involved in my first study in Thinh Tri. In-depth interviews with adolescents, their siblings, peers, parents, grandparents, other kin and teachers were conducted and focus group discussions with groups of adolescents (same-sex and cross-sex) were carried out, and so was participant observation in the families and in school. The data collection resulted in 40 hours of tape recording, which have been transcribed in Vietnamese. In addition, each of about 40 seventh grade female and male students wrote an essay for me on being young in contemporary Vietnam. In Hanoi, moreover, I had discussions with groups of female and male adolescents at a local urban Youth Union in order to acquire knowledge about being young in the city.[12]

To some extent the article also draws on my first fieldwork in Thinh Tri (1994–1995; 14 months). During this fieldwork social interaction between the girls and boys of five Thinh Tri families were observed continuously in order to examine the ways in which the meaning of daughters, sons, the body and 'morality' intersect with one another and, in turn, impact upon the upbringing of girls and boys. By so doing, I gathered insight about how northern rural Vietnamese girls and boys become culturally appropriate females or males. Intensive observations of all social interaction between the children, their kin and peers at home and in the classroom were carried out and interviews with the children, their siblings, other kin and teachers were conducted. All this resulted in more than 64 hours of recording (i.e. more than 49 hours of cassette tapes and 15 hours of videotapes), which have been transcribed in Vietnamese. (For details on this particular fieldwork, see Rydstrøm, 2003a.) Before addressing how young Thinh Tri women consider sexuality, let me elucidate on the ways in which sexuality is rendered meaningful in Vietnamese society as a phenomenon deeply intertwined with motherhood.

Sexuality in the *Doi Moi* Era

The *doi moi* policy (introduced in 1986) entailed liberalisation especially regarding the ways in which women could express their sexuality. However, in early *doi moi* Vietnam a pervading discourse on motherhood indicated that female sexuality was determined by a woman's role as a mother, meaning that sexuality was not a matter that could be rendered intelligible and practiced outside the sphere of the

family (Pelzer, 1993; Phinney, 2003; Thang Van Trinh, 2003). The philosopher Le Thi, who also is associated with the national Woman's Union, once epitomised the ways in which female sexuality and motherhood interconnect:

> Like their ancestors tens of thousands of years ago, women today bear children, give birth to children and breastfeed their children. No one can replace them in these functions [...]. How can we change the law of nature! When nature has created two human beings who complement each other as a man and a woman and form a harmonious couple, there have arisen the joys and pleasures of love and sex, of family happiness and childrearing which are indissoluble associated with their responsibilities and interests (Le Thi, 1992, p. 6; see also Le Thi, 1999).

Not only in early-*doi moi* Vietnam but also in contemporary late-*doi moi* Vietnam, the mother is granted a salient role (Rydstrøm, 2001, 2004). Vietnamese women were, and are, recognised as being responsible for 'maintaining the race' (Mai Thuc, 1997, p. 311) and thus holding what is praised as a 'glorious function' (Le Thi Nham Tuyet, 1999, p. 177; see also Rydstrøm, 2002). In this spirit, the scholar Tran Thi Que recently stated that 'women, wherever they are [. . .], all have the function of becoming pregnant and giving birth' (Tran Thi Que, 1999, p. 16).

In a study on the ways in which females and males are perceived in contemporary Vietnam, Barbara Franklin similarly registered that mainly men but even women assume that women have a 'natural vocation' (*Thien chuc;* i.e. heavenly mandate) owing to their 'physiology, especially the ability to bear children and breast-feed them' (Franklin, 2000, p. 46). Statements such as those disclose that human reproduction—and especially females' reproductive capacities—emerge as firm factors of determination with respect to female sexuality. Thereby, female sexuality is reduced to the function of reproduction which, in turn, desexualises the female body and the ways in which female sexuality can be expressed in various social spaces and places (Yurval-Davis, 1997).

Due to the ways in which motherhood, reproduction and female sexuality are enmeshed with one another, the liberalisation entailed in the *doi moi* policy with respect to female sexuality is imbued with ambiguity and ambivalence. Marriage, female virginity upon marriage, reproduction and happy family life remain highly appreciated values in Vietnamese society (Gender Education Group, 1996; Nguyen Thi Tuong Uyen, 1997; Phinney, 2003; Thang Van Trinh, 2003). In the recently revised Law on Marriage and Family from 2000, article number 1 points out that the main objective of the law is:

> [To] [c]ontribute to building, perfecting and protecting the progressive marriage and family regime, formulate legal standards for the conducts of family members; [to] protect the legitimate rights and interests of family members: [To] inherit and promote the fine ethical traditions of the Vietnamese families in order to build prosperous, equal, progressive, happy and lasting families (Official Gazette, 2000, p. 31).[13]

According to official Vietnamese policy, all citizens hold the responsibility not only of building but also of consolidating a family and, furthermore, ensuring that it functions well. This is reflected by the widespread ideal of 'happy and harmonious families' (*gia dinh hanh phuc hoa thuan*) which are recognised as well-to-do families that consist of no more than two children and healthy members,

each of whom holds good 'morality' and hence does not provoke conflict (Bélanger, 2004; Rydstrøm, 2003a, b).[14]

In a Population Council report it is noted that even though 'social practices are changing following the introduction of *doi moi* [...] there is not necessarily an acceptance of these changes in beliefs and/or values' (Population Council, 1997, p. 9). An intact hymen at marriage is perceived to entail happy families, healthy children and unworried parents. From a report on reproductive health issues (Gender Education Group, 1996) it is clear that young men prefer to marry virgins, although they do not mind having premarital sexual relations with a woman other than the one they are going to marry (Gender Education Group, 1996). In this spirit, a young woman commented: 'I think [that one] should keep [one's] virginity until marriage. It's one of the conditions for happiness and peace in the future family. There have already been many women who have had to divorce because they weren't virgins when they married' (Gender Education Group, 1996, p. 20; see also Nguyen Thi Thuong Uyen, 1997; Thang Van Trinh, 2003).

Premarital sexual relations, therefore, radically expand ideas of female virginity and female sexuality as linked tightly with motherhood and the building of happy families. This may be one reason why mothers are granted a special responsibility concerning the moral upbringing of the new generations of Vietnamese citizens. The special obligation of mothers also includes an attempt at keeping teenage children away from practices—such as premarital sexual relations—that can be categorised as 'social evils' (Le Kha Phieu, 2001; see also Rydstrøm, 2003a; Thang Van Trinh, 2003).

The figures on unmarried adolescents who have been involved in premarital sex differ from 0.7% to 72% depending on, first, whether a study has been carried out in an urban or rural field site and secondly, on the age of the respondents. Hence, such figures must be taken with reservation (Quan Le Nga, 2000; see also Bélanger & Khuat Thu Hong, 1996).[15] The findings of Barbara Mensch and her fellow scholars, for example, suggest that about 5% of female adolescents in Vietnam have had premarital sex and about 10% of male adolescents (Mensch *et al.*, 2000, p. 31; see also Truong Trong Hoang, 1998).

However, according to the scholar Quan Le Nga, 'if we consider a broader range of sexual activities including kissing, fondling of breasts and genital or oral sex, the number of youths involved in premarital sex' would be higher (Quan Le Nga, 2000, p. 8). In accordance with such numbers, late abortions (i.e. 3–7 months) are not an uncommon phenomenon among Vietnamese female adolescents below the age of 20. Late abortions are usually caused by the fact that young women tried to hide their pregnancy or do not realise the pregnancy until very late (Truong Trong Hoang, 1998; Hoang Ba Thinh, 1999; Nguyen The Lap *et al.*, 1999; Thang Van Trinh, 2003).[16]

As is clear, sexual desires are intertwined intimately with the discursive ways in which females are construed above all as mothers, which entails a demarcation of the boundaries of the female body. In the words of Judith Butler, 'any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes the body' (Butler, 1990, p. 131). Sexuality thus may be able to provoke and/or transgress dominant norms and ideas of appropriate female body behaviour recognised by official Vietnam policy as expressions of a 'polluted' 'morality' caused by the ways in which 'social evils' are influencing the country and, in so doing, encouraging young people to engage in practices condemned by law and/or tradition.

The 'Social Evils' Campaigns

The intersections between sexual desires and the 'social evils' campaign dates back to December 1995, when Vietnam's Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet took the first initiative on a campaign against so-called 'social evils' (*te nan xa hoi*) and 'poisonous culture' (*van hoa doc hai*). The campaign echoed a similar campaign in China on 'evils', 'pollution' and 'poison' that had begun in the 1980s—but also recalls more recent Malaysian concerns about 'morality' and 'pollution'—and was designed to mobilise mass organisations, the public at large and the bureaucracy to eliminate any 'evils' and 'poisonous' forces in Vietnamese society. Decrees and directives were issued in order to control any 'pollution' arising from Vietnam's increased inclusion into the world economy because of the *doi moi* policy (Kwok-sing Li, 1995; Marr, 1997; Rosen & Marr, 1999; Stivens, 2002).

According to David Marr (1997), the 'social evils' campaign originally was a response to a general public anxiety in Vietnamese society about the perceived explosion in violence, social vices, crime and cultural depravities, which was supported by media stories on killing, rape and crime. Vietnamese media reported on the widespread consumption of pornographic and violent videos, drunkenness (especially among young men), drug addiction, young men's sexual harassment of young women, homosexuality, gambling and loss of respect for authorities and seniors, all of which were associated with the country's increased integration into the global world.

The 'social evils' campaign illuminates an ongoing struggle between what is acknowledged as more original Vietnamese values, on one hand, and values from the West which are considered to overflow the country's borders. Stephen McNally (2003) argues that even though the attack on 'social evils' cannot be reduced to a fight against Western decadence, the campaign does expose how more conservative forces in Vietnamese society challenged the reform policy and Vietnam's increased process of globalisation by defining it as fuelling the rise of 'social evils' (see also Rosen & Marr, 1999). For example, in 1993 the scholar Le Thi Quy, who also represents an official voice due to her relation to the Women's Union, said:

> It is our view that we need to do much more to strengthen the traditional values in the family relations and increase the role of the community in the monitoring and surveillance of ethical actions of each individual. (Le Thi Quy quoted in McNally, 2003, p. 114)

In this spirit, in 1995, the Vietnamese government carried out a campaign which focused mainly on houses of prostitution, karaoke bars, video shops, massage parlours and advertising signs of foreign origin. Semi-nude or nude pictures such as wall calendars with Western models were confiscated from shops because the material was deemed to represent 'social evils' and thus something which could degenerate good 'morality' (Marr, 1997). Prostitution and the ways it exposes female sexuality was, and remains, a matter of special concern in the 'social evils' campaigns. For example, in 1996, a writer of a public security news article noted that 'social evils' in the form of 'whorehouses in disguise and sex tours pos[e] extreme dangers to the health of our race, and destroy the moral foundation of our nation through the scourge of AIDS, and the bad influence on the lifestyle of our youth, especially those of the feminine sex' (Nguyen-vo Thu-huong, 1998, p. 113; see also Le Thi Quy, 1997).

Since the introduction in 1995, the campaign against 'social evils' has focused on any phenomenon that can be categorised as 'dirty'. A representative from the Social Evils Prevention Department describes the problem regarding 'dirty' influences from the outside global world in terms of clean and polluted water: 'When we open the doors of our society, the water flows in, the clean along with the dirty. Our duty is to screen it, and to help people recognise and protect themselves from bad influences' (BBC, 1999).

In an article on the ways in which 'social evils' can be combated, the scholar and representative of the Women's Union, Do Thi Ninh Xuan argued that Vietnamese citizens' involvement in 'social evils' must be related to changes in Vietnamese society more generally. She stressed that even though the focus of the campaign is to prevent 'social evils', economic conditions as well as lifestyle, 'morality' and family relations more generally also need to be examined in order to fight against the bad influence of 'social evils' (Do Thi Ninh Xuan, 1999).

By so doing, precautions can be taken in order to keep adolescents who, as mentioned, are a group of special concern, away from 'social evils'. The General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam Le Kha Phieu thus stressed the importance of protecting the youngest generation from 'social evils' to ensure that the future decision-makers of Vietnamese society can remain 'non-polluted' (Le Kha Phieu, 2001). This is considered as being crucial because if adolescents were to be influenced by foreign 'dirty' forces, the future of Vietnam would be jeopardised (Marr, 1997; Rosen & Marr, 1999; Stivens, 2002).

Taken together the campaigns to promote good cultural activities, according to McNally, can be seen as 'campaigns of social control [which] aim to eliminate aspects of society considered unhealthy and thought to contribute to harmful and anti-social practices' (McNelly, 2003, p. 114). Sexual desires manifested in certain ways thus can be labelled by official Vietnam policy as 'unhealthy' aspects of Vietnamese society. Not unlike other places in Vietnam, also in the community of Thinh Tri the 'social evils' campaign has impacted upon young women's ways of considering sexual desires.

Thinh Tri Understandings of Sexuality

Everyday life for young Thinh Tri women means going to school, carrying out chores in the household, occasionally working in the rice fields (depending on the season), and not least chatting with friends with whom they consider various topics when meeting. On a chilly winter day, I was sitting in the living room in the house of the family of Le (19 years) wondering how young women understand sexuality and when they begin to address this matter. Le had invited some of her friends to come over and while we were drinking tea, the young women told me how it is time to pay special attention to the matter of sexuality when a female adolescent begins to menstruate. Le explained: 'At this age, young women begin to menstruate and young men to ejaculate/come [*xuat tinh*]. Besides these changes, the voices become different. Young men's voices become deeper and young women's voices brighter. The body shape also changes. Young men become taller and young women more grown up.'

While Thinh Tri male adolescents tend to be amused about the ways in which their voices change, their muscles develop and the emergence of a moustache it is different for female adolescents.[17] The young Thinh Tri women with whom I spoke stressed that 'growing up is a problem [*van de*]' because it is 'awkward' [*ngai*] to share with family members, especially one's father, the transformation which

one's body undergoes. Even though female adolescents repeated that menstruation is a 'normal' (*binh thuong*) part of one's body changes, many inhabitants consider the female body to be impure during menstruation. Therefore, many young women avoid offering at the ancestor altar when menstruating, visiting the Buddhist pagoda and the local temples. Menstruation is, Thuan (18 years) pointed out, 'a physical matter and therefore impure. I should avoid visiting the pagoda when menstruating because the pagoda is a sacred and pure place'. However, other female adolescents criticised ideas regarding female impurity as they considered such understandings to be expressions of 'superstition' (*me tin*).[18]

In general, young Thinh Tri women are concerned about highlighting their femaleness and, by association, their sexuality. The young Thinh Tri women thus nurse their bodies, pay special attention to their skin, dressing and how to comport their bodies in delicate ways. One afternoon, for example, when I was in the household of 17-year-old Loan, she explained to me about fashion and dressing: 'It is a matter of psychology [*tam sinh ly*]', she said and continued 'women are always interested in appearing beautiful and therefore they are very careful [*giu gin*] about their bodies in order to appear delicate/slim [*nho nhan*]'. Because a woman represents the beautiful sex, I was told, it is necessary to take care of one's body, for instance, by wearing nice clothes. Loan's friend, 19-year-old Hien who also was present, elaborated on the meaning of appearing delicate and feminine: 'I like to wear the *ao dai* [a long colored or white light dress with similar or different colored light trousers for females] because when women wear the *ao dai* it makes them more feminine and gentle [*mem mai, diu dang*]' (see Rydstrøm, 2003a, 2004).

On another occasion, the younger female adolescent Giang (15 years) told me about fashion and how she, unlike her older peers, is inspired by the Western and urban clothes she has seen on television. She hence dresses in Western/urban ways (e.g. jeans and T-shirt) and is, as she put it, 'always wearing tight trousers'. Her father, though, does not appreciate her dressing because, as Giang confided to me, 'he thinks it looks sexy/bad [*xau*]'.

Young women in Thinh Tri matter-of-factly define 'sexuality' (*tinh duc;* literally sexual desire) as a 'relation between a girl/female and boy/male [*quan he con trai/nam gai/nu*]'. As more generally in Vietnamese society, the local community is also pervaded by a profound heteronormativity, meaning that none of the adolescents with whom I spoke suggested that sexuality could be a relation between two females or males. (This, however, is not to say that homosexuality might not be practiced within the local community) (see Truong Trong Hoang, 1998; Aronsson, 1999; Colby, 2001; Truong Trong Hoang, 1998.) The heterosexual norm—and reference to the Law on Family and Marriage—was indicated by Hoan (17 years) when she explained: 'Like animals male and female have intercourse [*giao phoi*] in order to continue the race'. Hoan's friend Nguyet (18 years) considered the matter of sexuality which she is concerned about because of the bad ways in which it may influence young people:

> Sexuality is a relation of the flesh [*quan he xac thit*] between two persons of different sex. I think that sexuality is one of today's most important problems. On the television I have seen that there is much display of sexuality. Because of the open door [policy; i.e. *doi moi*], people develop a very loose morality. There are many problems because of the [societal] changes and it is necessary to understand the relationship [between

> females and males] and also to keep a distance to boys. [. . .]. It [i.e. sexuality] is a delicate [*te nhi*] matter but actually we should open up and talk more about this in order for everybody to understand about this most important problem. Everybody would like to know and understand clearly [about sexuality].

Nguyet makes reference to the way in which sexuality is included in broadcasts which may influence the 'morality' of young people in negative ways. Because of her concerns Nguyet wishes to learn more about sexuality. The same is true as regards 18-year-old Van Anh, who firmly added to what Nguyet had just said: 'If someone thinks I am too young to learn about sexuality I don't agree. I need to know about health and sexuality, what it is, and how it might be harmful [*tac hai;* harmful both to one's health and reputation]'. The fear of demoralisation is crystallised in these young women's considerations, on one hand, and curiosity regarding sexuality, on the other hand.

Learning about Sexuality

Thinh Tri adolescents are taught about sexuality in school, but virtually everyone agrees that the teaching is not very enlightening, above all because teachers usually explain about sexuality in diffuse ways. Khanh (19 years), for example, grumblingly pointed out: 'The teachers don't teach about sexuality, they only talk about animals and plants'.[19] However, other institutional units do attempt to shed light on the matter of sexuality by educating Thinh Tri adolescents. The staff of the local Health Care Clinic (*Trung tam y te*), for instance, teaches young people about sexuality. According to a female nurse from the clinic the teaching is carried out by 'propagating [*pho bien*] about the population policy and nutrition of children'. The nurse even explained to me that 'of course adolescents should understand how to build a family and [know] about normal as well as abnormal physiological problems. We tell them about the IUD, the pill, and AIDS. The more they know the better'.

Young rural Vietnamese, nevertheless, tend to have only limited knowledge about sexuality, fertility and contraception. In a study conducted by Quan Le Nga, only about 57.7% percent of rural adolescent males and 48.9 percent of females had heard about the term family planning (Quan Le Nga, 2000; see also Truong Trong Hoang, 1998; Thang Van Trinh, 2003). Quan Le Nga argues that such figures imply a lack of knowledge concerning sexuality, something which the male medical doctor from the Thinh Tri Health Care Clinic confirmed by recalling one episode:

> It is very necessary to explain adolescents about sexuality. Once, a young woman came to the clinic because she wanted an abortion. When examining her we found pieces of old clothes in her vagina. We asked: 'Why do you have all this [i.e. pieces of clothes in the vagina]?' and she answered: 'My boyfriend [*nguoi yeu*] told me that it would work as contraception'. Those two young people did not understand that it was very dangerous [with the pieces of clothes]. They thought that the old pieces of clothes would work like an IUD and prevent pregnancy.

A recent Population Council report suggests that those who teach on sexuality within local communities in Vietnam may feel that they need to

balance their teaching between parental and official 'morality' as it is intertwined with the 'social evils' campaigns, on one hand, and young peoples' need for factual information about sexuality and contraception, on the other hand. In other words, teachers might feel constrained whenever they have to address the topic of 'sexual health' (*suc khoe tinh duc*) (Population Council, 1997; see also Thang Van Trinh, 2003). Such observations may be verified as regards other areas in Vietnam but do not coincide with my data from Thinh Tri. Within the local community virtually all parents and grandparents recommended that adolescents learn about sexuality. A mother of 42 years, for instance, said:

> If my daughters ask: 'Where do the babies come from?' I answer: 'They come from the armpit'. Then they say: 'We already know! Babies come from the Health Care Clinic, so you are lying'. When they are too young, they should not know about sexuality but later they need some instruction so that they don't get pregnant before marriage. So when they grow up we will tell them about sexuality [. . .]. Today it is different than it was in the past. Young people show if they are fond of each other; I have seen some couples holding hands, arms, and also kissing one another. Before we had to be very serious and [if meeting we had to] sit at a distance from one another at a table.

In Thinh Tri both adolescents and their parents tend to think youth should learn about sexuality and thus do not associate teaching about sexuality with the category of 'social evils'. This somehow contradicts the findings of Alexander Soucy (2000), who notes that one result of the 'social evils' campaign has been that Vietnamese parents in general tend to avoid discussing sexuality with their teenage daughters or sons because they believe that talking about sexuality with adolescents may encourage their involvement in 'social evils', in terms of risky and/or premarital sexual relations.[20] However, yet another Thinh Tri mother (37 years) emphasised that young people should learn about sexuality. She told to me how she clearly remembered about the ways in which she herself as a young woman had tried to figure out about sexuality:

> I didn't know much about sexuality before I got married. When I was about 15 or 16 years old I didn't know how people make children because nobody had told me. Everybody would tell a lie. For example, people would say that children are pulled out of the navel of a woman. Today young people know [about sexuality] because they go to school. In the past we were ignorant about everything [regarding sexuality]. It is better to let children know by explaining to them about sexuality.

A Thinh Tri father (46 years) accordingly underscored the importance of informing young people about sexuality by pointing out that if adolescents know about sexuality they might not be 'carried away' (*mot phut lo la;* lit. a moment of unawareness) in terms of having premarital sexual relations. If they were 'carried away' by having premarital sexual relations, young people would affect not only their own reputation but also the reputation of their parents, I was told. Adolescents, he said, should be informed about sexuality, have a 'decent/proper relationship' (*quan he dung muc*) and avoid sexual relations prior to marriage.

Obeying Limits

In general, two different ways of rendering sexuality meaningful can be identified amongst Vietnamese female adolescents. The first definition is based on moral assumptions that condemn any premarital sexual relations as unacceptable. The second refers to premarital sexual relations as being morally acceptable because they are considered as spontaneous and passionate outbursts of trust and love that 'carry one away' (Gammeltoft & Nguyen Minh Thang, 2000; Thang Van Trinh, 2003; Truong Trong Hoang, 1998).

Many urban adolescents have more open attitudes to premarital sexual relations than they had previously, in the sense that young urban women increasingly consider a sexual relation to be part of a relationship. Recent studies show that perceptions of sexuality in urban Vietnam have changed in accordance with the country's integration into the global world and today young urban people may not be restricted to a similar extent as they used to be by their parents when attempting to find a partner (Bélanger & Khuat Thu Hong, 1996; Thang Van Trinh, 2003; Truong Trong Hoang, 1998).

In rural areas—such as Thinh Tri—an understanding of sexuality as embedded in moral definitions of appropriate female behaviour, however, appears to be predominant. Thinh Tri female adolescents kept repeating the ancient Confucian precept of 'females and males should keep a distance' as a guiding principle for appropriate behaviour in young people (see Rydstrøm, 2003a, 2004; Thang Van Trinh, 2003). Some young women even added that sexuality should not be a topic of conversation at all because talking about 'this problem' (*van de nay*) may mean that somebody would overhear the conversation and disqualify the interlocutors as having bad 'morality'.

Sexuality is an activity that should be reserved to the building of a family and is, I was told, appropriate to begin practicing when one has settled in a marriage. When one has found a partner, a sexual relation should be established between the couple, and a family should be started. Sexuality as regards married life, however, should not be a topic of conversation for a public setting and be treated with much secrecy, as is clear from what Van Anh (18 years) said: 'The [sexual] relation between a husband and wife should be secret [*giu kin*]. For example, if the children accidentally overheard their parents' talk [about sexuality] it would not be good because the children could get bad ideas'.

Because Thinh Tri female adolescents widely associate premarital sex with 'social evils' they perceive it as a violation of governmental wishes. Mai (17 years), for example, said: 'My mother and sister told me that it is illegal to have sex before marriage'. Mai's comment indicates how my own observations from the local community of Thinh Tri accord with the conclusions of a Population Council report in which it is noted that a concern 'about increasing 'social evils' which include [. . .], premarital and extramarital sex, pornography, and a variety of other social practices' (Population Council, 1997, p. 9) can be registered in Vietnamese society.

A female adolescent should not have a sexual relation prior to marriage because, as 18-year-old Xuan explained, 'for a Vietnamese woman it is important to be a virgin [*trinh tiet*] [upon marriage]'. Moreover, some Thinh Tri adolescents are engaged in a relationship which is a matter of continuous concern. A relationship with a young man—even though it may not include a sexual relation—may easily give a female adolescent a reputation as being 'careless' (*boi*) or of 'easy virtue' (*lang lo*). Being labelled as 'careless' means that the 'reputation' (*tieng*) and 'morality' of a female

adolescent and, in turn, her family would be damaged (something which also was mentioned by the father quoted above). Lan (18 years) elaborated on the significance of paying attention to one's reputation when being a young woman:

> Because of an old and feudal opinion, old people do not accept it if two friends [i.e. a female and male] hold hands when walking in the streets. Surely, old people will think that those two will have a relationship [i.e. including a sexual relation]. If people think so about us [i.e. females], we will get a bad reputation [*bi mang tieng*] even though those who hold hands might only be friends. Old people will think we are *xau* [i.e. having bad morality] and therefore they will try to ruin the relationship.[21]

Other female adolescents from the local community of Thinh Tri, however, emphasised that it could/should be considered 'normal' to hold hands with a boyfriend and that it should not cause any problems as long as the couple does not 'go too far' (*di qua xa*), in terms of having sex. Holding hands hence should not give one a reputation as being 'careless', improper and non-decent. On the other hand, young Thinh Tri women also reiterated it is salient that one is not 'careless' and always remembers to obey the 'limit' (*gioi han*).

Minh (16 years), for example, voiced her concern with respect to female 'morality': 'I think it is right that one should be careful [*giu gin*] in a relation with a boy because a girl could become pregnant. Everybody would think that the girl is frivolous and immoral/improper [i.e. if she has premarital sex and/or gets pregnant]'. A female, Minh and her young female peers explained to me, should not be too involved with her boyfriend but rather concentrate on her education in order to get high marks and a good job in the future. Hence, most young Thinh Tri women demonstrate good 'morality' by staying at home, conduct their household chores, and do their homework. However, some female adolescents may be too passionate, inhabitants gossiped and thus not able to control their desire to be together with a young man. Becoming pregnant prior to marriage, in other words, means the transgression of well-established norms.

Crossing Limits

'Going too far' in terms of having premarital sex will cause a lot of problems and make life very difficult, Thinh Tri female adolescents said. If a young woman has a relationship with a young man and it results in a premarital pregnancy, the situation will be very delicate—especially for the female. One of the teachers from the primary school in Thinh Tri, for example, told about the ways in which she attempts to handle female students who are involved in a relationship that also includes premarital sex:

> If a girl, for example, in grade nine has problems because of a sexual relation with a male, I insist on talking about it, for instance, by telling her: 'Nobody can correct your mistake. The Vietnamese always tend to forgive a boy [who has had a premarital sexual relation] more easily than a girl' [...]. Girls always have to pay more attention to morality [than boys] in order to remain virgins [upon marriage]. But they can't always control their desire to be together with a boy and might be so attracted that they do something [i.e. have sex].

Occasionally moral limits are crossed and female adolescents have a child out of wedlock, as was the case with the couple that 'loved one another and had a baby six months before they got married'. Thinh Tri female adolescents, who are not married but, however, become pregnant, usually get an abortion at the Health Care Clinic of the province or district. The abortion will be hidden from others and kept secret. Once when I visited the Health Care Clinic in Thinh Tri, the male medical doctor described to me the policy of the clinic with respect to unmarried, pregnant young women:

> If a girl gets pregnant and both she and her boyfriend still go to school, but are 18 years old and love one another, then a wedding should be arranged. If they are too young for marriage, the girl should have an abortion [...]. If girls have an abortion they keep it a secret and don't talk with anybody about the effects of the abortion. If a girl is 16 or 17 years old she doesn't have the age to have a child neither the age for getting married.

According to the Thinh Tri medical doctor, young women thus should not be invited to participate in deciding what to do if they get pregnant prior to marriage. This may be so because, as young Thinh Tri women stressed, being a female who crosses the boundaries of what is considered to be good 'morality' by having a child out of wedlock will have devastating consequences. The young woman in question will first of all shame her parents and second she will most likely be socially isolated because people will avoid having contact with a person with bad 'morality'. Phuong (17 years) explained about the negative consequences of having a child before marriage: 'Having a child before marriage is not good. I would get a bad reputation. I would not fit in/become isolated and would have lost my virginity. Some [girls] are of easy virtue [*lang lo*] and don't know how to take care of their virginity by restricting themselves'.

In a similar vein, a female adolescent from another community than Thinh Tri, who had once had an abortion, also was worried about her reputation: 'I am very afraid that people will find out about this [i.e. the abortion] and talk badly about [me] and offend me. So I have not told anyone about it, except my boyfriend' (Gammeltoft and Nguyen Minh Thang 2000:115; see also Truong Trong Hoang 1998). However, not all females who had a child prior to marriage should be judged too harshly, according to Binh (17 years):

> Girls who cannot control themselves [i.e. have sex] and give birth to a child should not be blamed because they were weak and did not know how to avoid having a baby. But those who know about sexuality, and have sex, and a child before marriage they have bad morality [i.e. they could be blamed].

The consequences of premarital sexual relations and pregnancy thus weigh much heavier on females than on males and having a child out of wedlock is connected with harsh social disqualification. An abortion, on the other hand, may be imbued with guilt, sorrow, pain and also worries about possible physical consequences. In addition, an abortion means fear about whether anybody might discover and even reveal one's secret (Gammeltoft & Nguyen Minh Thang, 2000; Thang Van Trinh, 2003). An abortion, which is the result of a premarital sexual relationship, is a case in point regarding the crossing of moral boundaries and, therefore, may foster intensified governmental campaigns to combat 'social evils'. The ideological apparatus thus may amplify the promotion of 'happy and harmonious families' and the condemnation of premarital sexual relations to meet the challenge of what is labelled by official Vietnam as immoral behaviour in young people.

Conclusions

Ways in which sexuality is rendered meaningful, practiced and controlled by young Thinh Tri women elucidate that female sexuality is a matter imbued with ambiguities and ambivalence. Because of the ways in which female sexuality in Vietnamese society has been rendered intelligible first by a Confucian doctrine, secondly by pre-*doi moi* restrictions and thirdly as inseparable from motherhood, female sexuality perpetually challenges moral boundaries. The transgressing forces of female sexuality shed light on the 'social evils' campaign in contemporary Vietnam and the ways in which it embraces sexuality. Not unlike the observations of Stivens in the Malaysian context, the campaigns in Vietnam can be seen as a response to what is recognised as moral 'pollution' and 'unhealthy' tendencies introduced into Vietnam by the outside world.

On one hand, the 'social evils' campaign attempts to control different kinds of urgent social problems concerning HIV and AIDS, addiction to alcohol and drugs, abuse and violence which contemporary Vietnam faces. On the other hand, the 'social evils' campaign also addresses practices that are bound up with sexual desires manifested, for example, as pre- and/or extramarital sexual relations and, in doing so, the 'social evils' campaign attempts to eliminate any social forces that may confuse the social order, in terms of crossing boundaries between the orderly and disorderly. In all this, female sexuality is construed as something which invites control—imposed by oneself and/or by the government.

Acknowledgements

Generous funding for research for this article was provided partly by the Swedish Department for Research Cooperation (SAREC) of the Swedish International Development Coorporation Agency (SIDA) and partly by the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (*Riksbankens Jubileumsfond*). A previous version of this article was presented in a panel on 'Globalizing Vietnam: Work, Gender, and Sexuality' at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, San Diego, March 2004 which lead to stimulating discussions on the topic of this article. Nguyen-vo Thu-huong offered me her inspiring comments on an earlier version of this text and so did Thomas Achen, Don Kulick, and Angie Ngoc Tran. The anonymous reviewers provided me with helpful suggestions which improved the article. In addition, Linda Peake and Lisa Drummond offered me their kind editorial advice. I greatly appreciate the support of the Institute of Educational Science in Hanoi and, moreover, of *em* Huong. My deep gratitude goes to the people and families in Thinh Tri with whom I worked, for their kindness and support.

Notes

1. The policy encourages new forms of management and ownership including a resurgent private market and integration with the global economy (Duiker, 1995).
2. Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam by the Chinese conquest (BCE 111–CE 939) and was the ideological and intellectual backbone of Vietnamese society for almost 1000 years (Nguyen Khac Vien, 1975; Marr, 1981).
3. According to the Confucian doctrine, an ideal female should act as though she were always aware of what is called the Four Virtues (*Tu duc*), i.e. labour, appearance, speech and behaviour (for details see Ngo Thi Ngan Binh, 2004). In contemporary Vietnam, a woman should display good 'morality', for instance, by restricting her way of behaving, by comporting herself with concentration whenever she conducts her duties, by carefully withdrawing herself from the centre

of social activities, by showing appreciation of seniors' talk, by not speaking too loudly and by not dressing extravagantly, sexily or indelicately (see Rydstrøm, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2004).

4. Recently the National Vietnamese AIDS Committee identified alarmingly high numbers of young people in Vietnam infected with HIV. Hence, people below the age of 30 are estimated to account for about 5% of the HIV/AIDS infected people in Vietnam (Quan Le Nga, 2000).
5. The name of the commune is a pseudonym as are the names of all people referred to in this article.
6. In Thinh Tri also a Front Union (*Mat tran*) and Farmer's Union (*Hoi nong dan*) are active.
7. The majority of the inhabitants' average annual income does not differ remarkably from the US$200, which UNICEF in 1998 estimated to be the average annual income in rural areas (UNICEF, 2000, pp. 18–19; see also Rydstrøm, 2003a).
8. The Vietnamese are constitutionally free to practice any religion. The majority of Vietnamese practice ancestor worship while 80%, in addition, are Buddhists. Religion in Vietnam, however, is a blend consisting of the traditions of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism and, in addition, worship of guardian spirits (de Vylder, 1991; Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 199; Duiker, 1995).
9. For details on ritual obligations in connection with funerals, see Shaun Kingsley Malarney (1996).
10. Such preferences are condemned by the Women's Union (both nationally and in Thinh Tri) because they are seen as a way of sustaining old Confucian customs and beliefs. In this spirit, one of the major aims of the Union has been to convince the Vietnamese population that a daughter and son have equal value. In order to counteract the persistent tradition of preferring male progeny, the Women's Union has taken an active part in the implementation of the government's family planning programme which places strong pressure on a couple to have no more than two children, even if neither of those children is a boy (Bélanger *et al.*, 2003; Duong Thi Cuong 1992; Hull & Le Bach Duong 1992).
11. During both periods of fieldwork, a young woman assisted me in collecting data, although a different woman for each fieldwork. Each of my female co-workers connected well with the families with whom I worked.
12. In 2004, I furthermore conducted fieldwork (3 months) in Hanoi and hence observed manifestations of sexuality in urban, contemporary Vietnam.
13. In the Vietnamese Law on Marriage from 1986, homosexuality was not explicitly prohibited; however, neither was it legally accepted, although in the more recent Marriage and Family Law from 2000 the focus clearly is on heterosexuality. Article 2 paragraph 1, for example, reads that marriage is defined as a 'voluntary, progressive and monogamous marriage in which husband and wife are equal'. In what is called interpretation of terms, it is clarified in the same Law, i.e. article 8, paragraph 2, that 'getting married is an act whereby a man and a woman establish the husband and wife relation [...]'. In the same article in paragraph 6, the heterosexual point is reiterated: 'Marriage means the relationship between husband and wife after getting married'. Almost inevitably, homosexuality is treated with much secrecy in present-day Vietnam and homosexuals, current research indicates, tend to engage in a heterosexual relationship in which children are produced (see Aronsson, 1999; Colby, 2001; Khuat Thu Hong, 1998; Truong Trong Hoang, 1998).
14. The General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam Le Kha Phieu, for instance, stressed: 'The family is the foundation of society, the natural environment for the development and happiness of all members, especially children. For this reason, we must highlight even more the role of the family, cause each family to realise that the family is the first body to be responsible for the bringing up of children into good citizens' (Le Kha Phieu, 2001, p. 59).
15. The average age at a national basis with regard to first sexual intercourse is about 19 years old for both female and male adolescents (Quan Le Nga, 2000).
16. Reports indicate that female adolescents who have premarital sex often are caught between a boyfriend's expectations of having a sexual relationship and fear of being condemned as being of 'easy virtue' (Gammeltoft & Nguyen Minh Thang, 2000; Quan Le Nga, 2000). According to what some Thinh Tri female adolescents briefly touched upon, a boyfriend occasionally forces a girlfriend to have sex; i.e. he rapes her. Rape is another matter altogether, which demands to be explored exclusively in a separate text (see Women's Union 1997 on child sexual abuse and rape).
17. On young men and sexuality see Truong Trong Hoang (1998).
18. Because of widespread assumptions that menstruation means loss of bodily 'heat', female adolescents even noted that their mothers, grandmothers and older sisters inform them about the kinds of 'hot' (*nong*) food they should eat and the 'cool' (*lanh*) vegetables they should avoid when menstruating (on 'cool' and 'hot' bodies see Rydstrøm, 2003a, b, 2004).

19. Thinh Tri female adolescents also complained that lessons on sexuality usually are disturbed by their male classmates who usually laugh and giggle whenever the topic of sexuality is on the agenda.
20. For a study exclusively on the ways in which Vietnamese parents and adolescents communicate about sexuality; see Thang Van Trinh (2003).
21. *Xau* is a negative expression with several meanings. First, a person labelled as *xau* means that that person has an 'ugly' appearance. Secondly, the word *xau* indicates that a person is 'bad', in the sense that that person has a 'bad character' and/or bad 'morality'. Finally, *xau* may be used to shame a person.

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

Deseos Sexuales y 'Males Sociales': mujeres jóvenes en el campo de Vietnam

Resumen La integración aumentado de Vietnam en la economía de mercado globalizada implica cambios rápidos y dinámicos que fomentan nuevas maneras de actuar, de relacionarse, y de hacer el mundo significativo. Este artículo trata las maneras en que un proceso continuo de trasformación en Vietnam contemporáneo se ejemplifica de la ambivalencia y ambigüedad de que se ésta empapada la sexualidad femenina. La sexualidad femenina se limita al matrimonio y la maternidad, lo cual significa que las relaciones sexuales prematrimonial o extramatrimonial tienden a estar relacionado con la categoría de «males sociales» (*«te nan xa hoi»*). La categoría de «males sociales» tiene definición imprecisa y era introducida a la sociedad vietnamita en virtud de lo que se veía como la implicación creciente del país en un mundo moral contaminado. Haciendo uso de trabajo de campo que se realizó en dos períodos distintas (1994–1995 y 2000–2001) en una comuna rural en el norte de Vietnam, este artículo destaca las maneras en que la sexualidad femenina, en un sitio local del campo, se entrelaza con ansiedades de las fuerzas de una cultura global y «venenosa» (*«hai de van hoa doc»*), lo que influya a las mujeres jóvenes a transgredir los límites morales, por ejemplo, tener sexo prematrimonial. Así que, para muchos de las adolescentes rurales la sexualidad significa la necesidad de tener control que se impone por ellas mismas y/o por el gobierno para garantizar moralidad adecuada. Sin embargo, para otras la sexualidad significa la participación en relaciones sexuales prematrimoniales y, por lo tanto, una travesía de los límites morales.