Social exchange and the participation of voluntary associations in lifecycle events

Dang Thi Viet Phuong†

Abstract: In Vietnam, since the early twentieth century, a vibrant social life in village with a lot of activities conducted by various voluntary associations has been noticed. This continues to be an important feature in the social life in Vietnamese rural society in recent years when Luong (2010) notices that individuals seek to expand their social networks via joining local voluntary associations. This practice was also noticed in our study from 2007 to 2009 in Giao Tan commune (Nam Dinh province, the Red river delta). This paper studies how Vietnamese rural inhabitants practise social exchanges in the particular form of gift giving and receiving during lifecycle events. It also examine how voluntary associations participate in these events and the meaning they bring to their members as well as the host families. Data of this paper is based on 52 in-depth interviews with representatives of local authority and voluntary associations, as well as data from 187 wedding and funeral journals taken note by local inhabitants in Giao Tan commune. Our study finds that rural people usually participate in the gift exchange network through lifecycle events of their villagers. Involving in this network becomes an obligation, a reciprocal exchange among them. People do one another a favor and expect some future return. Besides the meaning of paying an in-turn debt, joining in the lifecycle events among villagers also help strengthen social cohesion. Rural people prefer going to the events by delegations to by individuals, as it brings more honor to the host families. It means that the family members have larger networks other than their primary ones of family and kinship. The presence of voluntary associations in these events is an example of such secondary networks, where they create, within the village or commune, social relations and social exchanges among their members and/or with broader villagers.

Keywords: social exchange, gift exchange, lifecycle events, voluntary associations, rural society of Vietnam

† Deputy Head, Department of Social Security and Social Work, Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences
[date of submission: December 29,2014][data of acceptance: January 30,2015]
Introduction
Many scholars have conducted research on social exchange through mutual support networks in rural communities Vietnam, such as Nguyen-Marshall (2004), Luong (2010), Shimane (2014), etc. These studies attempt to describe various forms of social exchange, or consider social exchange as a form of social capital, or study social networks in which people carry out social exchange activities.

Through the study of the participation of voluntary associations in the life-cycle events, this paper examines social exchange activities taking place in rural communities in the Northern Vietnam from the perspective of social exchange theory. The study tries to understand the nature of the exchanges in the rural communities, whether it is the negotiated exchange that involves bargaining and negotiation or it is the reciprocal exchange that primarily based on trust and affection among members of the community or within the same network.

Based on interviews with representatives of the voluntary associations and the examination of wedding and funeral journals taken note by local people in Giao Tan rural commune of the Red River Delta, the author finds that reciprocity is a principle for practising social exchange of rural people. Our study also shows that the involvement of voluntary associations in lifecycle events helps expand the scope of social exchange in rural communities.

1. Theoretical background, research techniques an research site

1.1. Theoretical background
This paper tries to examine the participation of rural people in lifecycle events from the light of exchange theory. Exchange theory views social behavior primarily in terms of the pursuit of rewards and the avoidance of punishment (and other forms of cost). In exchange theory, the basic unit of analysis is the relationship between actors. Individuals engage in relationship in order to meet their needs (Cook, 1992).

Homans (1958), father of social exchange theory, defines social exchange as the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons. In his explanation of social interaction, Homans shows how one’s behavior reinforces another’s behavior, and then, in return, the behavior of the latter also reinforces that of the former. The interactions between two persons or groups make up the social exchanges that are crucial in their social life. Blau (1986) also considers social exchange very important in each person’s social life. He focuses on the reciprocal exchange of extrinsic benefits and on the forms of association and emergent social structures that this kind of social interaction created. According

Voluntary associations in this paper are those of Vietnamese people who share the same characteristics of professions, hobbies, etc. and voluntarily organize together for their own interests. A voluntary association does not pursue profit and does not have legal personality. It mainly operates within the villages and commune, and does not have a vertical structure from central to local level.
to Blau (1964, p. 91) “social exchange… refers to voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typical do in fact bring from others.” The principle of social exchange is that “one person does another a favor, and while there is a general expectation of some future return, its exact nature is definitely not stipulated in advance” (Blau, 1986, p. 93).

This paper studies how people practise social exchanges in the particular form of gift giving and receiving. Marcel Mauss (1950) groups the behaviors of giving and receiving gifts into what he calls “gift exchange”. The author asserted that the aim of the exchange is to strengthen social solidarity and that, at a first glance, it seems that the “gift” presentation is voluntary and spontaneous, but in fact it is an obligation and universal. This point of view is confirmed with evidence from different sources. For example, the study of Baker (1999) on mutual support associations in France discovered that one of the roles of these associations is to connect members through the participation in the lifecycle rituals. Yan (1996), in a study on “the flow of gifts” in a village in China, also found the same situation when everyone is responsible for participating in the gift exchange network and that is the way people set up and develop social cohesion within the village.

1.2. Data and research site
Data from this paper is drawn from the author’s qualitative research on voluntary associations in the Red river delta of Vietnam. The study was carried out from 2007 to 2009 in two communes of Giao Tan (Nam Dinh province, Red river delta) and Dong Quang (Bac Ninh province, Red river delta). Data for this paper are those of 52 in-depth interviews with representatives of voluntary associations and local people of Giao Tan commune. The in-depth interviews were directly implemented by the author. Complementary to the qualitative study, a survey into gift exchange was conducted with the support of local collaborators. We collected 187 journals of lifecycle events of funeral and wedding. The journals took notes of the names, addresses and the amount of money that those people contributed. Local collaborators were asked to collect and copy the journals and then to work with the people holding those journals to learn about the relations of the gift presenters based on a data form that was created and instructed by the author.

Giao Tan is a coastal rural commune in Giao Thuy district, Nam Dinh province, located in southernmost area of Red river delta. Giao Tan is an alluvium area formed about 200 years ago and surrounded by paddy fields. The total area of Giao Tan is 504.5 hectares, of which 304 ha is used for paddy cultivation.

Giao Tan has totally 2,600 households with 8,200 inhabitants. Two main religions are

---

2 This research is within the joint study project of Vietnam and France on “Social network in rural areas: Construction and Employment of the network in a transforming economy” in Giao Tan commune (Nam Dinh province) and Dong Quang commune (Bac Ninh province) from 2006 to 2009.
Buddhism and Christianity. Christian followers account for 5 percent of inhabitants. People live in clusters with 84 kinships. Some kinships have only 3 to 5 male adults while others may have up to 200. As for age structure, 73 percent of Giao Tan’s population is at working active age. This is considered a golden era for economic change where the number of people who are working is more than doubled than that of people who are not working.

Giao Tan is a typical agricultural commune, with high percentage of local laborers working as small-scale agricultural farmers (95 percent). There are a few secondary small-scale jobs such as knitting, bead-threading, eye-lash making that yields little income. To earn a living and improve living standard, many people have left their home for temporary jobs in big cities.

As for agricultural structure, farming constitutes major account (approx. 70 percent). Gross food production of the commune in 2010 mounted 3,482 tons, annual yield of rice reached 11.454 ton per hectare (People's Committee of Giao Tan commune, 2011). At current pricing, annual income from paddy cultivation is 70 million VND per hectare, estimated annual income from paddy cultivation in entire commune is 21.28 billion VND (approx. 1 million US dollars). Self-subsistence is typical of Giao Tan people’s life. In general, aspiration of residents is still restrained in fundamental needs. Despite the fact that starvation is absent, living standard of local residents is merely a little above the poverty line.

2. Social exchange through lifecycle events

The lifecycle rituals are in fact the rituals of solidarity and part of the gift and feast exchange (Kleinen, 1999). Visits to the sick, condolence offerings at funerals, joy sharing at weddings, housewarming parties, etc. are how people participate in and/or maintain social relations in the village. In this paper, we focus only on two important events in each person’s life: the funeral and the wedding.

In Vietnamese custom, the funeral is considered public issue while the wedding is rather domestic. Vietnamese people feel the responsibility to come to a funeral. They consider that “death is the end of everything”. When a person dies, everyone come to offer incense and pay the final tribute to the deceased. Meanwhile, a wedding is a domestic issue, people come there only when invited. Therefore, the success of a funeral speaks much of the deceased and his/her families in the eyes of the surroundings. This situation is also recognised in China (Yan, 1996). It seems to be similar in other Asian countries as well, while Shimane (2012) finds that funerals are an extremely important social event.

---

3 According to unofficial statistics from the authority, approx. 24% of the work force leave for cities to earn their livings.

4 Estimated average annual income of local laborers is 5 million VN dongs, which is little higher than new poverty line of applied from 2010 (400,000 VND/person in rural areas). Families with spouses or children working far away have better income. Communal statistics indicate average annual income in Giao Tan is 10 million VN dongs per person, which includes transferred income from those working far from home.
For Vietnamese rural people, it is the honor when people visit and offer congratulations or condolences. In fact, the more associations and people visit the family during lifecycle events, the higher the family’s prestige is. That is because it shows the network of relations of the family and family members, which brings the respect from the outsiders. A wide network of ties means the high prestige for the family: “When people visit the family of the event, it shows how wide the family’s network of relations is.” (GT18, 2007). “If we are members of associations, when our family are in troubles, they will come to us. For example, when my parents were sick, we had delegations of associations come to visit. It’s our great honor.” (GT29, 2009).

People present to the families of both weddings and funerals a certain amount of money and the families carefully keep the information in their journals. The information kept consists of the names and addresses of the gift presenters (in some cases, people also note down the relation between of the presenters and the receivers) and the amount of money presented. The amount of money depends on the relations between the presenters and the receivers. In general, if the amount is VND 50,000, it means they are neighbors; from VND 100,000 to 300,000, they are friends, depending on how close they are. For relatives, the amount may vary from VND 500,000 to several million Vietnam dongs, depending on the economic situation of the presenters and the blood relations to the receivers.

In Giao Tan commune, the “host” of the event is not a fix person. In each household, there exist different relations including those of the husband and wife and the children (sons, sons-in-law, daughters, and daughters-in-law), etc. In an event of the family (such as funeral), each member of the family can be a “host” to the extent of his/her own relations. Each family member keeps his/her own journal for each event. Thus, each family member keep a journal besides the common one which records the money that people offer to the family in general, not to any particular family member. When visiting the family, people have to determine their relations with the “host” by noting down the amount of offering and relations with the “host” in the family right at the desk where visitors’ journals are taken note. Each journal has one person in charge, responsible for noting down the amount the visitors “offer”. At each desk, the visitors give an amount of money and register his/her name (and relations with the host if needed, if they come in person) or the name of the institution/organization (if they come in delegation) to the responsible person. Only delegations, not individuals, are announced on the loud speakers to come into the house to do the funeral ritual.

5 According to Nguyen Van Huyen, the traditional society of Vietnam still “lays focus on social expenses.” For many occasions such as giving birth to a son (not daughter), daughter’s or son’s weddings, death of father or mother, it all requires people to hold parties for the whole village, sometimes for the whole commune or district, etc.” (Nguyen Van Huyen, 1995, p. 30).

6 While in other localities, like in Dong Quang commune (Tu Son district, Bac Ninh province), for each event, the family has only one journal that is kept by the eldest son of the family. He is also the one to hold the gift money presented for the event and be responsible for the funeral expenses and return the “gifts” later to other families. The second-born son can also make another journal, but is not allowed to keep the gift money.
Evidence from our observations with these lifecycle events finds a sense of obligation associated with the visits. The return of the amount of money (in kind previously) is an obligation and no one can evade it. The significance of this obligation is denoted by different words of the locality such as “repay”, “to pay in-turn debt” (GT32, 2009).

The “budget” for visits and offerings accounts for a considerable proportion of each household’s income. For a funeral in Giao Tan, a person may spend up to VND 500,000 (equivalent to the amount of a close relative) to pay the “in-turn debt.” That VND 500,000 will go to different journals at the funeral depending on the relations of the person with the family of the deceased. If the deceased is the neighbor of the person, the person spends VND 50,000 and this amount is recorded in the common journal of the wife or husband of the deceased. In case the person is the classmate or schoolmate of the daughter of the deceased, he can spend another VND 100,000 recorded to the journal of the daughter. Supposing the person did the military service together with the eldest son of the deceased, he may add another VND 100,000 to the journal of the eldest son. If the person is now also the workmate of the second son of the deceased, another VND 100,000 should be added to the journal of the second son. The person’s wife is in the same Dancing Club with the wife of the deceased’s eldest son; then, another VND 100,000 may be spent to the journal of the eldest son. At the same time, the person’s wife is also the classmate of the wife of the deceased’ second son, another VND 100,000 is spent to the journal of the second son. Eventually, for the neighboring relations alone, the person has to spend as much as VND 550,000 for the funeral, not to mention any kinship with the deceased’s family, for which the person needs to spend at least another VND 300,000 to several VND millions. It should be noted that at the time of the survey, the average income (based on the total income of the household, including the amount sent home by the people working away from the village) in Giao Tan was approximately VND eight million/person/year. When compared, the “gift” for the funeral accounts for a significant proportion of the household’s budget, especially when it must be spent entirely in cash.

Although the primary purpose of the gift exchange is to create (or reinforce) social links, that does not mean that the “in-turn” money is absolutely of no significance. This is clearly expressed in the way the villagers consider the “current prices” when they repay the “in-turn debt”. Usually the amount of money returned must be higher than, or at least equal to, the amount received before. The action of gift giving is an investment, and people believe that they will be able to get the return someday. The return of “debt” is considered an obligation. The action of such gift exchange is not only significant in this rural commune, but in other Asian countries also acknowledge this concept of social exchange (Shimane, 2014, p.45).

There are a lot of dialect words related to such action of gift exchange are used. Attending an event and presenting money as “gift” is called “contributing tontine money” (đi dòng phường), or “paying tontine money” (nộp tiền phường), or “going to the tontine” (đi phường). The word “tontine” denotes an organization where credit is rotated among local participants like money guilds or gold guilds. Finally, the phrase “making collapsed a tontine” (đổ phường, ie. liquidating a tontine) is used in the sense that the event will bring to the “host” an amount
of money.

“When a household have a funeral, we say that the household is making collapsed a tontine. Last time, our grandmother’s funeral brought over VND 20 million⁷. Excluding the funeral cost, we still had VND 15-16 million left. However, we need to pay later. The act only brings prestige to our family. For the money, later we have to return in other events” (GT40, 2009).

Villagers highly appreciate the money gained after each ceremonial event. This can be understood if one notices the amount of money collected, which sometimes amounts to several tens of million VND, a huge sum now in the rural areas of the Red River Delta, especially for Giao Tan, which is a poor commune⁸.

3. Participation of voluntary associations in lifecycle events

The participation of voluntary associations in lifecycle rituals is only one part of gift and feast exchange among families, relatives, neighbors, etc. However, the data gathered in Giao Tan show that there is a significant number of visits of voluntary associations. The data analysis of the record journals provided by local families show that voluntary associations and other associations account for 9.2% of the visits to those events.

The activities of visiting, congratulation and homage as well as the regulations on gifts are quite similar among voluntary associations in Giao Tan commune. Usually, associations have their own funds, which are used to visit members and their families in case of illness or accidents or in other lifecycle events. Gifts are normally a kilo of sugar and a condensed milk tin, equivalent to about VND 20,000. In case of a member’s father or mother’s death, offerings are incense, candles and a black offering (lễ đen)⁹. The offerings are small in value, then they

---

⁷ Equivalent to approximately 1000 US dollars.
⁸ Many scholars have discussed the form of “social assistance” for needy peasants from social organizations. Woodside (1971), for example, discussed the visits and support to sick members, the financial lend to needy members, offering to a member’s funeral, or training for members. He noted that even in the time of extremely loose social link (post-colonial period), the association taking care of members’ family businesses still experience strong and steady operation. The association aimed to partly cover the funeral or wedding expenses for the members in the village. Another author, Nguyen-Marshall (2004), also agrees to that point of view when emphasizing the link between the poverty in the rural life and the role of associations and unions. When considering the function and significance of the mutual support associations under the French colonial period in Vietnam, the author believes that that the mutual support associations have an important role to play in the life of ordinary peasants. It is because these associations not only provided means to earn money for these families, but also helped maintain and strengthen cultural identity, local customs and practices, and social relations. For the middle-class peasants to low-income people, mutual support associations make a form of insurance and guarantee. Peasants can seek support for their important lifecycle anniversaries (Ibid, pp. 282-283). As a survival strategy and community building organization, mutual support associations provide important capabilities to solve a number of contemporary issues related to poverty (Ibid, p. 277).
⁹ Black Offering is the amount of money given together with other offering with the aim to help the family hold the funeral. The amount of the offering varies depending on different specific associations.
are rather symbolic. However, what the host households expect in these circumstances are not such offerings, but the presence of association members and other villagers. It means they are members of the community, they mean something to the surrounding and they are cared.

Take a funeral in Giao Tan for example. According to village’s customs, the more mourners come and the longer the funeral lasts, the more prestigious the host feels. “First, the number of mourners is bigger if they come in delegations. Second, it is more honorable to receive delegations than individuals” (GT29, 2009). A long-lasting funeral means there are more associations since only associations, not individuals, can pay the deceased the last respect in the form of a ritual. The rituals include the calling of the association’s name, the placing of offerings, the walk around the coffin and the paying of condolences. It takes about 5 minutes for each delegation to complete all rituals. An informant reported on his parents’ funerals as follows: “At my parents’ funerals, four voluntary associations came to pay their last respects, plus the Party cell, so five delegations in total. Also there were delegations from my father’s and my mother’s sides. How honourable we felt” (GT26, 2009).

Individuals often share their condolences by contributing money and having their names noted to the funeral journals of whom they have relations with (these journals are usually placed on the desks located by the doorway with the presence of family members to take note of the name and the amount of money contributed to each family member’s journal). Different from what is imagined, the atmosphere in a funeral here hardly shows the feelings of sadness from mourners. What important to them is to get to the desk and have their names noted down in the journals. Funeral journals are usually as many as the number of family members. Therefore, for a large family, it often gets crowded and chaotic at these desks as people queue and push to find the exact journal of the family member they want to contribute. Sometimes, they argue and barge, asking to withdraw from the wrong journal or adding more money.

As mentioned earlier, there are two types of journals, a common journal and individual journals for each family member. Mourners are to get their names written down in the journal of whom they have relation, and they will wait and be paid perhaps with the same amount on similar events. Money noted in the common journal will not have to be paid back. According to our observation, people tend to use individual journals. It means that the “money” is expected to be returned to mourners. If the deceased’s family is in difficulty, mourners are more likely to contribute the family journal, which means the money is voluntarily “supported” without being returned.

During our study in the research site, when attending a funeral of a man died in an electricity accident, the author was instructed to contribute the money in the common journal and explained that his family is very poor and that the author has no relation with the dead. Though attending as an individual, the author was introduced as a delegation so that the author could pay homage to him. The name of the author’s workplace was announced so that people would know “there is a representative from Hanoi attending the funeral, to make it more honorable” (as the cadre of communal cultural affairs said). To make it a delegation, a path guide and a representative of the commune people’s committee accompanied the author to the
altar and to offer the black offering. Also, they instructed the author to write the workplace’s name instead of individual’s name on the envelope of money.

In the case of association’s visit, each member’s money is noted carefully, and all is put in one envelope named the association. This shared money is called “black offering”. “Black offering” is placed on the altar and then received by the host. All contributions are then noted down in the respective journal of the family member who is member of such association. The association’s name is often announced on loudspeakers “so that all villagers would know such family has such association paying homage” (GT40, 2009). The association’s representative’s name is also introduced. The solemnity of an association’s visit to a funeral is described in details in the following extract:

“An association’s shared money is written down in the “black offering” (lễ đen), not in funeral journals. There is a reception desk outside for mourners to register their comings. Information about the association’s name, with whom it has relation and kinds of offerings is all noted down. Prior to the rituals, the association’s name is called, for example “the association of high school alumni of Mr. A”. Then the representative puts the offering on the altar, lights up an incense. Each association is to complete all rituals in about 5 minutes. When my grandmother died, there were more than 70 associations of whom my parents and relatives are members. The funeral visits lasted from 3pm until 9pm, but some still had to wait.” (GT40, 2009)

The social exchange in this case is not only a pure act of reciprocity, but also means prestige. The more associations to come, the more honorable the host household feels. This is particularly important given that Vietnamese people, like other Asian societies, are highly face-saving (Shimane, 2012, p. 29).

Conclusion

The actual situation of gift exchange and the participation of voluntary associations in lifecycle events present a vivid social life of rural inhabitants in the Red river delta. Lifecycle events are a tester to the solidarity among villagers. Through these events villagers practise social exchange and reciprocity. The activities of paying visits to the ill, offering to a funeral or sharing the joy of a wedding, congratulating to a new born are the ways for villagers to participate in and/or maintain social relations within the village. Being a member of an association is also a way to integrate into village’s social life. By joining an association, participating other members’ lifecycle events with respect to the rules of social exchange, rural people can enlarge their social network beyond their primary groups of family and kinship (Dang Thi Viet Phuong, Bui Quang Dung, 2011).

One of the function of voluntary associations is the mutual assistance among members. People living in the village are expected to help one another. Collaboration with each other is a standard to be a villager. Our analysis has shown the existence of the “sense of responsibility” attached to the activities that form the “give and get return” relation among members. No member can neglect the obligation of visiting (with gifts) or returning what they get from others.
This exchange principle of “returning a debt” is performed not only in terms of gifts, but also shows how people corelate and strengthen their relations.

References
Dang Thi Viet Phuong and Bui Quang Dung, 2011, “Các tổ chức xã hội tự nguyện ở nông thôn đồng bằng sông Hồng: Liên kết và trao đổi xã hội” (Voluntary associations in the Red river delta: Social cohesion and exchange), Xã hội học (Sociology), No. 4/2011, pp. 31-45.
Giao Tan commune in 2011.


Tran Tu. 1984. Co cau to chuc cua lang Viet co trayen o Bac bo (The organizational structure of Vietnamese villages in the Tonkin), Hanoi: Nha xuat ban Khoa hoc xa hoi.
