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Cover Page Footnote

Violette Ho received a B.A. in Anthropology from the University of California Los Angeles, where she graduated Summa Cum Laude, along with College Honors and Departmental Honors. She also works on English-Vietnamese translation of History and Anthropology texts.

College Education and Women's Ultimate Goals of Gaining Respect and Nondependence

In recent decades, college education has become increasingly important for women in both the developed and developing worlds, including Vietnam. Four decades after the end of the Vietnam War, economic advancement and social change have transformed Vietnam, creating employment and educational opportunities for many Vietnamese. Today, more and more young people, especially women, are going to school and attending college. Higher education has gained importance and prominence in modern Vietnamese society.

Previous studies examining the relationship between women and higher education have found that women attend college because they want jobs, careers, independence, and other benefits.¹ In these studies, researchers tend to focus on women's autonomy and agency, on the dynamic of women's college lives in comparison to men's, and on the structural matters that could affect women's access and retention as compared to men's. However, not many studies explore the impact of socio-cultural elements on women's college decisions. In addition, few studies in Vietnam adopt qualitative methods to explore the lives of young women in contemporary society. This research attempts to fill some of these gaps in the literature.

Utilizing data collected during two months of fieldwork in Vietnamese suburban and rural contexts, this study examines how social norms and ideologies influence and shape young women's beliefs about college education, such as why they obtain a higher education and what college means to them. This paper argues that although most people claim they attend college to get better jobs, acquiring employment is only a strategy and not a goal. In most cases, the ultimate goals of higher education are to gain respect and to become nondependent. For the purpose of this paper, respect is defined as having high social status or honorable treatment, and

nondependence refers to a situation when a woman does not depend on her husband financially, and most of the decisions she makes are based on her understanding of duties to her family.

Literature Review

There have not been many ethnographic studies focusing on young Vietnamese women in higher education due to the Vietnamese government's restrictions on Western scholars researching in the country between the end of the Vietnam War (1975) and the 1990s.² However, research in the United States suggests that there are many factors that could possibly motivate and influence women's decisions about college and their plans for the future. Dorothy Holland and Margaret Eisenhart³ conducted research at two universities in the Southern United States and found a peer culture that pressured college women to get involved in romantic relationships. For these young women, their academic lives and future plans did not seem to be as important as their social lives, in which the "culture of romance"—pursuing relationships with men was dominant. Those who were involved in this "culture of romance" reported feeling evaluated upon the type of men they dated and the treatment they received from the men, not their grades or career prospects.⁴ While the second wave of the feminist movement that took place during the 1960s and 1970s promoted equal rights and independence for women, many highly-educated women in this study reported that they had lowered their career goals and planned to become financially dependent on their husbands.

Machung's 1989 study of female seniors at the University of California Berkeley offers an additional viewpoint on higher education. Young women in this research reported that they attended college because they wanted to "have it all," which meant having a happy family and a successful career at the same time.⁵ These women planned to have a family with children, a place at a professional or graduate school upon graduation, and high-paying jobs. These students,

however, expected their future husbands to be primarily responsible for the family's financial needs. They valued their future husbands' jobs higher than their own, and expressed a willingness to interrupt their own careers for up to twelve years to stay home and raise their children.⁶

In addition, these female Berkeley seniors planned to depend on their husbands to provide for the family during the interruption of their careers—to take a break or to give up their jobs—to become parents.⁷ There may be significant cultural differences between Holland and Eisenhart's study sites, and the University of California Berkeley, which is a highly pressurized academic environment. Nevertheless, Machung's research suggests that, in the 1980s at least, young women had the agency to define their own plans for the future and expected their husbands to be part of the plans.

In the discussion about the motivation to work outside the home, Berkeley students who participated in Machung's study emphasize "self-fulfillment" and "independence" as their two main reasons for working. These women valued their job satisfaction over making money. They defined working in terms of self-satisfaction—as long as they felt good about their jobs, money did not really matter. They also reported wanting to be respected professionally by the people in their fields.⁸ This study highlights the fact that these women discussed college education as a private matter, and that personal feelings were the main concerns regarding their working lives. Although they planned for competitive and high-paying jobs, their main concerns had little to do with money. Professional attainment and self-satisfaction remained dominant in these women's plans for the future.

Nearly a decade after Machung's study at Berkeley, Linda Stone and Nancy P. McKee's study reported similar responses from young women at Washington State University, suggesting

that many American female college students still considered their husbands the breadwinners.⁹ Many participants also indicated that they would depend on their husbands to provide for the family when they became parents.¹⁰ Whether they were planning for a future with the expectation that they would become the primary financial provider or that the financial burden would fall on their future husbands, this study suggests that young Americans have the power to make decisions based on their own preferences.

Stone and McKee's interpretation of these findings highlights their view that college students not only acquired the knowledge they were taught, but at the same time also had the ability to analyze and positively act upon what they learned. Consistent with this view, Stone and McKee concluded that the women "were participating in the creation of an American cultural ideal that it is a woman's duty to stay home with their children."¹¹ Stone and McKee's argument is important because it again suggests that many highly educated young women have the power to decide whether or not they want to depend on their husbands.

The American studies mentioned above suggest that many young women in the United States view college as a way to fulfill their personal aspirations and possibly add additional income to the household. In these studies, researchers tend to view women's college experience through the lens of women's autonomy and agency. While these studies provide some insight into the factors that motivate women in college, the American experience can only tell us so much about the Vietnamese experience since the two countries are so culturally different. Socio-cultural elements, such as familial obligations, which may influence and reshape women's educational decisions, remain largely unexplored.

Nguyen's research about traditions and changes in Vietnam found that marriage, not education, was perhaps the most important concern for women in a traditional Vietnamese

family. Women were under pressure to marry because “they would only find a secure base from which to live and act within the framework of marriage.”¹² Within the marriage, of utmost importance was the birth of a male child who would continue the husband's lineage and be responsible for ancestral worship.¹³ Although this ideology may no longer be true for all young contemporary women, as many of them are now investing their time and energy in higher education, marriage continues to play a central role and dominate conversations about their futures.

Under the feudal system that existed up to first half of the twentieth century, educational opportunities were only available to a limited number of Vietnamese men.¹⁴ Parents did not educate their daughters for three reasons. First, there was no economic incentive to spend money to educate girls because they would be married off and live with their husbands' families. Second, education for girls was believed to be unnecessary, given the view that a woman's life was to be centered around her home. Third, women could not study to become scholars, as only men were allowed to take the court examination and work as state officials.¹⁵ The situation could differ depending on family wealth, status, and tradition, or on geographic locations. First hand observations suggest, however, that many families, especially those living in rural areas, prioritize boys over girls if they have to make a choice.

Until recently, educational opportunities for the Vietnamese people were limited. After the reunification of South and North Vietnam in 1975, the government adopted a closed-door economic policy. In the late 1980s, Vietnam launched *Đổi-mới*, or “Innovation.” *Đổi-mới* is an economic campaign that transformed the previously centralized economy into a “socialist-oriented market economy.” *Đổi-mới* encouraged the establishment of private businesses and foreign investment.¹⁶

Not long after *Đổi-mới*, the government initiated educational reform, which allowed private investors to join the education market. As a result of this program, many institutions of higher education opened and began accepting students.¹⁷ Young people had more opportunities to attend college and the number of students in college increased significantly. After this educational reform, the country went through a major transformation both in the number of institutions and students. By 2008, the number of colleges had more than tripled, from 105 (before *Đổi-mới*) to 368 institutions, and the number of students surged tenfold, from 150,000 to 1.5 million.¹⁸ Reform created amazing opportunities for more women to attend college than ever before, and women took advantage. From a minority status (43 percent of all students attending college) in 2000, women became the majority (55 percent) in 2007.¹⁹

Previous studies revealed that the primary focus of the Vietnamese education system in the era of *Đổi-mới* is to train people for jobs as the market economy creates more opportunities for waged labor. By reforming the educational system, the Vietnamese government is “fostering man in the interests of socio-economic development.”²⁰ In other words, the Vietnamese government’s ultimate goal in educating young people, both men and women, is to provide labor for the growing Vietnamese economy. *Đổi-mới* also changed women’s views of their roles in the family. Today, Vietnamese women believe that they need to work, together with their husbands, to contribute to the financial welfare of the family, and waged jobs are more desirable and valued than home-based work.²¹

Since the 1990s, the social context of the new market economy, coupled with the opportunities for women to attend college and find jobs outside their homes, has influenced the way young women think about college and the future. Like their American counterparts, female college students in Vietnam discuss their higher education goals in terms of jobs, career

prospects, income, and expectations for a successful life. Economic advancement and educational reforms have led to many more Vietnamese youth attending college in order to achieve these outcomes. As many Vietnamese consider education one of the most sustainable ways to a better future,²² a college degree is viewed as means for women to gain social status and to make a good living working outside the home. What sets these Vietnamese students apart, however, is their desire to gain respect through college education, and this desire motivates them to achieve the goal of becoming nondependent, but not necessarily *independent*, when they get married.

Methods

The research for this paper occurred from June to August 2013, at An Giang University (AGU), located in the city of Long Xuyen—the capital of An Giang province. Situated in the heart of the Mekong Delta, about 180 km southwest of Ho Chi Minh City, Long Xuyen is approximately five hours by car from the Tan Son Nhat airport. An Giang is a major rice producer for Vietnam. The province's population is about 2 million, over 60 percent of who live in rural areas. Officially established in 1999, AGU is the only four-year college in the province and offers over ten majors, with both three and four-year degrees for more than 8,000 students on its two campuses. Many AGU students come from the rural areas surrounding An Giang and neighboring provinces.

Potential participants in the study had to be female students officially enrolled at AGU in any major, and be at least eighteen years old. The college's Student Affairs Office referred potential study participants. These students later brought other students to the project. The researcher's personal contacts also recruited a few participants for the study. All of study participants were in their second or third year of a four-year program and between nineteen and

twenty-two years of age. Some of their majors included Vietnamese Studies, English, Corporate Finance, Food Technology, Kindergarten Education, and Political Pedagogy.

The research included twenty-two semi-structured interviews in Vietnamese with twelve female students. The majority of the women interviewed were first-generation college students that came from low-income families. Their families lived in rural or suburban areas within a couple hours radius. All of them lived in the dormitory or shared a room with other students in an apartment near the college. Interviews occurred in groups of two to five people, with a few exceptions, based on the students' preferences. Each group/individual gave two or more interviews. Most of the students chose to talk in coffee shops.

College, jobs, and the ultimate goals of getting a higher education

College education for daughters imposes serious financial burdens on their parents. Upon graduation, these young women expect to find jobs, work for a couple of years, and then get married. As patrilocal practice remains popular in this community, many young women, including my participants, are expected to move in with their husbands and in-laws after getting married. Nevertheless, many parents are willing to invest almost all of the family's meager resources for their daughter's higher education without expecting their daughters to repay the financial investment. What does this phenomenon say about the meaning of college to these women and their parents?

The conversation about higher education begins with a discussion about jobs. In this community, jobs are associated with permanent employment, respectable job titles, acceptable working environments, and good pay, as opposed to providing day labor or getting temporary and seasonal contracts. The young women emphasized that their parents sent them to college for

jobs and for better futures. As many of these parents work as day laborers who perform agricultural work for somebody else, and they do not want daughters to follow in their footsteps.

An analysis of the women's narratives about jobs, however, reveals that acquiring employment is only a strategy and not a goal. The women's ultimate goals of getting an education are to gain respect and to become nondependent. College brings respect to their family, and the stable income and the potential for economic advancement are the means for these young women to achieve nondependence. Respect and nondependence are intertwined and indispensable. One has to be understood within the framework of the other and both are built upon women's understanding of familial obligations.

Women's familial obligations

This idea of mutual debt, that young women owe their parents a big favor and are supposed to pay their parents back, plays a central role in the women's decision to attend college. Many participants reported that their parents sacrificed a great deal in order to send them to college. Kim, a twenty year old majoring in Kindergarten Education,²³ said, "[My] parents don't dare to spend money on food [for themselves] because they want to save the money for me [to go to college]." Similar to Kim's family, some of the parents scrimp on what they eat, and others send all the money they have earned the previous month to their daughters. Na, a twenty year old student studying Corporate Finance, explained that her parents insisted that whenever they managed to save a small sum of money, she could go home and take it all (to pay for her education expenses). The parents, however, have never complained about the difficult lives they lead for their daughters to go through college. Parental sacrifice highlights love for their daughters and strengthens the mutual ties.

The invisible tie between the women and their parents is embedded within the context of the family in such a way that children feel they owe their parents and are supposed to do something to repay them, despite their parents never asking. Considering what their parents want when making life decisions is one way these young women fulfill their perceived obligations. Twenty-one year old Political Pedagogy major, Thanh, stated, “I’m most afraid of people looking down on my parents, so I always think of them before doing anything.” Nhi, a twenty year old Vietnamese Studies major, added, “When I do something, I’ll have my own thought. I’ll have my own way, then balance it with what my parents want. I tend to think more of my family.”

According to Thanh and Nhi, making parents proud and taking care of them whenever possible are some of the most popular ways for young women to show respect to their parents. As ancestor veneration has always been an important part of Vietnamese culture, these women feel the obligations because they grow up in a society where children are taught that they have a duty to their parents. Parental support of college education reinforces this ideology. This is a reestablishment of the consanguineal tie based on perceived duty to family rather than a new phenomenon. Higher education is where the journey to pay back their mutual debts begins.

College as a way to gain respect

The term *respect* suggests the notion of admiring someone who is of high social status, good morals, or important in certain ways. The word also signifies an individual’s high status and power within his or her social network, or suggests that someone should be treated in an appropriate way. In the community this study examined, respect is an achieved and not inherited element, which means that people have to earn respect. Being respected by neighbors and relatives is so crucial that many people, including the parents and students in my research, have

devoted considerable time, money, and effort to what could be called a quest for respect: by attending college, these young women earn respect for their parents and for themselves.

Having a child in college is a source of pride for the family as it improves parents' social status. Lan, a twenty year old Food Technology major, proudly recalled how she learned that she would become a college student, "I didn't know that I passed the [college entrance] exam. Some people learned about the news and came over to my house and told my parents." This young woman was at home when a neighbor came to her house and told her parents that the daughter had passed the college entrance exam, which was known to be highly competitive. In a community where everybody knows everybody, they did not have to wait for long before the entire village learned about the news and came over to honor the parents. Since then, neighbors and relatives have looked at the parents "differently," which means they treat the parents more respectfully through body language and verbal expression. A daughter in college brings prestige to the family even before she officially enrolls at the university.

The first dimension of respect is respect for the parents. This concept refers to the improvement of social status parents enjoy when their daughter becomes a college student. In this community, having a lot of money and being "highly educated," (holding at least a bachelor's degree) are two popular ways to gain respect. According to these young women, wealthy people are well respected because people in their community equate money with status and power, whereas having little or no money could mean the opposite.

Besides those who have a lot of money, "highly educated" people enjoy the status of scholars. People also believe that it is easier for college degree holders to find well-paying jobs. At the time of this research, most of the parents worked as day laborers and their incomes barely covered the family's immediate needs. These parents had no opportunities to gain better

employment, as they did not have higher education, nor did they have social connections that could potentially improve their status. Lacking access to other means of gaining respect, such as earning more money, parents seek improvement of their social status by sending their children to college.

The second dimension of respect refers to the honors these students earn for themselves. As with their parents, young women are highly regarded even before they officially enroll at AGU, and the level of respect increases as they progress through college. Nhi claimed that even her neighbors now “pampered” her, for example, offering her good food or asking if she wants something from them, every time she went home. The change in her neighbors’ attitude signifies an improvement in social status for this young woman because her neighbors did not do so before she started going to college. Thanh became an educational consultant for youth and parents in her commune, as her neighbors now trust her to give them advice regarding educational matters, such as to which college they should tell their children to apply to or what their children can do with a certain degree after graduation.

Being a college student brings status to these young women among friends and neighbors, but what is really important to them is the respect they earn from their future in-laws. Parental authority remains important within this community, so much so that parental approval is required for marriage. The groom’s parents will decide what type of daughter-in-law they want. Thanh said that in the past, people relied on matchmaking and as long as the girl was attractive, the man’s family would accept her and propose a marriage.

This situation has changed significantly. Men’s families are now obsessed with the potential daughter-in-law’s education, as her education brings prestige and economic benefits to the husband’s family. For this reason, if a young man receives a bachelor’s degree, his parents

will not allow him to marry a stay-at-home girl, a term used to imply women without a college education. To these young women, having gained social status for themselves through college before getting married means both receiving their future in-laws' approval and not being looked down upon by their husbands' families when they move into their homes. This status could improve a woman's relationship with her in-laws and, therefore, facilitates a happy marriage.

A daughter-in-law with a bachelor's degree is so important to many future parents-in-law that some of them are willing to invest in their son's girlfriend. Tam's, (another twenty year old student) case suggests another way to gain respect: Parents who have a son who are not accepted to college can ensure their futures through gaining an educated daughter-in-law. Tam accepted money and other support from her boyfriend's (Nam) parents while she attended college. Nam's parents treated Tam as their own daughter by supporting her aspirations for higher education. Interestingly, Nam was not accepted to any college. Even though Nam's parents tell Tam that they do not care if she marries their son after she graduates and that they invest in her because they simply want her to get a college education, Tam is able to accept their help because she anticipates marrying her boyfriend upon graduation. Tam has built a wonderful relationship with Nam's parents, especially his mother, and at the same time, takes on part-time jobs and takes care of her sick mother. In this case, Tam's education means a lot to Nam's parents, especially since none of their children are able to get into college. At the same time, Tam's future job prospects also promise a stable income to support the family. Investing in the future daughter-in-law in this case seems to be beneficial to all involved.

The students' determination to gain the respect of their future in-laws stemmed from real life examples of their less-educated relatives and friends who have had trouble with their in-laws and experience an unhappy married life. For example, Hièn said that her stepsister "has to do

cleaning, cooking and all other housework” for the husband and his family, implying that lack of education prevents her stepsister from finding employment outside the home. As a result, her stepsister does not gain respect and has a hard time living with her husband’s family. In addition to the status a woman enjoys for being a college graduate, these women indicated that college life also enhances their chances of having a successful married life, as they had the opportunity to learn how to live with others, to learn how to resolve family issues, and to gain knowledge that will help them raise their children more successfully.

Once a marriage is approved, young women will continue to do their best to ensure their future in-laws will respect them. They are also well aware of the expectations and responsibilities once they get married, such as finding ways to integrate into the husbands’ families, where there is considerable risk that their mothers-in-law and other members of the household may treat them disrespectfully. Hào, a twenty year old English major, stated, “A daughter-in-law with an education means her in-laws will respect her more [...]. Your husband loves you is one thing but you don’t have a say in anything.” These women know love by itself can never guarantee a successful marriage. To have a successful married life, their in-laws must also value and respect them as important members of the household. To achieve this goal, their first target is to become nondependent.

College facilitates nondependence

In the discussions about their futures, study participants emphasized that they did not want to depend on their husbands but did not necessarily suggest that they wanted to be independent. *Nondependence* in this case carries a slightly different meaning than *independence*. Independence evokes the feeling of autonomy and agency, suggesting that one can make her own decisions without worrying or considering other people’s opinions, including those of her own

family members. In nondependence, a woman first has to not depend on her husband financially, which means she has to work and to make a living, and then must channel parts of her income to fulfill duties to her natal family. In nondependence, a woman's decision is not always about her or for herself but is instead based on the balance between her conjugal and familial obligations.

The first element of nondependence refers to a woman's potential economic contributions to her new family, which also means that a woman cannot depend on her husband financially. As mentioned in Hào's statement, this desire to become nondependent equates to the demand to be recognized as an important family member, which means to have a say in family matters or to have more authority in the household. This authority is extended beyond the control of money to include having a say in important family matters, such as education for her children, what values to teach their kids, or how the husbands should treat the wives' parents. In order to achieve this authority, a woman must have a stable job so she can make money to support herself and become nondependent of her husband.

Providing examples to reaffirm the view that they must become economically nondependent, the women pointed out cases in which married women who lived with in-laws and depended on the husbands were not treated respectfully by their in-laws, especially when they live with the husbands' families. Mai provided a real-life example, "I have a sister who doesn't make any money and lives with her husband's family. The husband gave her money. In the end, they divorced." Mai implied that in this case, the wife's dependence on her husband ultimately led to the breakup. Other students supported Mai's view and told cases of marriage dissolutions, attributing these cases of unsuccessful marriages to the women's inability to gain employment outside the home, which they view as a direct result of lacking college education.

The second dimension of nondependence ties to a woman's ability to channel parts of her income to support her natal family. Reducing parents' economic burdens, such as paying for siblings to obtain a higher education or purchasing things her parents have always wanted but cannot afford to buy, are these women's priority when they find employment. Hân said, "If I work and I want something, I don't have to ask my husband." Hân already had plans to give her parents money and to buy special items for them. To make sure that her in-laws do not oppose her giving back to her parents, Hân knows that she has to become nondependent. Duty to parents is one of the underlying dynamics that most influences the women as they go through college and plan for their futures. Having an income, therefore, is important because it allows the women to have a certain level of autonomy to fulfill their duty to parents while still being part of the husband's family. Education is the key to fulfilling the desire not to be dependent financially, as it allows young women to gain employment, knowledge, prestige, and social respect all at the same time.

The third element of nondependence includes the ability to physically and emotionally care for their aging parents. Many hospitals in Vietnam require family members to be around continuously to assist doctors and nurses in taking care of patients. These family members are expected to assist patients with getting around, taking food and medication, and paying hospital bills, just to name a few obligations. Besides these practical aspects, having a child around also provides a tremendous psychological boost for ailing parents and is a source of pride for them because it provides evidence that their daughters are doing well and can care for them.

In Vietnam, the most important relationships in a marriage are between parents and children, not necessarily between husband and wife.²⁴ Parental care is associated with Vietnamese women's virtue. Aside from taking good care of their children, women take pride in

providing care for their parents because “being a good mother implies being a good daughter.”²⁵ Those who are able to raise children and take care of their aging parents will gain even more social respect.

Although there may be differences depending on geographic and social locations, women are expected to stay home and to devote their lives to the husbands' families in a “traditional Vietnamese family,”²⁶ which means that a woman's priority is taking care of her in-laws, children, and husband. She must also perform other tasks around the home such as cooking and cleaning. After getting married and moving in with her husband, a woman is expected to devote herself to the well being of her husband's family. Supporting and caring for one's parents requires a woman to take time and resources away from her new family. A woman is able to provide financial support and care for her aging parents while still fulfilling her obligations with husband's family only if her in-laws respect her and let her do so.

In addition to gaining respect and becoming nondependent, college education gives women some protection against the loss of respect in case of a divorce. For many Vietnamese, a good woman must be able to take care of her children. This idea implies that the inability to provide for children could be translated to the inability to become a virtuous woman.²⁷ When a couple splits, the old way of maintaining respect by having a husband and a family is no longer available. Women maintain social respect by proving that they are able to bring up their children. Participants indicated that they would have to be prepared for this situation when entering a marriage by getting a college degree, as the training can lead to employment, money, social status, knowledge, and so forth. Such education will help them to be independent financially, and thereby retain the respect of others in the case of an unsuccessful marriage.

Discussion

The modern goal of becoming less dependent after completing college is a goal that upholds certain aspects of more traditional social roles. Young educated women take seriously their roles as daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, and mother, as well as the traditional Vietnamese cultural obligations and expectations that these roles demand. For example, children, including daughters, are expected to visit their parents, provide some forms of financial support for them, and take care of sick or aging parents. The young women understand their duty to take care of their homes by performing domestic works and taking care of their in-laws. They are trying to fulfill these expectations and at the same time, utilize available resources they have in hand to get ready in case something “bad” happens, a phrase commonly expressed, which implies a major family breakdown, such as a divorce or a death of the husband.

Ideologies about what a modern woman can or should do have been modified to fit a Vietnamese suburban or rural context, in which familial obligations and social dynamics are socially legitimized. The young women in this research are attempting to find ways to navigate a web of cultural expectations, while at the same time, redefining outcomes and modifying their ideal plans to make these plans more likely to work in reality. As they move from a “rural/suburban family girl” to an imagined “urban/modern-working woman” who is ready to get a job, they are taking part in the modernization process that the Vietnamese government has actively promoted. In this “quest for respect and nondependence,” these women improve their and their parents’ social statuses in the village and within their future or extended families.

The immediate return for parents’ investment in daughters’ higher education is an improvement of their family’s social status. The long-term return is the guarantee of care and support for the parents. So it makes sense that parents are willing to invest a great deal of time

and money for their daughters to go to college. A college degree allows young women to get jobs. Jobs bring respect to the students and their parents. Jobs and the desire to gain respect empower young women to become nondependent, and being nondependent brings them even more respect. In this community, young women see college as a way to gain respect and enable them a nondependent future while simultaneously allowing them to fulfill traditional expectations to their natal families.

Conclusion

College education in the West seems to reflect women's ideas about self-fulfillment—the idea of who you want to be in the future. The ideal image of an educated woman tends to be associated with self-sufficiency, autonomy, and complete independence from her natal family. In Vietnam, this Western ideal of a modern woman has been reframed within the context of local ideologies and the reality of women's situations. This paper discussed how young Vietnamese women negotiate traditional expectations, such as parental and conjugal obligations, in the context of modern life, in which new opportunities and challenges, including higher education and white-collar jobs, have become more readily available.

Respect and nondependence can be seen as implicit cultural models guiding women's actions and the parameters they use to make decisions related to their plans for the future. Young Vietnamese college women often choose not to embrace the more easy way of marrying and becoming dependent on their husbands financially. Instead, they choose college—a path they hope will allow them to become financially self-reliant, as such self-reliance garners more respect for themselves as well as for their parents. This study advances the knowledge of what motivates young women in developing countries to obtain an education and how social norms

and ideology play out as young women in Southeast Asia plan for their future while moving into a more capitalistic society.

ENDNOTES

¹ Dorothy Holland and Margaret A. Eisenhart, *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Anne Machung, "Talking Career, Thinking Job: Gender Differences in Career and Family Expectations of Berkeley Seniors," *Feminist Studies* 15 no. 1 (1989): 35.

Linda Stone and Nancy P. McKee, "Gendered Futures: Student Visions of Career and Family on a College Campus," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 31 no.1 (2000): 67–89.

² Jayne Werner, "Gender, Household, and State: Renovation (Đổi Mới) as Social Process in Việt Nam," in *Gender, Household, State: Đổi Mới in Việt Nam*, ed. Jayne Werner and Daniele Belanger (New York, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2002), 15.

³ Dorothy Holland and Margaret A. Eisenhart, *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴ *Ibid*, 211-3.

⁵ Anne Machung, "Talking Career, Thinking Job: Gender Differences in Career and Family Expectations of Berkeley Seniors," *Feminist Studies* 15 no. 1 (1989): 35.

⁶ *Ibid*, 42.

⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

⁸ Machung, "Talking Career, Thinking Job: Gender Differences in Career and Family Expectations of Berkeley Seniors," *Feminist Studies* 15 no. 1 (1989): 41.

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¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

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