

Kinship Secrets and Narrative Work: The Shifting Political Economy of Adoption in Vietnam

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Vietnam has a long history of diverse forms of adoption. Yet contemporary domestic adoption remains largely invisible, with families often keeping it secret. The three narratives of secret adoption examined here illuminate the complex dynamics that have naturalized the middle-class biological nuclear family as the ideal for a market economy. As women narratively perform kin-work to make such a family visible and real, they render invisible other relations of blood and desire. Enmeshed in classed, gendered and intimate dynamics of transparency and secrecy, adoptive kinship in Vietnam delineates new subjectivities, affects and forms of political economy.

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My interest in domestic adoption in Vietnam began in the 1990s, when I was conducting research in Ho Chi Minh City's famous Bến Thành marketplace (Leshkowich 2014a). The market is a must-see stop for tourists. Among them were foreigners in the process of adopting a child from Vietnam — racial differences between the parents, most of them white North Americans or Europeans, and their Asian infants or toddlers making evident the form of their kinship relationship. Seeing me sitting on a plastic stool near a stall and chatting with its proprietor in Vietnamese, some of these visitors would pause to ask what I was doing, how I learned Vietnamese and whether I enjoyed living in Ho Chi Minh City. They often posed cultural questions, such as when women wore *áo dài* or why Vietnamese

interlocutors often asked their age upon starting a conversation. Or they asked for shopping advice, with a particular interest in buying souvenirs that they could share with their child as part of preserving his or her cultural heritage. Those with daughters often outlined their plans to buy twelve or more *áo dài* in different sizes so that their daughter could have them throughout her childhood. They alerted me to cultural heritage education programmes for transnational adoptive families and to the items or practices that might constitute “Vietnamese culture” in the absence of its daily, lived experience in a community.

After the adopting families moved down the aisle, even more interesting conversations would begin. Having seen many such families in recent years, stallholders were enormously curious about why they were adopting children from Vietnam. I was showered with questions. “Why do foreigners like Vietnamese baby girls?” “Will they make the child do household chores?” “When the child grows up, will they return it to Vietnam?” “How can they love a child who doesn’t look like them?” “How will they educate the child?” “How much did they pay for the child?” Such questions would likely have outraged the adoptive parents, for they implied that race and economics shaped kinship acts, whereas the adoptive parents tended to view family formation primarily in terms of emotional attachment.

Bến Thành traders’ questions provided insight into longstanding practices of adoption in Vietnam. Transfer of children between families has often involved issues of economics and lineage, with poorer families sometimes relinquishing a child to serve as an heir, in the case of boys, or to provide domestic labour, in the cases of both girls and boys, for wealthier kin or someone else in their social networks. For example, one of my contacts in Bến Thành Market had been adopted precisely to relieve the burden on her rural natal family and to help the urban adoptive family with their family-run market stall. Her status as a *con nuôi* (adopted child) was contingent on her labour. When she took an office job with a foreign company, she was asked to leave the family home. The adoption of male children as heirs, in contrast, tended to be permanent. Other forms

of child transfer might have been temporary, such as those intended to protect a child from supernatural harm. Stallholders' questions about why foreigners seemed to prefer Vietnamese girls or whether such *con nuôi* would in fact provide domestic labour reflected this history of adoption within Vietnam.

The question about education (*giáo dục*) voiced a concern that went beyond formal schooling. The term *giáo dục* refers to the entire process of socializing and educating a child to become a proper person (*thành người*). Stallholders simply were not sure how this process could occur for a Vietnamese child in an adoptive setting in a foreign country in which the parents were not Vietnamese. Loss of culture went deeper than *bánh trung thu* (mooncakes) at the mid-autumn festival or red envelopes (*lì xì*) at Tết. It meant a loss of the values and embodied interrelational practices through which the “white sheet of paper” or blank slate that is a child becomes a recognizable, legitimate, moral and social person.¹ It was a fundamental dislocation.

Claims, apparently circulated at the time by U.S. adoption agencies, that Vietnamese did not practice adoption further increased the sense of disconnect between how foreign adopting parents and Vietnamese viewed practices of “kinning” (Howell 2006, pp. 8–9). In conversations with me, some adoptive parents reported being told in the 1990s and 2000s that there was no word for or concept of adoption in Vietnamese — a mischaracterization that conveniently worked to justify the transnational circulation of children who, it was claimed, would otherwise languish in Vietnamese orphanages.

My casual conversations suggested a far more complex picture. Hearing of my interest in adoption, friends in Vietnam began to share stories of friends and relatives temporarily or permanently transferred within extended kin or social networks for the reasons of economics or descent outlined above. Others talked about how war and delayed marriage due to education or jobs had created problems of infertility, similar to the situation that prompted foreigners to adopt in Vietnam. A few mentioned that adopting a girl might arouse a maternal instinct that would foster biological conception, especially

of a son. Almost everyone claimed that children are the crucial glue that bonds a married couple.

While the goals and forms of the movement of children between Vietnamese families may not have matched those of transnational adoption, instead of confronting or explaining these differences, the transnational adoption industry's rhetoric of "no adoption in Vietnam" rendered these practices invisible. Official adoption statistics only added to the impression that adoption within Vietnam was relatively rare. Between 2003 and 2014, only 40,029 adoptions — fewer than 3,500 per year on average — were registered in Vietnam; 29,576 were domestic adoptions (74 per cent), while 10,453 (26 per cent) were transnational.² These are very low figures for a population that rose during this same period from eighty million to more than ninety million.

The actual practice of adoption within Vietnam is likely to be much more frequent. My anecdotal evidence suggests this, with many people saying that statistics are low because there would not be any need to register an adoption. Instead, domestic adoption occurred privately or under the table, with birth certificates revised through back channels or other arrangements. A Vietnamese official in the Ministry of Justice, the entity tasked with processing paperwork relating to adoption and marriage, confirmed that domestic adoption rates were most likely to be many times higher than reported. This official told me that "networks of neighbours" make legal oversight redundant. "Because of Vietnamese culture, everyone knows what's going on in the families around them."³

The rhetorical and statistical insignificance of the domestic circulation of children in places like Vietnam is reproduced by a burgeoning scholarly literature that tends to focus instead on transnational adoption in so-called receiving countries. Numerous studies detail how transnational adoption charts fascinating "new geographies of kinship" (Volkman 2005*b*, p. 2) that reflect global legal, political, economic, cultural and ethical issues, as well as anxieties about gender and reproduction (Anagnost 2000; Dorow 2006; Howell 2006; Kim 2000, 2005, 2007 and 2010; Leinaweaver

2013; Volkman 2005*a* and 2005*b*; Yngvesson 2005; Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000). Academic studies of adoption in Vietnam have tended to be historical, and they, too, focus on its transnational dimensions. For example, Sachs (2010) explores the complexity of wartime adoption between Vietnam and the United States, particularly through Operation Babylift. Firpo (2016) chronicles an earlier, poignant colonial history of removing mixed race (*métis*) children from their native mothers so that they could be raised in a more properly French environment, typically group homes, rather than in families.

Although transnational adoption studies do attend to circumstances in both sending and receiving countries, the analytical weight tends to rest on the receiving side through detailed exploration of adopting families, particularly parents: their motivations, their practices and their experiences. Once asserted, the terms “sending” and “receiving” countries set up a binary in which agency, and hence the analytical puzzle, rests primarily with the receivers. Resisting this labelling allows us to consider how “senders” may be engaged in their own practices of adoption, as well as how “receivers” may in turn be sources of adopted children for parents from other nations.⁴ Only a handful of studies have focused on the social, economic and cultural processes of domestic adoption within the countries that have become popular sending countries for transnational adoption (Dorow 2006; Fonseca 2005; Johnson 2004 and 2005; Leinaweaver 2008). Like the authors of these studies, however, I argue for the need to understand transnational adoption from Vietnam as being in profound dialogue with domestic adoption cultures and practices within Vietnam.

The statement of the Ministry of Justice official mentioned above suggested that the actual visibility of domestic adoption in daily life counters its statistical or legal invisibility. This image resonates with cherished Vietnamese depictions of closely knit village communities and multigenerational households in which everyone knows everyone else’s business. It does not square, however, with the mobile realities of contemporary urban life in Ho Chi Minh City, with its patterns of

rural-to-urban migration and with housing arrangements, particularly for those in the middle class, that increasingly emphasize nuclear families and personal privacy. The changing social context for families in Ho Chi Minh City meant that, in contrast to the Ministry of Justice official's image of visible, transparent kinship, the adoptive family members whom I have encountered, especially the adopting mothers, laboured to keep the fact of adoption secret from extended kin, neighbours and even the adoptees themselves.

To explore these dynamics, this article focuses on three families' stories of secret adoption. The adoptive mothers themselves related the first and third narratives to me in detail. The second, offered in stages over email and in person, begins with an aunt, uncle and cousin, but ultimately turns to a childhood friend and adoption revelation gone wrong. It is a cautionary tale, voiced to justify why it is preferable not to speak. As a bridge between the two first-person stories, it serves here to suggest the broader sociocultural logics that define adoptive kinship as so inherently tenuous that emotional bonds and familial stability must be constructed on a foundation of secrecy.

Some methodological reflection is in order. The stories related here are just that: stories. They were mobilized for a particular audience — an anthropologist — at particular moments in time. While I have no reason to question the speakers' descriptions of their views and experiences, their desire for secrecy prevented me from conducting participant observation that might have revealed further details, contradictions or complexity — all the wonderful messiness inherent in human subjectivity and social relationships. Nor can one interpret their experiences in the positivist sense as generalizable or representative of how other families might narrate or experience adoption. Nevertheless, casual conversations and the ongoing attention that I have paid to this issue while conducting research in Vietnam for more than two decades do make me confident that adoptive families generally avoid speaking about adoption and prefer to keep it private or secret.

What, then, can we learn from a close reading of a few narratives? As Ruth Behar has argued about life histories, such narratives

“should allow one to see the subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system that is often obscured in a typified account” (Behar 1990, p. 225). Narratives speak about social life and represent subjectivity, but they do not merely reflect a reality out there. They work to shape that reality by making sense, in the wonderfully dual meaning of coming to understand something and coming to make something seem sensible, to both speaker and listener. Writing of spirit possession rituals among Karo Batak women in the highlands of North Sumatra, Mary Steedly argues that these rites allow them to “convene an audience” that they are otherwise denied (Steedly 1993, p. 185). What Steedly terms “audiencing practice” enables storytellers to construct a story that their audiences will find compelling, particularly when that story departs from the “demands of the ready-made grid and the fully elaborated code” of social life and turns instead to the “everyday cadences of the perpetual open end” (Steedly 1993, p. 199).

Audiencing practice is particularly important in relation to adoptive kinship, because narrative offers a basis on which parent–child bonds built on ties other than the biological can become socially legible. As I argue below, the adoption narratives examined in detail here perform work — kin-work — by giving voice to what narrators claim is otherwise unsaid. I thus read them as attempts to make an adoptive family legible. This task is an important one, because such families ordinarily become legible only through being recast in the idiom of a biologically based nuclear family. Narratives enable us to consider how something comes to seem reasonable, how telling and not telling shape reality, and through what frameworks that reality is perceived.

The three narratives examined here illuminate the complex dynamics that have problematized adoption by naturalizing the middle-class biological nuclear family as the ideal affective unit and crucible for forging the civilized, modern subjectivities necessary for a market economy. With women enjoined as wives, mothers and daughters to do the work of making such a family visible and real, they also must make invisible other, more ambivalent, relations of

blood and desire. The primary lesson to take from this analysis — that the kin-work performed by middle-class adoptive mothers in Ho Chi Minh City succeeds primarily by making itself invisible — moves us beyond the facile claims of cultural or historical difference bandied about in the aisles of Bến Thành Market or in the halls of the Ministry of Justice to reveal instead fascinating points of convergence between contemporary Vietnamese and American adoption practices and logics that result from gendered, classed and intimate labour.

Thủy's Story

When I met her in January 2008 through a mutual friend, Thủy was a tailor in her forties who made costumes for a theatre company.⁵ Thủy and her husband had adopted their daughter four years earlier, when the girl was just under two years old. Thủy began our interview by emphasizing that her daughter did not know she was adopted and that she was not likely to learn this fact until she was older, perhaps even after she was married. Thủy was worried that disclosure earlier would expose her daughter to teasing by her peers or would lead to a longing for her birthmother, to the birthmother's trying to reclaim her, or to psychological problems. These latter might include an inferiority complex, depression and a lack of attachment to her adoptive parents. The move from one family to another could profoundly unmoor a child and impair the development of filial piety (*hiếu*). These commonly voiced concerns fuelled the stigma surrounding adoption.

Thủy detailed how she loved her daughter immediately upon meeting her. Thủy had spent nearly a decade going from hospital to hospital seeking a child who had been abandoned by its birthmother, and she had begun to give up on the prospect of adopting. She ultimately learned through contacts of a girl born to an ethnic minority woman from the highlands as the result of an affair with a married man. The father did not want the child, and the mother was unable to care for her. The maternal grandmother helped her daughter during her pregnancy but was unable to provide long-term

care for the child. The grandmother volunteered to arrange the adoption. Thủy said that the birthmother had relinquished the child to the grandmother in the hospital. Staff there had helped to arrange for the introduction to an adoptive mother. This common practice typically involved the prospective adoptive parent sending money to the hospital staff and to the child's biological family. That was the case here, with Thủy giving about three million đồng, roughly US\$200 at that time, to the maternal grandmother to cover the cost of the child's food and other expenses during the nearly two years that she remained in the grandmother's care.

Meanwhile, Thủy prepared the paperwork for adoption. The birthmother had agreed to relinquish the child and to establish Thủy as her legal mother. Thủy worried, however, that her child would discover a birth certificate with the birthmother's name before she was ready to learn that she was adopted. Thủy thus resolved to redo the paperwork from scratch so that it would list her as giving birth to her daughter at a local hospital. This process took time and involved further "exchange" (*trao đổi*) to secure a blank certificate with an official serial number. Thủy saw this paperwork as necessary to bind the child to her.

Thủy had never been a mother before and said that she felt "*tình cảm*", a term that refers to an interpersonal relationship of sentiment and sympathy, right from the moment that she met her daughter. She held the child and then closed the door so that the two of them could be alone in the room. She put the child to suckle at her breast. Thủy recalled her intense emotions:

When she suckled, I felt just how terribly much I loved her. I formed *tình cảm* from those moments. I don't understand if it's the same with married couples or not, but I closed the door because I was embarrassed, I closed the door to let the baby suck, at that moment the baby didn't know how to suckle, but slowly she learned, from that moment I loved her very much.⁶ I loved her very much, so that today I no longer remember that she's any different from being mine.

Given the strong bond between mother and daughter, I asked Thủy why she nonetheless wanted to keep the fact of adoption a secret. She

explained that this had to do with how others differentiated between adopted children (*con nuôi*) and biological children (*con ruột*). The child would get an idea in its head that its parents were more like step-parents than biological parents. Noting that Vietnamese think that stepmothers do not love their stepchildren, Thủy said that, in a child's narrow view of the world, if an adoptive mother tried to instruct or correct it, the child would think that it was because it was not the mother's "real" child. Thủy explained,

For example, if one day a friend's mother takes her child somewhere to play, but I can't go, I say that I'll take her another day, but a young child wants to go right then. If in the child's mind the child is a biological child, then it will know that its mother has to go earn money and can't take it to play. But if in its mind the child knows that it is adopted, that it's not a biological child, but the other kid is, so that's why the other kid's mother takes it to play, but it's not a biological child, so its mother doesn't love it and doesn't take it to play.... In the narrow minds of children, they'll think it's that simple.

We discussed the relationship between Thủy's daughter and the rest of the family. The adoption was motivated by infertility and a sense of the importance of children for family and marital happiness. Thủy and her husband had been married for over ten years. She was worried that without children, she and her husband, who was employed as a guard, would grow apart. They would just go to work and come home without being as connected to each other as they had been as newlyweds. It would be like they were old.

So I thought that if we had a child, it would be like pulling back time, not just letting a boring life go ahead and pass by. So I said that I was going to look for a child, but my husband said we're already old, we shouldn't have a child. But I was still sad, so lonely when I got home from work. When I brought our daughter home, it was like I brought her father back to the family. He knew when to come home to take care of her when I hadn't yet come back from work. I thought that a child would make the marriage last longer, without her we'd age and we'd have nothing, so this baby is the link.

Thủy's plan worked, and her husband had come to love their daughter very much — so much in fact that Thủy said he cherished the girl

more than she herself did. But it had not been easy to get him to agree to the adoption. By her account, he had been afraid of “being tied down, having to hold the baby all the time, dealing with diapers, and the rest”. When Thủy decided to look for a child to adopt, she resolved to do it herself. She remembered calling her husband and saying how desperate and hungry the child was. She “sweet talked” him, and he finally said, “Uh, do what you want.” And when the child came home, Thủy said he loved her completely, so that now there was no distance between them. It even got to the point that, when she had to scold the child, “He sides with her, and the two of us wind up bickering.”

Thủy reported that all her maternal relatives loved her daughter. Her mother had gone with her to get the child and had shown her how to care for her daughter. Her mother helped get her daughter to and from school when Thủy could not. Her husband’s family did not know that their daughter was adopted because they lived far away. When her husband’s mother came to visit, they had decided not to tell her. Thủy again emphasized a lack of distinction. “She belongs to me, she doesn’t have any trace of anything else. I am at peace because I have her; she is entirely my child.”

As we talked more about her keeping the adoption a secret, Thủy contrasted the Vietnamese perspective with what she perceived as a more open American approach. “Vietnamese always want to keep that secret, so they don’t say anything, but Americans, if their child wants to know, they tell it.” She claimed that Americans thought that if they did not tell the truth to the child, someone else would, while Vietnamese thought that if they hid the truth, there was no way that the child would find out. Compared to the “very simplified” (*rất đơn giản hóa*) American comfort with supplying information about adoption that Thủy had learned about from media sources, she characterized Vietnamese ideas about family systems as “still quite limited” (*còn hạn hẹp*).

I asked her whether the money that she paid to make the adoption happen could be seen as her “buying” a child. After pausing for a moment, she replied, “I think that these are people with very difficult

lives, so I give them a little bit. That's it, it's not a purchase because I have no idea how much money could possibly be enough."

Towards the end of our conversation, we discussed the fear that the child's biological mother would reclaim her daughter. Thủy said she was terrified about this. One time she had dared to take her daughter back near the daughter's former home, but people did not seem to pay any attention. Thủy thought that they probably either did not know the truth or had forgotten about her daughter's birth and adoption. The experience nevertheless made her so scared that she decided to conceal all traces of the adoption and not let her daughter know.

Having justified this decision in terms of child psychology, Thủy explained that she paid a lot of attention to her child's moral education.

My idea is to give her a *tâm* [heart, mind, soul, or spirit]; a *tâm* will allow her to behave. I often send her to classes with a [Catholic] nun, even though I'm Buddhist, because in the nun's *tâm* there is holiness, there is tolerance, there's no pettiness. As a result, it will let my daughter have a more expansive viewpoint so that later she can recognize that her own situation is better than ordinary life. After that, I'll let her know the truth.

Thủy's story presents a compelling account of the logics motivating adoption. While one family's inability to care for a child and another family's desire to have a child generally motivates adoption, the factors that constitute both "inability" and "desire" vary. For the birthmother of Thủy's daughter, the important factors shaping her inability to care for her child were a combination of poverty and an extramarital relationship. In the past, these conditions might also have prompted the transfer of an illegitimate child from one family to another. Alternatively, if economic and social circumstances permitted, the mother and child might have formally joined the father's household through polygyny. Today, the notion of inability reflects the constraints of a market economic environment in which healthcare and education cost money. Proper parenting has increasingly come to be seen as the ability to provide economically for a child, placing poor single mothers in the moral position of concluding that the best

way to care for their child would be to secure its place in a wealthier family (Leshkovich 2012, p. 498). In Thủy's case, this moralizing logic of a birthmother's maternal unfitness also reveals the mapping of differences of region and ethnicity on to class inequalities.

Thủy's motivations — her desire for a child — are also fascinating. She suggests the importance of children to marital happiness — not strictly for securing descent, but for the affective relationship between husband and wife. Without a child whom they love and nurture jointly, the husband might not come home at night. And when he did, they would have little to bind them together. They would grow old in place, marking time. Marriage now rests on a daily intimate attachment between husband and wife, with a child serving as the crucial glue. As a result, and as Melissa Pashigian (2002, pp. 134, 140–41) found in her research on women who sought infertility treatments in northern Vietnam, companionate marriage has made maternity even more central to women's notions of proper, modern adulthood.

Like Thủy, women typically do the emotional, social, legal and economic work to locate a child and incorporate it into their family. I frequently heard that men were reluctant to pursue adoption and that women would sometimes force the issue by bringing home a child as a *fait accompli*. Informants explained that men were afraid that they would not have a bond with a child who was not theirs — a logic of biological paternity and patriliney that also meant that women who remarried often had to leave their children from a first marriage in the care of maternal or paternal grandparents. The lack of blood ties can only be overcome through the daily intimacy of caring for a child, something also done more often by women than by men.

Thủy's story suggests that this matter of ties is more complicated. While she claims to have loved her daughter immediately upon meeting her — a common statement from adoptive mothers — her first act alone with the child was to suckle her. This act produced no nourishment for the child, but it symbolically and emotionally transferred the physicality of motherhood from the birthmother to

Thủy. For women in Vietnam, nurturing a child in the womb and giving birth is a kind of sacrifice (*hy sinh*).⁷ Sharing blood and nutrients during this womb time physically creates the enduring emotional link between mother and child. So important is this uterine link that surrogacy was outlawed in Vietnam in 2003 because physical gestation was deemed more important than genetics in determining legal maternity. Pashigian terms this deeply embedded cultural and symbolic perspective “womb-centrism” (Pashigian 2009, p. 43).⁸ Gestation is the means through which women and children develop a particular form of maternal and filial devotion, the *tình cảm* of sentiment, care and sacrifice, as opposed to the piety or *hiếu* for a father inculcated through the social structures of patriliney. As Harriet Phinney (2009) notes, after the end of the Second Indochina War, the Vietnamese state celebrated images of biological maternity and blood ties. The perceived importance of these links was one reason that unmarried Northern women “asked for a child” (*xin con*) after the war not by adopting but by seeking a man with whom to have sex in the hope of becoming pregnant.

Although Thủy used the act of nursing to create a physical bond from which she and her daughter could develop *tình cảm*, the spectre of her daughter’s uterine attachment to her birthmother loomed. Thủy was afraid of two things. First, her daughter might want to reunite with her birthmother. Second, her daughter might develop an inferiority complex stemming from her sense that she could not be as loved as a biological child. While Thủy voiced these fears in terms of Vietnamese culture and with reference to the possible teasing that her daughter might endure from others, the underlying issue seemed to be that doubt might be cast upon the *tình cảm* between Thủy and her daughter. This doubt would be due not to the lack of a genetic connection between them, as might be the case in the United States, but to the absence of the uterine care and sacrifice that only a gestational mother could provide. The loss of that kind of foundational maternal love could make her daughter feel inferior and depressed, or it might result in her lashing out against and rejecting her adoptive family, particularly her mother.

These fears prompted Thủy to conceal the fact of adoption from her daughter and to provide a kind of moral education to ground her daughter, so that she might be ready to learn the truth at some point in the future. A social worker whom I know echoed this sense that an established sense of *tự hào*, pride in one's self, typically achieved by the age of sixteen or eighteen, was necessary to weather the revelation of truth.⁹ A nurse who sometimes arranged adoptions from the hospital in which she worked cautioned that this strategy might backfire, with adopted children often being spoiled by their adoptive parents.¹⁰

Silent Spectres

The lure of the uterine tie was a prominent theme in a second adoption story, told to me in bits and pieces by two good friends, an aunt and her niece. It involved a male family member who at the age of nearly sixty had married a woman of more than forty years of age. The wife had suffered from ovarian fibroids and was unable to have biological children. As the niece related their story,

Before the marriage, the husband already knew that she got uterine fibroids and they might not have their own children, but they came to hospital for treatment after that for several years until the doctors said “NO”.¹¹

The couple adopted a daughter soon thereafter. At the time that her two relatives shared the story with me, the girl was ten years old. Both the aunt and niece indicated to me separately that, because of the age of the parents, “everyone” knew that the daughter was adopted, but this fact was never talked about. It was clear that the daughter herself did not know. In fact, they recalled moments at family gatherings in which the secret might be touched upon and the adoptive mother reacted dramatically to squelch discussion.

Because I knew many members of this family, I asked the niece to see whether the mother might talk to me, relying on her to provide assurances that I would keep the interview entirely confidential. Perhaps my being embedded in the social networks of the family worked against me. The niece reported,

I asked my aunt about your request but she immediately refused. She doesn't want to say anything about her family matters and even doesn't want to touch the word "adopted children".¹²

In an earlier conversation, the niece ascribed her aunt's fear of mentioning adoption to the pull of the birthmother. To explain, she related another adoption story involving a childhood friend in Hanoi. The friend had learned she was adopted in the late 1970s, when her biological mother appeared at the schoolyard and identified herself as the child's mother. The child ran home terrified, and her mother admitted the truth. My friend reported the ensuing panic that the birthmother might reclaim her. It reached the point at which the girl developed a sense of her birthmother as a kind of malevolent spirit or ghost who might transport her to the other side, to her life prior to adoption. The parents responded by being very protective of the child and by limiting her social world — something that my friend described in English as "very particular".¹³

The fact that thirty years separated this case of birthmother panic from the others about which I heard reveals an ongoing sense of the fundamental link between womb and child, but the strategies employed to overcome it have changed. The construction of an almost supernatural threat in the aftermath of war in late 1970s Hanoi and the use of socialization techniques to inculcate a distance from others that bespoke an appropriate feminine restraint has yielded to Thủy's approach, one rooted in developmental psychology. That approach considers the risk of inferiority complexes, a child's possible perception of parental disciplining, and strengthening self-confidence and the adolescent ego through a programme of moral education.

Hạnh's Story

Whereas the birthmother in the previous stories is a distant, shadowy figure — a stranger with intimate claims of *tình cảm* on one's child — in Hạnh's experience, she is known and was, for a time at least, close at hand.¹⁴ Hạnh and her husband run a successful import-export business on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. They have two adult daughters and a son who was two and a half years

old when I met Hạnh in early 2011. An acquaintance of mine who was a close friend of Hạnh's had introduced us. Hạnh's son was in fact her husband's child with a young restaurant hostess. Hạnh had learned about the situation when the young woman was six months pregnant. She resolved that she would adopt the child and raise it as her own.

Throughout our interview, Hạnh cast doubt on the birthmother's morals and offered as proof of her bad character the birthmother's never having felt *tình cảm* for her biological child. She seemed only interested in money. Hạnh and her husband had arranged to support the mother financially during the pregnancy so that she would not have to work at the restaurant and could have access to healthcare. Then, when she handed the child over to Hạnh and her husband at the age of four months, the birthmother received thirty million đồng, just under US\$2,000 at the time, mostly intended to help her go to vocational school. Hạnh and the birthmother had decided all of this in advance, but the woman ultimately chose not to go to school and wound up getting married.

For Hạnh, these circumstances raised the risk that, although her son had not done anything wrong himself, he might bear the negative imprint of his biological parents' characters, and particularly that of his mother. Hạnh viewed her husband as far from blameless, but the routine nature of men's infidelity made Hạnh much more worried about the birthmother's avarice and lack of maternal sentiment. She later told me that she was not sure why the birthmother had not had an abortion, but she suspected that the woman had seen the pregnancy as an opportunity to get money or a house. She also noted that the woman's lack of deep feelings for the child could have been due to her being young, educated only through the ninth grade, or greedy. Or she might have consciously chosen not to bond with the child because she was hiding the situation from her family. Hạnh did not seem to entertain another possibility: that the birthmother might have forced herself to suppress feelings for a child that she knew that she would be relinquishing. Then again, the reasons did not seem to matter much to Hạnh, for whom the bottom line was

that the birthmother did not have any *tình cảm* for the child. This unnatural state made the birthmother morally suspect.

Hạnh also mentioned that the birthmother seemed ungrateful (*vô ơn*), a trait that can be particularly troubling in this context, as children's remembrance of the debt (*ơn*) that they owe to parents is a cornerstone of filial piety. That her son's biological mother neither expressed nor seemed to feel *ơn* could therefore mean that the son would lack proper morality, something that Hạnh resolved to address through concerted attention to building the boy's character. This goal had been a focus of the arrangement from the start. The money that Hạnh provided during the pregnancy had protected the physical health of the foetus, but it also meant that the birthmother did not have to work at the restaurant and thus insulated the foetus from a morally contaminating environment. Citing the phrase, "the father eats salt, the child is thirsty" (*đời cha ăn mặn, đời con khát nước*), Hạnh saw her son's poor character as an inherent risk of the situation. Only once the child had grown would she know how things had turned out.

Hạnh had developed her ideas about the child's relative innocence over time. "In taking care of the child, I determined that this baby isn't guilty of anything.... In the process of caring for him, I gradually came to have *tình cảm* for him." While it was hard to think of him as being just like her birth children, the process of making sure that he had everything that he needed had resulted in "true *tình cảm*". As evidence for this sentiment, she said that, if the child studied hard and her husband agreed, they would let him study abroad, just as had been the case for her two daughters.

Like the other women whom I interviewed, Hạnh invoked developmental psychology to explain why she would wait to reveal the child's origins to him. Perhaps he would be secure enough when he was nearly twenty, either going to university or almost finished. Crucial to this prospect was that the birthmother not be involved with him. She had visited the child a few times after the handover, but then the tie had to be broken. The two women had last spoken a few months earlier, at which point the birthmother thanked Hạnh

for all that she had done. She now had a child with her husband, who, like the rest of the woman's family, did not know about the earlier birth. The adoption had, however, caused some problems within Hạng's family. Her daughters had objected and had not yet formed as much *tình cảm* with their brother as Hạng had hoped. Her parents, meanwhile, accepted the child and its circumstances without much fuss.

Part of the arrangement with the birthmother centred on the paperwork; Hạng's name was to be on the birth certificate right from the start. Officially, Hạng was the mother. Ensuring this status would both secure Hạng's rights and protect the child from a truth that would cause him shame if he learned it too early. Meanwhile, to prevent many people from knowing the situation, Hạng bought a house in a new location.

While all of my conversations with Vietnamese adoptive parents focused on issues of discrimination or stigma between biological and adoptive children, Hạng's circumstances made this matter especially complicated. She repeatedly emphasized that she never held her child's origins against him. Returning again to the theme of blame, she declared, "This is clearly a story about adults, not a child." Never, she claimed, had she felt anything except perhaps that the situation was her husband's fault. The problem of *tình cảm* was between husband and wife because of his deception. If she thought that she would punish the child, she never would have adopted him. Meanwhile, having the child did seem to have changed her husband's behaviour. He did not go out as much. Chuckling, Hạng declared, "If he didn't change, I would have divorced him for good."

Her mention of divorce prompted me to ask what would happen to the child if they did divorce. Hạng did not hesitate a moment before saying that of course the child would go with his father because he was the biological father (*bố ruột*). If that happened, however, the child would again be a victim. With this son as with her two grown children, it was Hạng who attended to education and other needs, while their father did not pay any attention to them.

Towards the end of our discussion, Hạnh mentioned that it might seem that part of her family's situation had to do with its only having daughters and her husband's wanting a son. She recounted that she had raised that issue when her two daughters were young, but that her husband had said that a son was not necessary. Now, however, she realized that her husband had wanted a son and that maybe that had been part of the story all along. Meanwhile, for her part, Hạnh said that she in fact had more *tình cảm* with this child than with her daughters. The daughters had been born in the 1980s, when Hạnh and her husband worked for the state and were on a fixed income. Being older and financially secure, she now had more time to play with her son. They could also afford whatever the child needed, from higher quality milk to more toys. As a result, her son was better off both materially and spiritually.

Hạnh's story clearly differs from those in which the adopted child is not biologically related to one of the parents. In an earlier era, as noted above, her husband might have taken the birthmother as an additional wife, and Hạnh as the senior wife would have enjoyed privileges over the junior wife and her children. Or he might simply have delivered the child to his wife's care. The result here was similar to the latter outcome, but it is significant that the process through which it had been accomplished was one that Hạnh saw as adoption in which the child became her own. It involved erasing the birthmother legally and emotionally, and it required Hạnh to assume a legal and social maternal role that to the child, neighbours and officials would seem no different from that of a biological mother. Like other women pursuing adoption, Hạnh seemed motivated by a desire to preserve her marriage by binding her husband more closely to her, if not through the daily care for his son, then in the debt that he owed her for accepting his transgression.

The friend who introduced us saw Hạnh's story as a drama of women's domestic power, a power that is simultaneously emotional and financial. My friend declared that Hạnh did what she did to hold on to the business and to control her husband. She was worried, however, that now Hạnh was trapped by this power, committed to

caring for a child for whom, in the friend's view, she might not have quite the depth of *tình cảm* that she professed.¹⁵

The Gendered Narrative Work of Making Kinship Visible and Invisible

Thinking about how Hạnh and her husband might have handled the situation in an earlier time, one marked by different gender and kinship practices, highlights a central theme of all the adoption stories that I gathered. While the “neighbours know everything” assertion of the Ministry of Justice official might have applied to earlier, obviously visible forms of adoption, contemporary adoption to make visible a family of mother, father and child rests on making other kinship relations invisible, particularly those involving illegitimacy. This requires tremendous effort, and it is primarily women who perform the emotional, social and practical labour to make adoptive families socially intelligible by making adoption invisible. Their narratives about this labour in fact also perform labour, in that they contribute to the work that they seem merely to describe.

In a 2009 article, Sara Dorow and Amy Swiffen analyse narratives told by American parents of children adopted from China. As socially intelligible kinship rests on the presumed correspondence between biological and social family origins, “adoptive parents’ narratives foreground the kind of labor required when the gap in that origin is brought into focus” (Dorow and Swiffen 2009, p. 565). For parents in the United States who have adopted children from China, the idea of “Chinese-culture”, which Dorow and Swiffen hyphenate in order to emphasize its narrative currency, becomes a means to manage this demand for intelligibility. They find that Chinese-culture functions “as something that could be narrated, which in itself promises some degree of mastery over the knowledge gaps and racial difference that threaten social intelligibility” (Dorow and Swiffen 2009, p. 567). This narration is significant “precisely because it is performed at the (dis)juncture of blood and social origins” (ibid.).

In the Vietnamese narratives that I have collected, notions of *tình cảm* and moral or psychological education — glossed by terms such as *giáo dục* (education), *tâm* (soul, spirit, mind) and *tự hào* (self-pride) — similarly mediate the gap between adoptive families' biological and social origins. The centrality of the womb for establishing *tình cảm* between mother and child means that adoptive mothers seem most threatened by the gap between biological and social family origins, even as they may claim that it is men who do not want children who are “not their own”. In detailing their labour to establish *tình cảm* by suckling an infant, banishing a spectral birthmother or providing daily care for a husband's illegitimate child, the women seem to close this gap by asserting that they, too, can embody this bond and in so doing bind themselves to their children in proper mother–child relations. They assert that adoptive kinship is socially intelligible and legitimate on terms strikingly similar to that of biological kinship. In fact, the biological mother can be consigned to the shadows precisely because she did not display the *tình cảm* of a “real” mother. Yet, by reproducing the foundational physicality and intimacy of *tình cảm*, adoptive mothers might also ironically reinforce the normativity of biological motherhood, particularly uterine gestation and nursing, as the wellspring of maternal love. Fathers, who have enjoyed centuries of patrilineal ideology and social structure in which their recognition of children as heirs is sufficient to secure their status as recipients of filial piety, seem far better able to adapt to adoptive circumstances now, just as they had done in the past.

Dorow and Swiffen (2009) trace narratives of social intelligibility in a context of long-accepted heteronormative biological kinship in the United States. In that context, anxiety stems from the visible gap between social and biological kinship that is self-evident in the racial difference between white American parents and their adoptive Chinese children. While the anxiety over *tình cảm* that emerges in the narratives I collected reflects a similar inability to conform to normative expectations that biological and social kinship should be coextensive, those narratives reveal a deeper anxiety about the norm

itself. Namely, they reveal the implications of a relatively recent political-economic focus on the nuclear family headed by a conjugal pair, rather than an extended, multigenerational family, as the ideal unit for attending to children's physical and emotional needs.

I argue elsewhere (Leshkovich 2014*b*) that a responsabilization of the family as a fundamental economic unit and as the moral and affective incubator of the forms of personhood demanded of successful economic actors has accompanied the Vietnamese government's promotion of market socialism (see also Rose 1999, p. 266). A global rise in self-help and mental health expertise that has been particularly marked in late and post-socialist settings has buttressed this process of familialization (Matza 2009, p. 492; Nguyễn-võ 2008, p. 79; Ong 2006, p. 3; Rose 1999, p. 149; Yang 2015; Zhang 2015). Key to this dynamic is the conjugal pair and their companionate relationship. While the dynamic may thus seem like a celebration of modern, individualistic romantic love, the pair's primary role is in fact to imbue children with norms of responsible market behaviour such as self-discipline, efficiency and rationality and of traditional culture such as filial piety, gratitude and sacrifice.

That children are seen as necessary for the perpetuation of the husband–wife bond provides further evidence that companionate marriage is not in fact about adult romantic love or sexual desire, or at least not primarily so. When Hạnh's husband's extramarital sexual activity threatened their marriage, she responded, not by securing his fidelity, but by grafting her maternity on to his paternity. Because it occurs under the guise of adoption, Hạnh's legitimacy as a mother requires that she make invisible the work to establish this relationship. In making the child her own, on the birth certificate and in daily life, Hạnh makes invisible the nature of her husband's transgression. Keeping the secret is, as her friend told me, both the source of her power and something that traps her. For Thủy, the act of nursing her adopted daughter makes a claim to a physical intimacy, but one that also occurs secretly. She is not sure what happens with husbands and wives who have biological children, but she felt the need to close the door and make her nursing a secret — one that she only makes visible through narrative assertions of her maternal

bond that reproduce the ambivalence of its being not quite the same as biological maternity.

Through story, silence and deed, Thủy and Hạnh perform the kin-work to make their adoptive families real and socially intelligible. According to Carol Stack and Linda Burton, kin-work includes all the labour “that families need to accomplish to endure over time.... Kin-work regenerates families, maintains lifetime continuities, sustains intergenerational responsibilities, and reinforces shared values” (Stack and Burton 1994, pp. 34–35). While kin-work is collective, women perform much of the day-to-day labour of care, both because their status often depends on the well-being of their families and because they lack access to other forms of status that might allow them to resist the expectation that they will devote much of their energy to family needs (*ibid.*, pp. 37–38).

Several factors have combined to intensify the kin-work that Thủy, Hạnh and other Vietnamese adoptive mothers must perform. These factors include the conflation between womanhood and motherhood; increased emphasis, especially among actual and aspirational members of the urban middle classes, on nuclear family relationships as centring on nurturing, emotional attachments among members; and a sense that chief among these ties is a mother–child bond that naturally forms during gestation. They also include claims that childrearing requires adhering to scientifically grounded, modern principles of developmental psychology and shifting economic pressures. The pressures, combined with women’s greater access to education, lead women and men — again, especially in the middle classes — to delay having children, thus increasing the incidence of infertility.

Conclusion

This article began by relating questions raised by adoption as it traversed apparent cultural borders on the floor of Bến Thành Market. Different histories and different kinship expectations made adoption practices seem mutually unintelligible: foreigners who wanted girls, did not pay for children or expect them to become servants, and intended to love and socialize children across racial

differences; Vietnamese who seemed not to adopt, either in reality or in the eyes of the law. While an exhaustive comparison between the ideas and practices surrounding U.S. transnational and Vietnamese domestic adoption lies beyond the scope of this article, the narratives presented here should serve as provocation to move beyond the supposed gulf of cultural difference. Although shadowy, the outlines of contemporary adoption in Ho Chi Minh City suggest tantalizing points of convergence, as middle classes in the United States and in Vietnam both look to realize an ideal family, one based on emotional bonds between parents and children that unite a couple in companionate affection and shared responsibility.

Adoptive parents in the United States and Vietnam also seem to share a sense that adoptive kinship is more fragile than biological ties and to respond through efforts to enhance their children's sense of identity. In the United States, this ambivalence led in the past to adoptions frequently being closed and secret, with birth certificates legally revised to list adoptive parents, much as occurs in Vietnam today. In recent decades, adoption in the United States has become more open for a variety of reasons, including decreased stigma surrounding illegitimacy, psychological theories that emphasize the importance to children of knowing their origins, increased fascination with genetic heritage, and the visibility of adoption across racial lines that makes secrecy unrealistic. Even with openness, however, ambivalence about the disjuncture between biological and social kinship remains. Transnationally adopting parents in the United States embrace cultural heritage practices to shore up their children's identity and to provide a positive buffer against the racism that they are likely to experience as Asian Americans. For their part, Vietnamese parents emphasize moral education to build self-confidence and character, so that their children can withstand eventual disclosure of their adoption and any associated stigma. All of these goals involve extensive kin-work, which, in both Vietnam and the United States, is performed primarily by women.

This analysis therefore suggests the need to move beyond discussion of cultural or racial difference in transnational adoption, and beyond the stark dichotomy between sending and receiving

countries that that discussion both presumes and reproduces, to attend to how the relationship among gender, class and transnationally circulating kinship ideals shapes adoption practices wherever they occur. In Vietnam today, as in the past, adoption provides a means to answer a family's desire for a child or to resolve the status of a child born in socially unacceptable circumstances. But because adoption uncouples the affective from the biological, it offers a seemingly fragile foundation on which to build a family whose success is increasingly measured by the quality of emotional relationships presumed to be grounded in blood ties. Concealing the fact of adoption provides the opportunity to approximate this prevailing norm by making adoptive families seem as if they were biological. This recasting in turn shapes not just how others might view the family but also how family members themselves develop and experience their ties via ongoing interaction. Enmeshed in gendered dynamics of transparency and secrecy, adoptive kin-work, including the labour of narration chronicled here, demarcates the visible and invisible through which new class subjectivities, interpersonal relationships and forms of political economy are being forged in contemporary urban Vietnam.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Rydstrøm (2001) and Gammeltoft (2014, pp. 186–88).
2. The proportion of transnational adoptions generally declined over this period because of concern about Vietnam's compliance with international protocols. This concern brought two moratoria on U.S. adoptions from Vietnam, during 2003–6 and 2008–14. Statistics for 2003–8 were compiled from Bộ Tư Pháp (2009, p. 14); for 2009–10, from Bộ Tư Pháp (2010); for 2011, from Bộ Tư Pháp (2012*a*); for 2012, from Bộ Tư Pháp (2012*b*); for 2013, from Bộ Tư Pháp (2014); and for 2014, from Bộ Tư Pháp (2015).
3. Interview, 17 January 2008, Ho Chi Minh City.
4. For example, although the United States is known primarily as a “receiver” of transnational adoptees, a not insignificant number of African American children are adopted by Canadians and Europeans; see for example Brown (2013). This fact suggests that race plays a central role in shaping ideas about and practices of adoption, both domestic and transnational, in the United States.
5. The name is a pseudonym. All information and quotations in this section are from an interview conducted in Ho Chi Minh City, 9 January 2008.
6. Unable to lactate, Thủy worried that she would be ridiculed for putting the child to her breast.
7. *Hy sinh* is also a valued interpersonal ethic inculcated and expressed through language and bodily comportment (Shohet 2013, pp. 204–6).
8. For humanitarian reasons, Vietnam's National Assembly legalized surrogacy in 2014 for married couples, subject to the requirements that the couple have no children, that the surrogate be a relative of the couple, that the surrogate already have biological children, and that the surrogate only serve as such once.
9. Interview, 9 January 2008, Ho Chi Minh City.
10. Interview, 13 January 2008, Ho Chi Minh City.
11. Email message to author, 6 January 2008.
12. Email message to author, 14 January 2008.
13. Interview, 10 January 2008, Ho Chi Minh City.
14. The name is a pseudonym. All information and quotations in this section come from an interview conducted in Ho Chi Minh City, 26 January 2011.
15. Interview, 26 January 2011, Ho Chi Minh City.

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