SUPERVISOR AND ACCOMPLICE
Social life and sexual behaviour of construction workers in Hanoi

A Master’s Thesis

Submitted by
Bui Thi Thanh Thuy

Supervisor
dr. Han ten Brummelhuis

Amsterdam Master’s in Medical Anthropology
Medical Anthropology Unit
Faculty of Social Science and Behaviour
University of Amsterdam
The Netherlands

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all the people who helped me to complete this thesis. I am indebted to all of them:

Dr. Han ten Brummelhuis, my research supervisor, who gave me much valuable advice.

Dr. Robert A. Miller, Executive Director of Population Council, and Ms. Nicolette van Duursen of AMMA who provided critical remarks to my research proposal.

Ms. Sun Ae Lee, Dr. Vu Kieu Dzung, and Ms. Tran Thu Ha of Population Council and Mrs. Trudy Kannis and Mr. Peter Mesker of AMMA who supported me over the course of my study.

Peter Shenk, who helped to revise my use of English.

All of my informants who were willing to share their own stories.

The Population Council and the Ford Foundation, who both supported my study in the Netherlands.
Abstract

This study is about rural-urban migrants who work as construction workers for private employers, known as cai, in Hanoi. Cai are men who receive construction projects and hire workers to implement them. A group of workers who work for a cai can often include many men from the same village. These migrant construction workers are a new phenomenon in Vietnamese society and are seen to be a result of Doi moi, the economic reform process that started in the country in 1986.

This thesis investigates the social life of these migrant workers and analyses cultural factors that affect their sexual behaviour and relationships. The study took place in Hanoi over a period of six months, from August 2004 to January 2005. I conducted participant observation on two key groups, totalling 65 workers, and compared the situation between them. Qualitative interviews were conducted on 24 workers, two female cooks and the two cai of the key groups. Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with 24 other workers from three other groups. The workers’ social life in the city was examined with a great deal of consideration of the relationship among peers/co-workers in the same group, and the relationship between the cai and his workers. Furthermore, the intimate communication between the workers and their wives as well as the norms of their home village regarding the husband’s role and sexuality are explored in order to gain insight into the sexual behaviour of the workers. The analysis is based on the theory of social control.

The findings show that both cai and peers play important roles in the sexual activities and relationships of the workers in the city. In the first key group, the cai and most of the workers came from the same village. The men were paid their salary at the end of the year. News about the group travelled quickly to the home village. As a result, the workers were reluctant to buy sex in the city because they were afraid of developing a bad reputation. Moreover, if a worker was extravagant, his wife or parents could ask the cai not give him any money while he was working on a project. In this way, the workers’ behaviour was controlled by their traditional network of peers, the cai and their wives. A worker’s peers acted primarily as his supervisors, since they were capable of conveying news of his behaviour back to the village.

In contrast, many of the workers in the second key group came from two villages, while the cai came from yet another village. The workers did not trust their cai and expected to be paid their wage at the end of each project. The cai wanted to delay payment as long as possible,
and thus gave his workers smaller advances to keep them happy. Many workers in the group admitted that they or their peers had bought sex in the city. Peers sometimes shared a sex worker or tools for seeking out sex services, such as providing each other a bicycle or a nice shirt. In the case of the second key group, peers acted as accomplices. But at the same time, peers remained supervisors as well. When Thu, a female worker in the group, had sexual relations with Cuong, the son of the cai, and some other workers, peers relayed the news on to her husband, who subsequently asked to her to return home.

The workers’ fear of a bad reputation is largely related to their social norms of sexuality and a husband’s role. A husband is expected to be the breadwinner of the family. As a result, a husband will develop a bad reputation if he is extravagant. However, from the workers’ point of view, unlike for women, it is acceptable for men to have many sexual partners. A worker who participates in extra-marital sex, therefore, only gets a bad name when he spends too much money. If a worker sometimes has casual sex or a non-serious relationship, his wife, his peers and the cai might not object too strongly. This shows that the control mechanism of the workers’ traditional social network tolerates casual sex.

In the concluding section, I recommend that HIV/STD prevention programmes on migrant construction workers should take the role of peer influence into consideration. By promoting the role of peers as supervisors and diminishing their roles as accomplices, peer education programmes will help to reduce casual sex among the workers, the behaviour that might put them at risk. In addition, changes in social norms could lead to positive changes in the workers’ behaviour. If men’s involvement in extra-marital sex is no longer acceptable according to the social norms, the above control mechanism will also discourage the workers from engaging in casual sex. Furthermore, the extended discussion about the workers’ attitude towards condom use suggests the need for research on the communication between sex workers and their clients about condoms, as well as on the quality of condoms found in cheap sex services.

Key words: Sexual behaviour, extra-marital relationships, peers, social control, social network, HIV/STD prevention.
**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMMA</td>
<td>Amsterdam Master's in Medical Anthropology</td>
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<tr>
<td>FGDs</td>
<td>Focus group discussions</td>
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<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</td>
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<tr>
<td>IUD</td>
<td>Intrauterine Device</td>
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<tr>
<td>STIs</td>
<td>Sexually transmitted infections</td>
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<tr>
<td>STDs</td>
<td>Sexually transmitted diseases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnamese Term</td>
<td>English Translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cai</td>
<td>Private employers who hire workers and then directly supervises them on a construction project.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dau canh</td>
<td>A reliable worker of a cai who assigns the jobs to the workers and keeps an eye on the technical aspect of the project when the cai is absent from the construction site.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doi moi</td>
<td>The economic renovation process in Vietnam that was started in 1986. Through Doi moi, the planned economy was restructured into a market economy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giam sat ky thuat</td>
<td>Specialists who supervise technical quality of construction projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phan hoan thien</td>
<td>The second phase of a construction project in which a house is decorated after it is built in the first phase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phan tho</td>
<td>The first phase of a construction project in which a house is built.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu (also xach vua)</td>
<td>Construction workers who are in charge of making mortar and preparing materials for tho.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thau</td>
<td>Construction contractors who sign the contract with clients to take on construction projects. A thau might directly hire workers and implement the construction project himself. In this case, thau might be a state company or a cai. A thau might sign a sub-contract with a cai (B') who directly conducts the project. Or, a thau might sign a sub-contract with another thau (B'') and then B'' signs another sub-contract with a cai (B''') who implements the project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tho</td>
<td>Construction workers who are in charge of building and plastering the wall and making decorations for the house.</td>
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*Tho hoan thien* skilled and experienced construction workers who do the decoration for a house and other complicated jobs that need the most expertise. They often work for construction project only during *phan hoan thien*.

*Xach vua* see *phu*. 
Chapter 1

Introduction

Three weeks before I finished this thesis, a Vietnamese newspaper reported the following event:

At 12:10 hrs on 14 April 2005, a concrete stage and its pillars collapsed at the construction site of the project for upgrading the water production factory of Cau Do (Da Nang). Seventeen workers fell and were buried in the mortar and material of the stage. Digging for the victims lasted for more than one hour. Nine of the seventeen victims suffered serious head and spinal injuries and were taken to the hospital of Da Nang.

Almost all of the victims were from the commune of Cong Thanh, Yen Thanh District, Nghe An province. They were invited to work on the project by a fellow villager, Nguyen Van Be\(^1\), and have been working on it since May 2004 at a wage of 40,000 dong\(^2\) per day.

The stock company responsible for the project, Vinaconex 10, had not signed any labor contracts; nor had it arranged insurance for the workers\(^3\).

As a researcher who had just finished six months of fieldwork on construction workers, I was moved by this news. Although the event was not immediately related to the topic of this study, it reminded me of all the workers that I had had a chance to contact: their story, their talks and their concerns. The accident demonstrates the difficult and risky circumstances these migrant construction workers have to operate under.

The target group

This study is about construction workers (tho ne, in Vietnamese) who work in the informal construction sector in Hanoi. They are migrants who have left their home village for the city to work for private employers, called cai. Although their work regulations and conditions will

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\(^1\) The name was changed.
\(^2\) Exchange rate May 2005: 1 US$ = 15,800 Vietnamese dong
be described in more detail in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I would like to sketch some points that aroused my interest and led me to conduct a study on these workers.

Individuals who receive construction projects and hire workers to carry them out are called *cai*. Unlike state employers, *cai* are individuals who do the business on their own. Each group of workers who work for a *cai* is usually comprised of people who come from a specific rural areas. Many of them are fellow-villagers and/or relatives. A *cai* may also come from the same village as his workers.

Almost all workers are men, although some groups of workers may have a few female workers or female cooks. Thus, they live in an almost all-men environment. In the city, the workers live and work at the construction site. As a result, their living conditions are insecure and mobile. Moreover, as shown in the example above, they do not have labor contracts and/or health insurance. The workers only get a wage based on the number of days they have worked. As will be described in the following chapter, the workers do not get their wage monthly, but either at the end of a construction project or at the end of the traditional Vietnamese year, depending on the situation and the relationship between a *cai* and his workers. It is possible for a worker to receive advance payment from their *cai* if he needs to buy something in the city. This advance payment is deducted from his overall wage.

As mentioned above, these construction workers are confronted with many risks: risks of on-site accidents, risks of being exploited because of a lack of labor rights and risks of health problems caused by noxious construction materials, for instance. As migrants, they face additional risks: a psychological unbalance caused by living away from home and working under stressful conditions, and the sexual risks caused by an increased incidence of casual sex.

This study focuses on this last issue, the issue of their sexual health. As part of this, it will be seen whether they involve themselves in extra-marital relations and, if so, what factors or circumstances led to this and whether this put them at risk of HIV/STDs.
Migration and sexual risks

Several studies have shown the link between population mobility and the spread of HIV/STDs (Caldwell 1997:51, Renard 1997:82, Carballo & Nerukar 2001:557). It is evident that migrant groups are more vulnerable to HIV/STDs because of an increase in casual sex among them (Fernandez 1998, Moodies 1994, MacQueen 1996, Chirwa 1997). Therefore, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of factors that lead to an increase in casual sex among migrants.

From an anthropological perspective, mobility leads people across the boundaries of their own group into unknown sexual cultures. This may create new contexts of behaviour, new codes for sexual conduct and lead to changes in sexual behaviour that impact their health. Movement typically involves new chances for sexual encounters (Herdt, 1997:7). By providing opportunities for broader social and behavioural changes, mobility makes migrants susceptible to STIs/HIV infections. Based on this standpoint, anthropologists raise the importance of cultural factors in shaping sexual practices relevant to HIV transmission and prevention (Parker, 2001:163). Therefore, in order to find effective solutions to sexual health problems among migrants and for STD/HIV prevention programmes, it is necessary to understand the socio-cultural factors and the context in which specific groups of migrants live (Parker, 2001:166, Renard, 1997:81).

As far as I knew when I started this study, no research—especially no anthropological research—has been done about sexual health problems among migrant construction workers in Vietnam. The vulnerable situation of construction workers raised my concern about the risks to their sexual health, especially their risk of HIV/STDs. And, based on this need to understand the social and cultural factors that influence migrants’ sexual practices, my interest focused on analysing the circumstances that affected the workers’ involvement in extra-marital relations while they are away from home.

Objectives of this study

The main objective of this study is to understand the life of migrant workers who work in the informal construction sector in Hanoi and use this knowledge to analyse the cultural and social factors that affect their involvement in extra-marital relations.

An understanding of the workers’ lives, including their social life in the city, the relations among peers in the same group, and the relationship between the cai and his workers will help
to contextualize factors that affect their sexual behaviours and relationships. Furthermore, the intimate communication between the workers and their wives, as well as the norms of their home village regarding the husband's role and sexuality are explored in order to gain a deeper insight into these factors. In achieving the main objective, this study explores the following themes:

1. The life of the workers in the city, including their working and living conditions and the way the workers get their wage.
2. The workers' sexual behaviours when they work away from home.
3. The roles of peers and cai in the workers' involvement, or lack thereof, in extra-marital relations.
4. The workers' perceptions of the role of the husband and the intimate communications between the workers and their wives about extra-marital relations.

Theory and main findings

The theory that was used to guide the researcher during this study was the theory about social control. It is the theory that is usually used to explain the behaviour of migrants. The term 'social control' in general covers a wide range of meanings and refers to all factors and structural forces that shape and constrain the activities and decisions of individuals. In other words, social control is anything and everything that controls human behaviour and maintains social order (Ross 1901; Gibbs 1994: 49).

It is said that social control in migrant communities is often limited. This is usually explained by two factors: the role of the peer group and the lack of control from the home community. The separation of migrant workers from their families and the transient nature of their employment and residence cut temporary migrants from both normative and formal social control mechanisms. According to several authors (Renard 1997:80; Vanlandingham & Grandjean 1997:132; Fernandez 1998), migrant workers, away from the control of their family and their community, find themselves more anonymous in their new surroundings and free of the pressures of social conditioning. They are no longer controlled by social norms and values of their home village. This situation gives them a new form of freedom and encourages them to do many things that they may not do at home. They have the chance to develop new relationships and establish new social networks to amuse themselves and reduce their
loneliness. All of this may cause migrants to put themselves at risk because it creates a conducive environment for sexual encounters or drug use.

Under the new conditions, without their traditional social networks and cultural values, migrant workers are more influenced by peer pressure, the influence of other migrants who live and work in the same situation. It is usually the case that when people live away from home and work in a stressful environment, peer pressure is usually stronger – their peers are their closest form of support and, as a result, they tend to stick together. A new lifestyle may emerge. If there are opportunities for entertainment, they will take them, money permitting. Men are thought to be less responsible than women are and it is thus alright if they spend their earnings more frivolously (Tan 2003; Chantavanich 2003).

In this thesis, however, it is shown that the social control among some specific groups of migrant construction workers was quite strong and affected the workers' involvement in extra-marital relations during the time they worked away from home. The control mechanism was run by a traditional social network of peers, the cai and the workers' wives. By conducting participant observation on the two key groups of workers and interviewing people of these two groups, the researcher could compare the groups with each other.

In the first key group, almost all workers, including the cai, came from the same village. In this group, the workers were reluctant to access sex services because of the fear of developing bad reputation. The workers said that information about the group was transmitted very fast to their home village. As a consequence, anyone who behaved ‘badly’ would quickly acquire a bad reputation.

In the second key group, the cai came from a different village than his workers. The group was divided into two subgroups of workers who came from two different villages. Some workers did not belong to either of these subgroups, coming themselves from different villages. Many workers in this group admitted that they or their peers had used sex services in the city. The peers in a subgroup went out together, shared tools for seeking sex such as a bicycle and even shared sex workers. At the same time, peers also who leaked sensitive information about other peers in the same subgroup to their home village. This showed that peers can play both the roles of accomplices and supervisors.

In comparing the two key groups, it was clear that the more fellow villagers there were in the group, the stronger the social control was of peers as supervisors. Likewise, the fewer number of peers that were fellow villagers, the less possibility there was for information to be leaked.
Through these findings about the role of peer pressure, it is suggested that HIV/STD prevention programmes for construction workers should apply peer education in order to make most use of the positive role of peers as supervisors. In this way, the traditional social network among the workers can be used as an effective tool in HIV/STD prevention.

The *cai* and the way in which workers were paid also affected the workers’ involvement in extra-marital sex. In the first key group, the workers were only given their wages at the end of the traditional Vietnamese year. In several cases, the *cai* gave the wage directly to the workers’ wives. The *cai* was responsible to the worker’s family for his wage. If he gave a worker too many payments in advance, at the end of the year the worker would only receive a small amount of money. His wife or parents could then blame the *cai* for this and would not allow the worker to work for that *cai* the following year. Moreover, if a worker was extravagant with money, his wife or parents could ask the *cai* not to give him advance payments unless he had a very good reason for doing so. This helped to deter the workers from accessing sex services in the city.

In contrast, the workers in the second key group did not trust their *cai* and they expected to get their wages at the end of the construction project. The *cai*, for his part, wanted to delay having to distribute their wages. In order to deal with their complaints, he gave them many advance payments. This money gave the workers more of an opportunity to visit sex workers. Since the workers did not have labour contracts, the relationship between them and the *cai* was based on trust, as one might expect. In the second group, the *cai* lost the trust of his workers when they did not get their wage on time. But in the first group, the *cai* tried to maintain the trust of his workers and their families because he was the fellow villager. Otherwise, he would not only lose his workers but also get a bad reputation in the village. This shows how the relationship between the *cai* and his workers affected the way the workers were given their wages, and how this determined the worker’s probability of buying sex. Furthermore, the *cai* who was from the same village as his workers also participated in a social control mechanism by managing workers’ expenses in the city.

Although the fear of getting a bad reputation was one of the reasons that discouraged the workers from extra-marital sex and relationships, a worker who participated in this only suffered a bad reputation if he was extravagant. Through information from focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews, I will show that extra-marital relations among the male workers were not thought less of for the behaviour itself, since the social norms about
sexuality tolerated male involvement in extra-marital sex. Unlike women, if a man had many sexual partners, he would not be reproached. However, men were expected to be the bread winners of the family. A man who was extravagant would be looked down upon since he was not adequately fulfilling the role of a husband in the family. If a worker spent too much money buying sex or giving it to his concubine, he got a bad reputation. But if a worker who participated in extra-marital sex and/or relationships was not extravagant, then his wife, his peers and the cai would generally ignore his behaviour. This shows that the control mechanism of the workers’ traditional social network only reduced the prevalence of extra-marital sex among the workers, while casual sex was tolerated.

While the social norms concerning sexuality and the husband’s role affected the workers’ sexual behaviours, their awareness of HIV risks did not influence their decision to buy, or not buy, sex. In the first group, the workers admitted that it was the fear of a bad reputation, not the fear of HIV infection that made them reluctant to buy sex. In the second group, though the workers said that they were afraid of HIV infection, they still bought sex. Their fear of HIV was instead transferred to their concerns about the quality of condoms when they accessed sex services.

These findings suggest that HIV/STD prevention programmes should take into account the importance of cultural and social norms in people’s sexual behaviours. Changes in a negative social norm could lead to positive changes in people’s sexual behaviours. For example, if the social norm allowing men to have several sex partners were to change, the workers would be discouraged from participating in extra-marital sex and relationships. Also, if a worker were to engage in extra-marital sex, the reactions of his wife and peers would be stronger. All in all, this would help to limit casual sex that might put them at risk for HIV/STDs.

The study includes an extended section in which condom use and the workers’ awareness of HIV/STD risks are discussed. The workers consider condoms as a tool for HIV prevention. They do not use condoms with their wives, but they are quite concerned about the quality of the condom when they access sex services. This confirms the importance of condoms in HIV/STD prevention. Moreover, the distrust these men have towards sex workers concerning the quality of condoms (discussed in Chapter 8) suggests a need for research into the communication between them and, indeed, on the quality of condoms in cheap sex services.
Organisation of the study

This chapter has explained the need for research about extra-marital sex and relationships on migrant construction workers who work in the informal sector. The objectives of the study were outlined, along with the theory that was used to guide the researcher during the study and the main findings. In Chapter 2, I will describe the methodological approach used in the data collection and my personal experience of conducting the research. Chapter 3 provides the reader with the historical context surrounding the formation of the informal construction sector. In the same chapter, the readers will get to know how a cai conducts construction work by receiving projects and hiring workers to implement them. Chapter 4 discusses the workers' living and working conditions. It also covers the relations between the workers and their cai and the manner in which the workers are paid. In Chapter 5, I give the reader a picture of the worker's social life in the city, including their social relations and activities in their free time. In addition, I describe the situation in the two key groups: the relationship among peers and between the workers and their cai. Chapter 6 will help the reader to understand the workers' sexual relations when they work away from home. By analyzing the influence of peers and cai, I elaborate on the factors that affect the workers' involvement in extra-marital sex and relationships and the frequency of that involvement. Chapter 7 discusses the workers' perceptions, their social norms regarding the husband's role in the community and gender bias with regards to sexuality. These all help to explain why and to what extent the workers participate in extra-marital relations. A part of chapter 8 is used as a kind of additional section to discuss condom use and awareness of HIV risks among the workers I studied. Finally, of course, the conclusion will sum up the main findings of the study.
Chapter 2

Methodology

Study type
This study applied an exploratory design to get an insight into the lives of rural-urban migrant workers in the informal construction sector in Hanoi. The primary focus was to try to understand social and cultural factors that affect their involvement in extra-marital sex and relationships. It is expected that such insights will enable us to ascertain the sexual risks to which those workers are exposed.

Data collection techniques
The data collecting process covered a period of six months, from the beginning of August 2004 to the end of January 2005, in which participant observation, in-depth interview and focus group discussion (FGD) techniques were applied. A male assistant was chosen to help me during this process.

Sample
The study was implemented in Hanoi, a city that has attracted a large numbers of male peasants coming to work as construction workers. Since there is no location or institution that registers cai and construction workers who work in the informal sector, it was impossible to know the whole population of the workers. Consequently, I could not choose a random sample.

I chose groups that included rural-urban migrant workers who came from the same village. This helped me to see the relationships among peers from the same village. I contacted some cai and asked for permission to conduct a study on the workers of their group. From all of these groups, I chose two groups to serve as key groups. I carried out participant observation on these key groups during the data gathering process. I also conducted in-depth interviews with all group members who had worked as construction workers for at least three months and who had agreed to participate in the study.

Three other groups were chosen for FGDs.
The two key groups

The first key group was comprised of workers who came from the province of Thanh Hoa. Almost all workers came from the same village as the cai. The group had 30 workers in total. They were working on a state project. Therefore they were not allowed to sleep at the construction site. They slept in two rooms nearby that were rented by the cai. The group had a female cook who was the wife of one of the workers.

The second key group was comprised of workers who came from the province of Thai Binh. This Thai Binh group included 35 workers over the six months of my fieldwork, but at any given time, there were only around 20 workers in the group. Most of the workers came from two villages other than the village of their cai. Only one worker was a fellow villager of the cai. During the course of my fieldwork, the workers were involved in two continuous construction projects in two private houses. At night, the workers slept in the houses under construction. In the first two months of my fieldwork, the group had one female worker and one female cook.

At first, both cai were cautious with me. Even though I showed them the letter of introduction from AMMA and promised that all information would be kept confidential, they thought I was a journalist and could publish a story about the life of the workers that described how the cai exploited them. I explained that my topic was not about construction work but about the private life of construction workers. They accepted with some reservations.

Fortunately, after I had interviewed a worker of the Thanh Hoa group who was the cai’s brother, I gained the trust of that worker, and as a result, of the cai. Thereafter, he helped me during the time I worked with the group. He explained what I was doing and introduced me to the new workers of the group, asking them to talk with me. In the Thai Binh group, I helped the workers with some small jobs in order to first gain their trust. After this, the cai behaved nice towards me. I had not actually been aware that respected workers were in some sense more powerful than the cai. Fortunately, the esteem of a respected worker helped to improve my relations with the cai.

When I started my fieldwork, I did not intend to choose two key groups in which one cai came from the same village as his workers while the other cai came from a different village than his workers. By chance, the two key groups were like that. I was then able to discover interesting differences between the two groups in which the cai played an important role.
Participant observation

During their free time, I visited the workers’ living quarters to talk with them and I also observed their activities after they had finished their work. Observation helped me to understand their ‘cultural code’ and to learn how they organized their free time, what kind of contacts they had in the city, how they treated other peers and how they organized their daily life and social interaction. I also played the role of a messenger because I had a mobile phone. When some workers or the female cook went home, they sometimes phoned and asked me to convey some messages to the cai or to other peers. This helped me to get closer to the workers and to learn more about the dynamics of the group.

Participant observation was a good way to gain the workers’ trust, become friends with them and form good relationships for the in-depth interviews. At first, some workers were very reserved; they would not even answer such simple question like ‘What is your name?’ and refused to participate. But after I had visited and chatted with them, these workers agreed to join the interview process and became good informants.

Participant observation is also a good way to get reliable information from the group, especially sensitive information. One evening when I visited a group, I did not see some workers. I asked a young worker (15 years old) where they had gone. This worker laughed and told me that they went to Nga Tu So. From previous interviews with another group, I knew that Nga Tu So was a place for cheap sex services. Another worker gave him a black look. The teenager stopped talking immediately and I inferred that those workers had gone out to buy sex. There were several other instances in which it was clear to me that participant observation had helped me to gain such sensitive information.

I made two visits to the two villages in Thanh Hoa and Thai Binh. When the female cook of these two groups went home, I accompanied them to their village and visited some workers’ families. On these trips, I observed the way the workers treated their wives, the relationships among villagers and among peers’ families, and the social relations in the village. My trip to the village also improved my relationship with the female cooks and some of the workers.
In-depth interviews

In total, I interviewed 24 workers, 2 female cooks and the 2 cai of the key groups. For in-depth interviews, I chose workers from the two key groups who had been on the construction job for at least three months. During my fieldwork, I met 65 workers in the 2 key groups, but I interviewed only 24 workers of these. Several workers were too new and did not meet my criteria. Three workers refused to be interviewed. Many workers returned home for family reasons and did not come back to the group or found jobs on other projects (for other cai). I conducted both formal and informal interviews, depending on the situation. Some interviews were tape-recorded with permission of the interviewees.

FORMAL INTERVIEWS: Since the workers lived in a group, it was difficult for me to find a natural and private environment for interviews. Usually, I invited the workers to go out for an interview in a coffee shop nearby their construction sites. I asked them to choose the place for the interview, but all of them let me decide. Often, after the first formal interview, the workers became friendlier towards me and then I sometimes had informal interviews with them later.

INFORMAL INTERVIEWS: Sometimes, the workers had a day off because the construction material was not available or because it was rainy. The female cooks and the workers had my mobile phone number and they phoned me when they had a free day. At the construction site, I also talked with workers and now and then our conversation became an informal interview. When I became the workers’ friend, I sometimes invited a key worker to go out for a drink and we had informal interviews. Apart from a friend, I was also a counsellor who listened to their concerns, such as their relationship with the cai and their family affairs. Informal talks were also conducted during my trips to the villages.

With the cook of the Thai Binh group, I visited her house in the village and we had an informal interview there. I talked to the female cook of the Thanh Hoa group in their rented rooms when the workers were working at the construction site. Through such interviews, I was able to gather some information about the social relationships and sexual behaviour of the workers.

I did not plan to interview the cai because my classmates expressed the opinion that my talking with the cai could make the workers reluctant to talk to me. However, when I went into the field, I realised the important role of the cai and decided to interview them. The interviews with the cai were conducted at the end of the data collection process to avoid as much as possible any bias.
Focus group discussions

Three FGDs, which altogether included 24 participants, were conducted at the end of the data collection process. Since the topic of this study regards sensitive information such as sexual behaviour, I assumed that the workers would not like to talk about their own behaviour in the group. The objective of the FGDs was to inquiry about some information I got through the interviews; I did not ask private questions during them. The workers made comments and discussed a number of issues concerning my research. All FGDs were tape-recorded.

Before I went to the field I was afraid that, being a female, it would be hard for me to chair FGDs about such a sensitive topic in a male group. So, I had planned to let the male assistant conduct the FGDs and act as observer myself. However, in the field I decided to conduct the FGDs myself for several reasons: (a) I had gain self-confidence after conducting interviews and got used to talking with male workers about the topic. (b) I considered the fieldwork as a learning process in which I should learn and experience as much as possible, so I wanted to try and deal with problems myself. (c) Even though the male assistant would have chaired FGDs, my presence would have changed the characteristics of the FGDs. The talks would no longer take place in an all-male environment. Thus, the workers might still feel reluctant to speak out. As an observer, my role would be too passive to deal with that problem.

The three groups involved in FGDs were called: Hai Hung, Nghe An and Bac Giang. I visited the groups sometimes before the FGDs took place in order to get acquainted with the workers in advance. The FGDs were conducted at the construction sites. I did not want to do the FGDs in the coffee shop because it would have been too noisy to use the recorder. The workers did not want to discuss matter in a rented room in the neighbourhood. So we decided to have FGDs at the construction site itself, where the workers felt free to say what they wanted.

Being a researcher

Since the workers lived in their groups, I was strongly affected by the sensitive relationships among peers and between the workers and the cai. A typical example is the story of the two women in the Thai Binh group. Thu was a female worker. Huong was the female cook. Both of them had sexual relationship with Cuong, the cai's son, and they therefore disliked each
other. At first, when I just visited the group and was not familiar with the situation, Thu hung out with me and told me about the relationship between Huong and Cuong. This made Huong keep some distance from me until I visited her house in the village. Then, Huong spoke ill of Thu and told me about Thu’s relationship with some other workers. Similarly, some workers grew close to me and expressed their discontent with other peers or with the cai. On one hand, this helped me to get some relevant information. On the other hand, it sometimes put me in a sticky situation because both sides expected me to agree with them. I tried my best to be neutral, but mostly just expressed some sympathy or listened to them and kept silent. I also promised to keep their stories confidential. In fact, the workers were not afraid that their identity would be disclosed in print, but they did not like other members of the group to know their story. It is therefore very important for the researcher to have an even-handed attitude towards the group in order to get information from everyone without bias. If the researcher can work well in this complex situation, it will greatly benefit the research. In the Thai Binh group, after the workers quit the job and worked for other cai, some of them still contacted me. In this way, I was still able to keep track of them and gather information from both the workers and the cai.

One of the difficulties regarding the study of a group of people who know each other well is that the information from the interview is leaked. When a worker would return to his group from an interview, other peers asked him about the content of our conversation. In some cases, this created significant problems for my study.

One time, I invited a worker for an interview. Even though I had described the purpose of the study and had gotten informed consent from every worker, I had no specific idea about what information I would get from this interview. Our conversation went smoothly and the worker told me much relevant and sensitive information that I had not expected. But after the talk, the worker realised how sensitive it was and got worried about it. He told other co-workers about the talk. These co-workers then became cautious about the topic. Although they did not refuse to be interviewed, they stressed when they talked to me and may not have been entirely forthcoming with the truth.

Disappointed by some bad interviews, I wanted to choose another key group instead of the Thai Binh group, but then I realised that it was necessary to continue my work on this group for several reasons. First, in a group of construction workers who lived and worked together, it was impossible to keep information about our talks completely secret. Even if I had
contacted a new group, I would only be able to interview a few workers in the beginning period because this problem would happen again. By choosing a new group, I might get some more good interviews but I would have to deal with the same problem again. The aim of my study was to understand the life of all the workers living in the group, together with the influence of their peers and their village. I would have lost a lot of important information if I had interviewed only some workers of the group without gaining an understanding for the whole situation and the relationships among peers. Furthermore, with such limited time, it was not a good solution to approach a new group and invest more time gaining their trust again before having the interviews. In addition, at that time I realised that the Thai Binh group and the Thanh Hoa group provided me with two opposite pictures. It was evident that almost all workers in the Thai Binh group had bought sex in the city. In contrast, there was no evidence, neither through interviews nor through observation, that workers in the Thanh Hoa group used sex services. I tried to find the reasons for this difference. That is why I decided to keep my work focused on the two original key groups and interviewed all members of the groups who agreed to participate in the study.

To improve the quality of the interviews, I made changes in the way I talked with the workers. I stopped asking them directly about their own sexual behaviour, but questioned them about related issues such as the behaviour of their peers, the relationships among peers, their relationship with their wife and so on. Their responses were surprising; they were not reluctant to talk to me anymore. Interestingly, when I did not push them, they were willing to acknowledge that they had visited sex workers. In this way, I got information that was more diversified. They told me, for example, about their intimate conversations with their wives and about their sexual contacts in the city.

Luckily, I had a good relationship with some key workers who told me many events that took place in the group. Once, a worker in the Thai Binh group told me that another peer, after an interview, recommended everyone to be careful about my recorder. In this way, I discovered that the workers did not want me to use the recorder, but that they also felt reluctant to turn down my request when I asked their permission. Instead they became more cautious when the interview was tape-recorded. After this, I explained more carefully to the workers their right to refuse it. I stopped using the recorder in all the interviews with the Thai Binh group and made my notes immediately after the interviews. With members of the Thanh Hoa group, I still used the recorder but I paid more attention to their attitude during the talks. When one
looked at the recorder, I understood that he did not want specific information that he was going to say to be recorded and I turned off the recorder immediately.

Through this experience, I became more aware of the importance of participant observation in studying a group of peers. By participant observation, I took a role in the group and this helped me to deal better with problems as a member of the group. I realised that the workers did not react openly against things that they disliked, but responded in a different way. Participant observation helped me to understand their "cultural code".

I was aware that it would be difficult for me, as a woman, to conduct research on a sensitive topic within a male group. To deal with this problem, I tried to define my role in relation to specific workers. It was difficult to talk to the workers who were much younger than me. My relationship to the young workers was similar to the relationship between an older sister and her younger brothers. This made the topic of sex difficult to mention because they were afraid that I would blame them. They did not tell me much about their own sexual behaviour, but when I asked them about the sexual behaviours of older workers, they were willing to give me much more information.

With workers who were as old as or older than me, straight talk about sex was much easier. In our talks, I took the role of a sensible and sympathetic female friend. Some workers were outspoken and liked to share their ideas and concerns about their intimate life. One of them said: "I do not know why I could share this story with you, even though I was reluctant to tell my wife. I felt that I could trust you and have you understand me". (Hai, tho, Thai Binh)

Asking questions about HIV

At first, it was difficult to get information about the workers' concern about HIV risks in the city. The workers avoided answering my questions. Some even mocked me: "Oh, we are illiterate, we don't know about HIV. What's that?"

I realised that the way I was asking questions made the topic of HIV sensitive. After questions about their life, I asked them about their concern about the risks of HIV in the city. This made the workers feel like they were considered a high risk group. Thus, I stopped directly questioning them about HIV. During the conversation, however, when the workers mentioned a related point, I directed the talk to the issue of HIV or sexual risks, and it appeared that they felt free to talk. For example, a worker said that he never used a condom with his wife. I
asked him whether he used one with sex workers and why. After that, he explained that
condoms were usually used for STD prevention rather than for contraception. He also
expressed his concerns about the quality of condoms that were provided by sex workers to
their clients, his ideas about the differences in sexual risks between city sex workers and rural
sex workers, and of how he protected himself against HIV. By using this method, the talks
still ran naturally and the information I got was more thorough and reliable.

Limitations of the study
The data was collected over a short period of six months. The sample was not random. The
findings therefore cannot be generalized to all construction workers in Vietnam. Furthermore,
the fact that every body in the group knew each other and shared information about the
interviews as well as the sensitive relations among peers and between the workers and the cai
might have affected the quality of the interviews.

Ethical considerations
The names of all participants whose information is used have been changed. I have also
changed the name of their home village in order to protect the workers’ identities.
Chapter 3

*Cai* and the informal construction sector

This chapter discusses the historical context that led to the formation of the informal construction sector in Hanoi as well as the mechanisms and characteristics of this sector. Readers will be provided with a contextual understanding of the informal sector in which construction workers, the target of this study, play an important role.

*Doi moi* and its effects

In the 1980’s, the centrally planned economy in Vietnam which had been built up after 1954, experienced a grave crisis characterized by a serious disequilibrium between supply and demand. To deal with the crisis, the Vietnamese government decided in 1986 to implement an economic renovation process called *Doi moi* in which the planned economy was restructured into a market economy. Since then, *Doi moi* has had dramatic impacts not only on the economy, but also on many aspects of Vietnamese society (Beresford 2003). Both industrial and agricultural output has risen swiftly since the reform. Overall living standards have improved and the number of people living in extreme poverty has declined dramatically. Urbanisation and modernisation were promoted in such target cities as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, and Da Nang. Many types of activities in the informal economic sector have developed in urban areas and several factory-workshops and businesses have sprung up. People in urban areas have been able to find jobs in budding informal sectors. After *Doi moi* was introduced, while formal economic sectors reduced their employment considerably, informal sectors have developed remarkably.

*Doi moi* led to an increase in social inequality. After its introduction, the state subsidy and redistribution system was abolished, forcing people to earn a living on their own. The income they received depended on their own productivity. After the reform process, a handful of cities and provinces based on industry had privileged access to credit and received much of the country’s foreign investment. In these cities, people could find jobs easily either in formal sectors or in the budding informal sector. Although these policies boosted the country’s

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4 *Doi moi* in Vietnamese means ‘renovation’
economic development, they led to the simultaneous unbalance in living standard, income, service system and infrastructure between cities and the countryside (Ha & Ha 2001: 31).

This unbalance between urban and rural areas is the main explanation for the surge of rural-urban migration in the country after Doi moi. The Doi moi program was accompanied by increased movement of labour from rural to urban areas, in which the large cities received the largest migration flows. Both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City attracted large numbers of migrants from other provinces and regions (Dang 2003:5). Spontaneous rural-urban migration occurred in many different ways and intensities. This migration attracted many kinds of people, men as well as women, young and old, highly educated people and illiterates, highly skilled and unskilled labourers (Hardy 2003:127). Males participate more in the spontaneous rural-urban migration stream than females, and the rate of male migrants moving to the cities is increasing (Ha & Ha 2001:37). The reason for this higher rate of male migrants is related to the increase in work requiring male labour such as construction work or motorbike-driving, while the need for services that require female skills is stable.

The informal construction sector

Before the ‘renovation’ process, state companies controlled over all construction jobs in Vietnam. These companies took on all construction projects, including private houses and physical infrastructures such as ports, roads and bridges. There was only one kind of construction worker: someone who worked for the state companies. After Doi moi, state companies no longer monopolise this field. A new informal sector has arisen which includes people who do the construction jobs on their own or work for private employers.

The emergence of this informal sector can be attributed to a few factors. The urbanisation and modernisation during the reform process have led to an increasing need for construction. The expansion of cities has turned many outskirts into urban areas. A large amount of cultivated land in the suburbs has become housing areas. Hanoi, for example, has developed from a city with four districts into a city of seven districts that covers an area of 918.46 km². This has caused an enormous demand for construction in expanded areas. Moreover, many houses in the old district of the city have been rebuilt or repaired as a result of the improved standard of living. The multi-sectored economy after Doi moi brought about the rapid development of the informal sector. While the state sector has laid off many workers, the rapidly growing

5 The data were taken from the official Hanoi website: www.hanoi.govt.net
informal and private sector has created many new jobs and attracted former state employees (Ha & Ha 2001).

This study concerns construction workers who work for private employers called cai. A cai hires workers and then directly supervises them on a construction project. In Vietnam, when a client (A) has a house built, he or she signs a contract with a construction contractor (B), who is called thaw. A thaw might directly hire workers and implement the construction project himself. In this case, thaw might be a state company or a cai. A thaw might sign a sub-contract with a cai (B') who directly conducts the project. Or, a thaw might sign a sub-contract with another thaw (B'') and then B'' signs another sub-contract with a cai (B''') who implements the project. In the last two cases, the thaw is an intermediary. A client of a construction project might be a private homeowner or a company. A thaw might be a company or an individual who works independently.

There are two different kinds of arrangements a cai can have with a private homeowner. The first is that the homeowner is responsible for the raw material while the cai is responsible for implementing and supervising the work. In this case, the cai only regulates his workers and supervises the work. In the second way, the cai takes on the whole project, including acquiring the raw material and supervising the workers. The homeowner does not have to do anything but pay for the project when it is finished.

A cai cannot directly sign a construction project with a state agencies, especially when it comes to infrastructure projects as roads, bridges and ports. However, they still can take on state construction projects by signing a sub-contract with a thaw (B or B'). In this case, cai are only responsible for performing the construction job and are not involved with the provision of materials. Because state projects are usually large, thaw who receive them often sign sub-contracts with several cai.

A cai finds a construction project in three different ways. Firstly, a homeowner who is satisfied with a cai will refer him to other people. In this way, each cai builds a social network based on trust. Secondly, a private homeowner who wants to build a house might visit a house under construction to contact the cai. Thirdly, every cai has relationships with several thaw and other cai who may pass on part of their construction project to him.

For many private homeowners, signing a contract with a cai is faster than signing a contract with a state firm. After deciding to build a house, one can call a cai and the project can start a few days later. If the homeowner signs a contract with a state company, he or she must wait
for some weeks. Since the cai is directly responsible for managing and conducting the project, the housekeeper can discuss every related matter with him including price, design and so on. The quality of this kind of project is usually better than that of projects implemented by state companies. Since the state manager and workers receive a fixed salary that does not depend on the project they implement, they may not care as much about its quality or the speed of its completion. A person who signs a contract with a state company must often give some extra money to the manager of the project to ensure that the project will be done well. All of this is why many homeowners want to sign a contract with a cai.

When a cai takes on a construction project of a private house, the homeowner or thau only gives him a certain amount of money as a deposit. The remainder will be paid after the project is completed and the homeowner is satisfied. If the project is big and takes a long time to be finished, the homeowner may give the cai some money after a certain amount of work has been done. When a cai undertakes a state project, the thau gives him money in accordance with the amount of work that has been done. During the project, a cai can ask the thau for money which is called ‘money for food’. This amount of money is no higher than the amount of work that has been done. At certain points, the cai will be paid for one part of the work that is completed. However, whatever the case, the cai only receives the whole payment when the whole project has been done.

Some cai prefer to take on private house projects. These projects usually take a shorter period of time and do not need too many workers. Therefore, not much capital is needed. Moreover, the cai usually sign private house contracts directly with the homeowner. As a result, the payment process is simpler and faster than that of a state project. In addition, while the quality of a state project is always overseen by thau and technical supervisors who are called giam sat ky thuat, the quality of the private house is often supervised by the homeowner who does not know much about construction techniques. It is thus easier for a cai to satisfy a private homeowner.

Some cai, however, prefer to take on state projects. The reason for this is that a state project might be more lucrative than a private house project, although this is not always the case.

Nevertheless, not every cai can take on state projects. For one, the blue-prints for state projects are often more complicated. Only cai who are skilful and knowledgeable enough to understand the blue-prints can undertake these projects. For two, many cai do not have enough workers for the big project that a state project usually is. A cai, however, could
receive a big project and divide the job into two parts. Then while he carries out one part, he
lets another cai do the other. In this case, the latter cai has to pay commission to the cai who
got the project directly from the tau. The former, however, is the one who is responsible for
the project to the tau.

There are two kinds of people who can be cai. Firstly, students, after graduating from the
technical school, or secondly, staff of construction companies can hire workers and
implement construction projects. Secondly, some skilful workers, after having worked for
several years as construction employees, can also acquire the money, experience, and the
social network needed to become a cai. Construction workers who work for cai are either
urban residents or migrants from rural areas. Often, a group of construction workers that
works for one cai is comprised of either only urban residents or only migrants.

Each cai has relationships with several carpenters, plumbers and electricians. These
specialists are not the cai’s employees. The cai will call and pay electricians and plumbers as
soon as construction is finished. Otherwise, the homeowner will pay them when the electric
and water supply system is not included in the contract.

A cai takes some risks when he does business. A tau may stop a project midway through if
he is not satisfied with the quality of the cai’s work. This would be a loss to the cai since he
would not be paid for work already done. Sometimes the tau will even simply disappear
after the project has been finished without paying. In other cases, the cai may not receive
payment for a long time after completion of the project because the building has not been
inspected and taken over. This forces the cai to ask his workers to wait to collect their wages
until he get paid. Some workers may then quit their jobs. Some cai, however, may try their
best to suffer losses and pay the workers’ wages in order to keep them. It is important for a
cai to have workers who are loyal to him.

Every day, the cai assigns tasks to his workers. Most cai do not work themselves, but only
supervise the workers. Some, however, also participate in the construction work. A good cai
can efficiently assign tasks to his workers. If work is not divided properly among the workers,
the cai will lose time and money. The cai gets his payment for the project as a whole. He pays
the workers’ wages in accordance with the number of days they worked. After paying the
workers’ wages and providing them with food, he keeps the rest of the money from the
project. If the cai does not assign the work well, the project will take more time and he will
have to pay his workers more, meaning less profit for him.
A cai can accept one or more construction projects at the same time. When this happens, he has a reliable worker to keep an eye on the technical aspect of the project. This person is called a dau canh. A dau canh is often a skilled worker, but this is not always the case. The dau canh will assign the jobs to the workers and keep track of the number of days they work. But the cai is still the person who pays the wages and decides whether to hire or fire a worker.

Assigning work on a project is a tricky thing for every cai. Every construction project is divided into two phases. The first phase is the building process, called phan tho, while the second phase is the decoration process, called phan hoan thien. The number of workers involved in a project is not fixed, but does depend on the phase of the project. Phan tho requires more workers than phan hoan thien does. In addition, more phu (construction workers who are in charge of making mortar and preparing materials) are needed during phan tho. During phan hoan thien, the project needs more tho (construction workers who are in charge of building and plastering the wall and making decorations for the house), especially skilful tho. When the building of a private house has just begun, for instance, it may need around 15 workers. When the project is almost complete, it may need only one or two skilled workers. The cai has to regulate projects to arrange the job for every worker. Often, when a project is in phan hoan thien, the cai receives a new one. He will then assign most of his workers to the new project while leaving just a few experienced workers on the old one. In this way, all of his workers stay occupied and things are run effectively.

To ensure that all of the projects have enough workers, a cai usually avoids starting new projects at the same time. All projects need skilled workers, so if some projects are finishing at the same time it may be difficult for the cai to arrange work for all of his low-skilled workers.

When the project needs more workers, cai engage new phu who are usually fellow villagers or relatives of his workers. As a result, a group of construction workers usually includes people from the same rural area and sometimes even relatives. New phu get a lower wage and are in charge of cooking and helping other workers.

If a cai cannot arrange work for all of his workers, he may ask some of them – mostly the less skilled – to go home and return when work is available. Still, the cai always tries his best to ensure regular work for his skilled and loyal workers. A cai may have another solution, called 'gui tho', to keep his workers when he has no work for them. He will ask another cai in need of workers to engage his workers. In this way, his workers will serve as temporary employees
another cai, receiving their pay from this new cai. Also, when a cai from the countryside does not have any projects, he may work as a tho for another cai until he gets a project for himself.

A cai needs a good team of workers, a team that has a proper balance of tho, main workers, and phu, assistants. Though construction workers are typically just divided into tho and phu, in fact there are many levels of tho and phu. A good phu may have a wage that is as high as or even higher than that of a bad tho. A good phu can make mortar well and speed up the working process. As breaktime approaches, a phu can make more mortar than can be processed in the time left, requiring the tho to finish the mortar before the break. Some phu attempt to impress their cai in this way. Not every tho is able to do good decoration work. Only the most skilled of workers, called tho hoan thien, can do it. These workers get a higher wage. A loyal tho hoan thien may stick to just one cai, but normally they work for several cai. Because the wage of a tho hoan thien is higher than that of a normal tho, a cai does not want to have to pay him a high wage during phan tho. And since the tho hoan thien do not want to be paid below their expertise, they end up only working during phan hoan thien.

At the time of this study, the demand for construction projects was high. A cai could find construction projects easily. They had the luxury of being able to choose the more lucrative projects while rejecting the others. At the same time, however, cai had difficulties in finding construction workers since the number of cai had increased and a competition among these cai to find workers had arisen. As I will explain in the following chapters, this affected the relationships between the cai and his workers, even leading to a situation in which cai offered sex services in order to attract skilled workers.
This chapter will concentrate on the target group of this study: migrant construction workers. As a big city with a high demand for construction, Hanoi has attracted a large number of rural people coming to fill these job vacancies. Most construction workers are men, ranging from 15 and 50 years of age. A few women work as phu. Some groups of workers have female cooks, which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter.

There are two kinds of construction employees: main workers called tho and assistants called phu, or xach vua. Tho are in charge of building and plastering the wall and making decorations for the house. Phu are in charge of making mortar and preparing materials for the tho.

There are, however, many levels of tho and phu, depending on their technical skill. There are three levels of tho. Skilful tho, or tho hoan thien, are those who do the decoration and other complicated jobs that needed the most expertise. For each work day, a skilful tho is paid approximately 30.000-40.000 Vietnamese dong. Within each crew of workers, there are only a few tho hoan thien. Some tho hoan thien get a very high wage, as high as 70.000 dong per day. These tho hoan thien typically work for many cai and only during the phan hoan thien phase of a projects. Normal tho are less skilled, receiving roughly 25.000 – 30.000 dong a day. Aside from the most complicated of tasks, they can perform almost everything required in building a house. The third level of tho are unskilled tho. They can build a wall, but are not so good at plastering. An unskilled tho always works under the technical supervision of other tho. Unskilled tho are paid between 20.000 – 25.000 thousand dong per day.

In general, there are two levels of phu: skilled phu and unskilled phu. The latter are usually new workers. They did not know exactly what they had to do and other workers had to assign them tasks. Skilled phu know what is necessary and can make mortar without a tho’s guidance. A phu gets around 16.000 – 25.000 dong per day.
How do workers get their job?

In many cases, the cai and his workers come from the same village. When a skilled worker, after several years of construction work, wants to start his own business, he often invites his colleagues, friends or fellow-villagers to work for him. This was the case with Dat, the cai of the Thanh Hoa group. Almost all of the workers in his group came from xom Quat, Dat’s home village. Moreover, several members of the group were relatives. For instance, Son, Dat’s sibling and Cuong, the adopted son of Dat’s father were tho in the work crew. Cuong’s wife, Tuyet, was the cook of the group. She was also responsible for keeping track of the work days of every worker.

Sometimes, the cai recruits new workers from the neighbourhoods of the construction site. Before the project in Hanoi, Dat had undertaken a project in Lang Son. There, he had hired some young workers. This was usual in rural areas, but not in Hanoi because construction was considered hard work by city residents. However, a cai in Hanoi could find new workers among the population that had come to the city from the countryside. During my fieldwork, I met a pupil from Hai Duong who had come to the city to take the exam to get into a mechanical training school. While waiting for the exam results, he decided not to go home but stayed in Hanoi to work as a phu. After finding out that he had passed, he quit his job and went to school to study.

In some other cases, the workers know the cai through a friend. Often, a construction worker has colleagues from other projects and other cai. If, later on, he later works for another cai, he might introduce his old colleagues or friends to his new cai. If the worker introduced his fellow-villagers to the cai, then the group would have some workers who came from the same village. This is the case with the Thai Binh group.

It is therefore not difficult for experienced workers to find a job because they have relationships with many cai and other workers. For them, finding a good cai to work for is not that hard:

I have worked for many cai. In general, there are many job opportunities now. We can choose a good cai to work for. [Question: What is a good cai?] Those who pay us timely and fairly. Also, we were paid when we needed the money. (Thong, tho, Thanh Hoa)
How does one become a construction worker?

There are no training courses to become a *phu* or a *tho*. When a beginner starts working as a *phu*, the *cai* and *tho* decided what work he has to do. Over time, the *phu* will learn the job better and gain experience. With some guidance from *tho*, a *phu* can teach himself the skills to become a *tho*. To become a *tho*, a *phu* has to work quite hard. After finishing his own work, a *phu* has to help a *tho* and ask him about techniques. Otherwise, there would be no chance for him to become a *tho*. Some *phu* can become a *tho* after two working years. Others work as a *phu* for 20 years.

When a beginner is the close relative of the *cai* or a *tho*, he has more opportunities to learn the techniques from his relative. Sometimes, when a *cai* likes a nice and hard-working *phu*, he encourages him to become a *tho* and thus, perhaps, a reliable, loyal worker in the future. Sometimes, a *phu* who wants to become a *tho*, but does not want to work too hard, works as a volunteer for the *cai* to learn skills. Instead of money, this volunteer would receive free meals from the *cai*. In some cases, the *thau* might complain because the *cai* did not have enough *tho* on his team. At this point, the *cai* might ask a skilled *phu* to work as a *tho* in order to satisfy the *thau*. It is a good chance for the *phu* to learn and practice the techniques.

Tuyen was 26 years old. He had worked for Dat, the *cai*, for 10 years. His mother-in-law and Dat’s father were siblings. He told me about how he became a *tho*:

> I became a *tho* after I had worked for two years as a *phu*. No one taught me. But I took pains to work. When I had a little free time, I practiced the skills. Generally, I observed how *tho* did their job and then imitated them. When I did not do that job well, I tried it again. Then I asked *tho* [about the skills]. At present, you see who could be the teacher? Everyone is busy with their job. For example, Dat has been the *cai*, but he only told me what I had better do. He also had his jobs. (Tuyen, *tho*, Thanh Hoa)

Because the wage from the *cai* is lower than that from state companies, after several years of work some skilled workers manage to get a job in a state company or decide to work as a *cai* on their own. That is why *cai* also need to recruit beginners who could become their skilled workers in the future.

**Working and living conditions**

The workers did not have a fixed working time. Every day, the cook got up early to prepare breakfast. Then, he or she would wake the workers up as soon as the breakfast was ready.
After breakfast, the workers started their day. It was a rule that they only worked during daylight. Therefore, the number of work hours in a day depended on the season. Accordingly, the work day was longer in the summer. The group cook for the Thai Binh group, for instance, got up at half past four in the summer. The workers would have breakfast at half past five and start working at six o’clock in the morning. Lunch break would be at noon. In the afternoon, they worked from 2 o’clock to 7 o’clock. In the winter, work would start at 7 o’clock in the morning and end at 6 o’clock in the evening. For this reason, some cai, like the Thai Binh cai, shortened the lunch time during the winter. This is a description from a worker in the Thanh Hoa group:

Generally speaking, we don’t have a fixed work schedule. We have breakfast right after we get up. After that, we drink a tea and then work until almost 12 o’clock. In the afternoon, we start at half past one and work until it is so dark that we can not make out each other’s faces. Sometimes, we weren’t finish the work expected of us. We then had to turn on the lights and work until the job was done. This job is extremely hard. (Quang, phu, Thanh Hoa)

Some cai, however, tried to reduce the time difference between the summer and the winter to ensure that his workers did not have to work too hard in the summer. The cai of the Hai Hung group said that his workers always finished their work at 6 o’clock, despite the fact that it was still light at that time.

Some groups did not get an official break during the working day. When a worker wanted to take a short break, he stopped his job for a few minutes to drink a tea or smoke rustic tobacco (thuoc lao, in Vietnamese). This was the case with the Thai Binh group. The cai, however, did not like those who took too many of these short breaks. In some other groups, the workers had a fifteen minute break in the morning and another one in the afternoon. During these breaks, all workers stopped their work, sat together, drank tea and smoked.

Sometimes, when a cai needed to speed up a project, he would ask his workers to work into the evening or at night. The workers would then receive extra pay. Normally, the workers got around 25,000 dong for working at night.

The workers did not get weekends off. They only had a few holidays, the important traditional holidays, such as New Year’s Day. When it rained, work had to be postponed and the workers would not be paid for that day, except in the form of free meals from the cai.
All workers had left behind their family in their home village. When a worker's family had an important affair, he could ask the cai for some days off. But cai typically did not like such requirements. Workers would therefore only ask for time off when it was really necessary.

In the city, the workers usually worked and lived on the construction site. If the homeowner or thau did not allow them to sleep on the construction site, the cai rented a cheap room nearby. One of my key groups, the Thanh Hoa group, did construction work on a factory. Since the factory was still in use during the time of construction project, the workers could not sleep at their construction site. The cai rented two rooms nearby. The rent was 800000 Vietnamese dong, of which the cai paid half and the thau paid the other half. According to the workers, staying in these two rooms was even worse than staying in houses under construction:

Who likes to live like this? You see, the house is not a real house. They [the thau who took on the project] are very bad, the construction place is very big, but they do not allow us to stay there, they give us 400000 dong per month and then do not care how we live. Here, we don't have water on Sunday because the neighbours use suction-pumps to take much water. [Question: Are there any water-containers here?] No. Before we came here, this house was empty; perhaps it was used for storage. When we had just arrived, the house smelled really bad due to humidity and mould. I could not sleep for several nights, I had to go outside. Sleeping on the veranda was better. We've been here for one month, and now it is better since the people's smell has reduced the smell of mould and humidity. The drain is very bad; sometimes the floor is full of water. The roof leaks, so the water sometimes drops in the middle of our bed when it rains. (Thong, tho, Thanh Hoa)

The way in which the cai controlled the progress of his projects also affected the sleeping places for his workers. A house just starting to be built usually needed many workers, but it was not in good enough shape for the workers to sleep there. A house that was almost finished was a better sleeping site. The cai would often take men working on the new project and have them come sleep at the old site. This was only possible if the two sites were not far from each other. Sometimes, at the beginning of a project, the workers made a tent on a street nearby and folded it up in the morning. This was not always possible because Hanoi streets are quite narrow and the neighbours might complain. When carrying out repair projects, the workers could not sleep at the construction site because the homeowner stayed there. In these instances, a nice homeowner might give the workers some money so that they could take a bus to another construction site and return the next morning.
The *cai* organized free meals for his workers. Normally, each group of workers had a cook. Every day, the *cai* gave money to the group cook so that he or she could buy the food. The amount of money for each worker per day was 8000 *dong*. The *cai* also provided them with soap, rustic tobacco and toothpaste.

The cook was often the wife of a worker in the group. In some cases, however, the cook was a divorced woman or a male worker who had just started the job. The cook got a monthly wage of around 400,000 – 500,000 *dong*. His or her main task was preparing meals for the group. If the cook was a woman, she was also in charge of washing clothes for the *cai*. If the workers lived at the construction site, the cook was in charge of helping other workers with small jobs or working as a *phu* during work hours.

When the *cai* could not find a female cook, he asked a worker, usually a *phu*, to cook for the group. If this were the case, the worker still worked at the construction site, but he stopped his work two hours before the meals were expected to be ready. He would still be paid like a regular worker, but cooking was seen as undesirable. The men did not like to get up early in the morning and to do the small jobs of a woman.

At the end of my fieldwork, the female cook of the Thanh Hoa group went home because she got pregnant. The *cai* had difficulties finding a replacement for her. A young worker who had cooked in the past for about two weeks told the *cai* that he would quit his job if he had to cook. The *cai* then asked other workers, but no one wanted to do it. Finally, it was decided that all workers of the group had to cook by turn. After the female cook of the Thai Binh group quit her job after a traffic accident, the *cai* asked his son, a young worker, to cook because no one else was willing to do it.

Most *cai* wanted to have a female cook or even a female *phu*. They found that female employees were more obedient and hard-working. A female worker could accept jobs that male workers did not want to do. Unlike male workers, if women had to work harder than usual, they rarely complained:

> The participation of a woman makes everything cosy. When the group has a woman, the members are more closely knit with each other. Moreover, a woman can do a variety of tasks smoothly. When she has to work harder, she does not complain. The woman is weaker, so we usually give her priority. She does many jobs, but only small jobs. If the group has one or two women, it is very good (Su, *cai*, Nghe An)
It was, however, not very easy for a cai to find a female cook. Since the workers lived in an all-male environment, only a few families allowed their daughter or their wife to leave home to work in that environment. But some workers allowed their wives to work because they themselves were part of the group. The participation of a woman in the group made the simple life of construction workers more complicated. Their living and working space was no longer just for men. They had to make a private sleeping place for her and they could not do many things that they would have done if the group only had men. At the same time, cai did not want to have too many females in the group because it affected the quality of the work team.

Family Relations

During the time the workers lived in the city, their family could contact them on the cai’s number if he had a mobile phone. Otherwise, when the workers started a new project, the cai would ask the thaw or the homeowner to tell them their telephone number. Both cai of the two key groups in this study did not have a mobile phone. Thus, in the Thanh Hoa group, the workers’ families contacted them via the thaw’s telephone. In the Thai Binh group, the workers could receive phonecalls through a neighbour of the construction place. If the workers wanted to contact their family, they would phone the village. Often, the workers’ families did not have telephones, but one of their neighbours would. The workers did not write letters home because Hanoi was quite nearby. Some workers said that when they worked in the South, they visited their home only once a year. When this was the case, they would sometimes write a letter to their family. The workers could also contact their family through peers from the same village. When a peer went home, he would convey messages to his co-workers’ families. And when he returned to the city, he would convey messages back from the families.

Married workers visited home more frequently, about once every month. Young, unmarried workers visited their home every two or three months. They would stay at home for a few days and then return to work. In their family, the wife took on both house work and farm work. Thus, the workers did not have to do work while home. Some workers, however, might help their wife or their family to do farm work during the harvest. Many workers said that they got bored went they stayed at home because there was nothing to do:
Usually, I visit home once every month or every two months. Each time, I stay at home for 3-5 days. In my home, I have nothing to do, only eating and sleeping. Then when I feel bored, I go [to the city to work]. I get used to working like this. I feel bored at home. At home, I go see some friends in the village or ask them to go to a 'village bar'. That is all. [Question: Does not your wife ask you to do anything?] We have nothing to do. Only one person is enough to do the farm work and the house work. (Mao, tho, Thanh Hoa)

It seems that when workers get used to their work in the city, they start to see life in the village as boring:

You know, most men in the village have only one kind of work. That is tending ducks day after day. Sometimes, they help their wife plough the field. It is a boring life. I get used to leaving. Now when I go home, I feel bored. I go home every month, but each time I cannot stay for more than 2-3 days. I have nothing to do there. When I am at home, my wife never asks me to do anything. Only to stay at home with her. I get up at 10 o'clock in the morning, go for a walk and then go home to sit next to the table. It is so boring. Everyone is busy, and nobody has time to talk to me. In the evening, after our dinner, my wife asks the children to study until 9-10 o'clock and then she turns the television off. Then everyone goes to bed. A day finishes like that, so boring. (Hai, tho, Thai Binh)

The relationship between the cai and his workers

The workers do not have labour contracts with the cai. They also have no health or social insurance. If a worker has an on-site accident, the cai might give him and his family a certain amount of money for medicine and treatment.

A cai is accountable for his workers' behaviour to the thu, the homeowner and other people, including the neighbours of the construction site. Sometimes a cai has to dismiss a worker when people in the neighbourhood have complained about him. The most typical reason for this was that the worker was drunk and tried to pick a fight with a neighbour. One time, while a worker in the Thanh Hoa group was working on the 3rd floor of the house under construction, he dropped a brick on a vender on the street. This vender was a neighbour. The cai took him to the hospital and paid for the treatment. He wrote a letter of apology and discussed compensation with the relatives of the victim. To protect the worker, the cai did not tell them his name. Instead, he said that he was responsible for the affair. The cai then deducted the money he paid for the compensation from the worker's wage. However, the deduction was less than the compensation. This means that the worker paid a part and the cai paid the other part.
When the cai received a new worker, he did not discuss the wage with his worker in advance. During the first few work days, the cai observed and evaluated the new worker’s expertise and then decided on his wage. No interviewees told me that they asked the cai directly about their wage. The workers knew their wage when they got it for the first time.

At the beginning of the year when I worked for another cai, I got 20,000 dong per day. Now, I do not know. [Question: Why did not you ask the cai about your wage?] I hesitate. I am reluctant to ask about wage when I get a job. (Tuan, phu, Thanh Hoa)

If a worker was not satisfied with the wage that the cai paid him, instead of discussing it he quit the job to work for another cai. This was usually not the reason, however, for quitting. Often, the workers quit because the cai did not pay them timely, as I will describe later.

The workers did not get their wage every month. The cai kept the wages and gave them some money before they returned home. During the time the workers lived in the city, they could ask the cai for money if they had immediate need of it. This money was considered to be an advance payment (tien tam ung, in Vietnamese). Each cai has a book in which he marks the work days of every worker and the amount of money they have withdrawn. When the workers get either an advance payment or the wage itself, they did not receive any receipts.

Usually, the workers were paid the entire wage only after a project was finished or at the end of the traditional Vietnamese year. After the cai totalled up the number of work days and calculated a worker’s entire pay, he deducted the advance payment and gave him the remainder. There were two reasons for this. First, cai are only paid for a project by thau or the homeowner when the project is finished. Second, cai want to retain their workers. If the worker gets his entire wage early, he will go home and not return. If the worker and the cai come from the same village or had a trusting relationship, the workers were given the whole wage at the end of the year. If the relationship between the workers and the cai was less reliable, the workers were paid after each project was finished. Vinh and Hoi:

We do not get our wage monthly. I have not seen anyone in the group who got his wage this year. Usually, I get it only once a year. When I need some money, I asked him [Dat, the cai] for an advance payment. Over the four recent months, I got only 100,000 dong. For example, if I want to go home tomorrow, I will ask Dat to give me some money today and say that after finishing my family affair, I
will come back to work for him. Then he will give it to me. If he does not have money here, he will tell me that I can go home and see his wife [in the village] and ask her to give me. Even if we wanted to be paid every two or every three months, Dat would not have the money to give us. If I am the only person in the group who wants to get it [the wage], it is fine. But the group has 20 people, how much is then enough? The shau gives Dat only some money for food. Then he gets paid in accordance with the amount of work completed. For example, after we finished 10 jobs, they would pay the cai for 5 or 7 [jobs]. Each time Dat got a payment like that, he informed us. Then he gave each person around 500.000 dong. For those who did not want to get it [the money], Dat kept it. Last year, I got my paid only once at the end of the year. I work for him, if my family needs money, he will bring it to my home and give to my wife. (Vinh, tho, Thanh Hoa)

I got paid only once at the end of the year. Each time I went home, he [the cai] gave me only some money for transportation. If he was more generous and had quite a lot of money, he paid me a month of wage when I had worked for two months. Partly because he wanted to keep his workers, partly because he did not have the money. Often, undertaking such a project, he gets the entire payment only when the project is finished. (Hoi, tho, Thanh Hoa)

When I asked the workers in the Thanh Hoa group whether they wanted the cai to pay them immediately, only one worker said yes while most of them said no.

I want to get my wage monthly. We need the capital for our business. Since he [the cai] does not have it, I cannot ask him [a monthly wage]. (Loc, phu, Thanh Hoa)

But another person said:

I do not need to get a monthly wage. It is only a small amount; I could not use it for anything. Then I just buy some candy for my children, go out for a drink with some friends, spend something, then it is gone. Getting the entire wage once every year, I have some money for savings and I can do some big affairs. (Chi, phu, Thanh Hoa)

When the workers and the cai do not have a reliable relationship, the workers expect the entire wage when a project finished. Before I knew the Thai Binh group, they had finished a project. The workers then went home for a few days. That time, the cai gave the workers only part of the money but not their entire wage. This disappointed the workers. Some of them did not return to the group, and some of them went back to work for the new project. But they found ways to get the money from the old project as soon as they could. They did not wait until the project was finished, but asked the cai for money all the time. The workers kept track of the cai. They found out right after the cai got some money from the homeowner. Then they told each other and asked him for the money immediately. It was an implicit rule between the workers and the cai that the workers only could get money for family reasons. Normally,
When the workers worked in the city, they only asked the cai for a small advance payment. Thus they thought up some reasons to get the wage from the cai:

Now, the young workers, they are very clever. They said that their father got sick or their wife had an accident. Then they got the money and went home. [Question: Was it more than their wage?] No, only as much as their wage. But when they have the money, they will not come back. Usually, only a cai can welsh on his workers. The workers rarely can welsh on the cai. He knows our house, how could we welsh on him? Trust is like that. (Manh, tho, Thai Binh)

When the workers could not get their wage, they told the cai that they would quit the job if he did not pay them. Then the cai promised that he would pay them when the workers went home or when he got money from the thau. When I asked the workers of the Thai Binh group when they wanted to be paid, most of them said that they preferred to get it when they visited their home, around once a month, or when they needed it. One worker complained:

At the beginning of this year, I worked for another cai. The wage was a little bit lower than at this place, but he was always on time. We could ask for money whenever we needed. For example, if I had worked for only ten days and wanted to go home, he paid us the wage for ten days. It was very good; we had money whenever we went home. But this cai was bad. He got money from the thau many times, but he only gave us a little bit. Each time I went home, he gave me 50,000 dong. I paid 10,000 dong for the motorbike driver to go to the Long Bien bus station. Then I spent 15,000 dong taking a bus. After buying some candy for my children, I had only 10,000 dong left. When I came back [to the city], I had to bring money from home [to pay for transportation]. If I keep working for him, perhaps at the end of the year I could buy only some candy for my children. Then my family will have to eat the seed. Now I know what kind of person he is, so I want to be sure [to get the wage]. I will not let him drag me along. If he pays me the wage from the old project, I will continue my job. Otherwise, I will quit. (Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

As one might expect, the relationship between the cai and the workers was based on trust. The workers did not discuss their wage with the cai. Rather, the cai was the only one who determined the wage. And since the workers did not have labour contracts with the cai, they did not have any documents to ensure that they would be paid. Only the cai kept a record of the number of days worked and how many payments in advance were made. As mentioned above, the workers were not given receipts along with their wages or advances. Both the cai and his workers hoped that trust was the foundation for their relationship.

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6 Do thoc giong ra ma an: a Vietnamese saying that means 'eating the seed'. It is used to describe the situation of poverty. When people are too poor, they do not have enough rice for meals, and then they have to 'eat the seed'. This makes them poorer and more miserable because they will not have seed for the next crop.
The only thing the workers could do when the *cai* did not pay them was to quit. When deciding to quit the job, the workers were aware that they would lose the money from the days they had worked. I asked a worker of the Thai Binh group about this:

> If he does not pay me, I will quit the job and forget about that [the wage]. What is a better solution? Asking? When I asked him, he dragged me along [ask for a delay]. After quitting the job and I’ve tried to go [to his house or to the construction site] to ask him, but he keeps putting me off. Each time I go there, it costs around 50,000 *dong*. If I go several times, the expense for transportation will be higher than the debt. And I am not sure that I can get it back. (Viet, *phu*, Thai Binh)

If the worker and the *cai* had a good relationship or the *cai* paid his workers timely, the workers did not require to be paid very frequently. Rather, they liked to get a large amount of money at one time so that they could make some savings. This was the situation in the Thanh Hoa group.

However, if the worker came from the same village as the *cai*, he was not eager to ask the *cai* for his wage if he did not really trust him. In such a situation, the worker would wait until the end of the year because everybody assumed that the *cai* could not refuse to pay his fellow villagers. The Thai Binh group had only one worker who came from the same village as the *cai*. He told about the *cai* as follows:

> *Tet* is coming in a few months. I can wait. Let’s see how he will pay me. If he is not nice, next year I will work for another *cai*. Nowadays, there are many *cai*, there are just not enough *tho*. I knew that he has a bad reputation. That is why no villagers work for him. The main reason is that he did not pay the workers timely. As you see, there are a few groups in which the *cai* does not have workers from his own village. [Question: Could he refuse to pay his fellow-villagers?] He could not refuse. But he drew it out. He kept on putting off. He did that many times, and then he suffered discredit. (Long, *tho*, Thai Binh)

The trust is important for both the workers and the *cai*. If the *cai* trusts his workers, he does his business more easily. The *cai* does not have to supervise his workers too much since they work with responsibility. If the worker does not like the *cai*, he will not work hard when the *cai* is not at the construction site. Sometimes, workers might even steal some construction material. Thus, if the *cai* does not have a reliable team, he has to keep a keen eye on the project all the time. In the case of the Thai Binh group, the *cai* was rarely absent from the construction site. If he had to go home or go to a village to pick up new workers, he took a

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7 *Tet*: the traditional Vietnamese New Year.
one day-return trip. Sometimes, he went home in the evening and returned at the construction place the next morning. In contrast, the cai of the Thanh Hoa group trusted his workers. He sometimes went home for a week while the project in the city was still going on. One of his workers said:

This time, he [the cai] has had many family affairs and his wife got sick as well. That is why he went home for such a long time. When he is busy, he can go home for some days, it does not matter, and the work still goes smoothly. He trusts us. All members of our group are fellow-villagers. We are like brothers in a family. So it is easy to trust on their responsibility. (Hoi, tho, Thanh Hoa)

Working with a reliable cai ensured the workers that they could get their wage timely and fairly. Otherwise, they could be cheated when the cai ran off or delayed paying them:

Nowadays, many people do not want to work in Hanoi because they were cheated many times. If the cai came from Hanoi or another area, he usually asked an intermediary from a rural area to introduce some villagers to him. The cai then ran off, and the intermediary closed his eyes and the workers lost their wage. (Manh, tho, Thai Binh)

When the workers trust the cai, they work more willingly:

I do not care about the wage. Actually, it depends on the project. For example, if he gets much profit, he will share it with us. If he suffers a loss, we will not require much. We are in the same family [village] none of us are strangers. (Tuan, phu, Thanh Hoa)

As will be seen in Chapter 6, the different ways in which the workers in the two key groups were paid affected how and if they made use of sex services.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, at the time of this study, construction was in demand and a cai could find a project quite easily. Cai had difficulties, however, in finding construction workers because of the increase in projects. Consequently, competition arose among cai to find workers. Especially when workers quit during a project, the cai would find himself in a difficult situation. The homeowner or the thau might complain when they noticed that the cai did not have enough workers for the project. Every cai thus had a strategy to keep his workers. The rule between cai and workers was to pay in full only when a project was finished. In that way, at least, the cai could keep his workers for the duration of the project. A second way was for the cai to build up a kind of relationship with the worker, by perhaps awarding them bonuses. If the cai had a high profit from a project, he would give them some extra money. The size of the bonus might differ among workers. The more skilled or trustworthy workers
would be better compensated. In this way, the cai could expect these workers to return. Sometimes, the cai visited them at home or brought them gifts on some traditional holidays like New Year’s Day.

Occasionally, a cai recruits a worker by supporting a family that is needy. This was the case with Thai, a tho in the Thai Binh group. When his family was in a difficult situation, Thang gave them money to help pay off their debts. Thai then worked for Thang and Thang got his money back by deducting it from Thai’s wage.

When the cai of the Thai Binh group lost his workers’ trust by not paying them for the previous project, he found other ways of retaining them. He gave them some more advances or small bonuses. He also tried to build up relationships by visiting the workers’ houses. One worker, named Ngan, said many times that, if the cai did not pay him, he would quit the job. When Ngan wanted to go home, Cuong, the son of the cai, brought him home by motorbike and stayed in his house for two days instead of paying him his salary. By bringing Ngan home, Cuong could keep track of him and Ngan could save some money by not having to find his own transportation. Cuong made it clear that he wanted to improve his relationship with Ngan, but actually he was afraid that the worker would not return. Furthermore, during their trip back home, Cuong took Ngan to a brothel and paid all the expenses. Still, one month later, Ngan disappeared as soon as he was given his wage.

As for another skilled worker, named Cong, the cai of the Thai Binh group tried a different way to be nice to him. Cong, tho hoan thien, told me that the cai had invited him many times to go out for a massage. But he refused. He had received such invitations before from other cai because he was a craftsman. This respect for his talents was also reflected in the way that the cai and other workers treated to him. Sometimes, when I visited the group at the dinner time, I noticed that he was served a separate special diet. Cong explained: “I knew that he could not pay me. I worked for him because of the nice relationship between us that has lasted for a long time.” (Cong, tho, Thai Binh)

When the cai could not pay the workers on time or paid them less than they could get from other cai, he would try to nurture this kind of emotional relationship. Even though wages were important within the group, both the cai and his son claimed that: “Money is not important to me. The most important thing is camaraderie with colleagues.”
Although the cai of the Thanh Hoa group paid his worker punctually, it was not very easy for him to keep his workers. In xom Quat, the home village of the cai and his workers, construction work was considered a by-trade. Every man younger than fifty left the village to do construction work somewhere. Usually, only women, children and old people remained in the village. One worker described this as follows:

I’ll tell you this story, perhaps you’ll find it funny, but it is the reality in our village. As a rule in the village, when a family has a funeral, only men who are not the relative of the dead can carry his coffin. Nowadays at some funerals, the family of the dead can’t find enough men to carry the coffin because all the men in the village are working somewhere. (Son, tho, Thanh Hoa)

This village has several cai and, for every cai, the village is the main source of workers. That meant a great deal of competition between them for manpower. Like other cai in the village, Dat had some loyal workers who had worked for him for a long time, and some less loyal workers. Dat’s main concern with the less loyal workers was to pay them regularly. But Dat treated his loyal workers as if they were his relatives. When the family of a worker needed money, he gave them an advance that was higher than the worker’s wage.

Some workers left as a result of the poor condition of the rented house, and Dat had to find new workers. Dan, one of his loyal workers, told me about the difficulties in recruiting workers from the village:

Normally, in the middle of the year, it is very difficult to find a worker who is a fellow villager. This is because the workers stick to their cai. For example, I have worked for Dat like this, and then I go home for one or two months. During the time I am at home, another cai might invite me to work for him, but I won’t accept. I’ll wait for Dat, and when he has a new project, I will work for him. I may get a higher wage working for another cai, but I do not want him [Dat] to be displeased with me. That is why it is difficult to get a tho. Only when someone gets fed up with his cai will he agree to work for us [he means: work for Dat] (Dan, tho, Thanh Hoa)

It was much easier to get a phu. Since a new phu does not need any skills, the cai can ask anyone who is available. Most often, he looked for teenagers who had failed their high school entrance examination. Both key groups of this study had some of these workers. The youngest were 15 years old. Thinh, the youngest son of the cai of the Thai Binh group, and the only son of the cai in the Hai Hung focus discussion group are also examples. After these two 15-year-olds were not admitted by the high school, their fathers asked them to work as a phu and as a cook for the group. Dung, the cai of the Hai Hung group, explained:
Now, the group does not have any cook. So I asked him to do this work. Otherwise, he would get spoiled. He didn’t have anything to do in the village. I wanted him to study. We [Dung and his wife] let him get away without working in the household, but he was not able to study. He now needs to work so that he learns how hard life is. But I will give him another chance. He can take the exam next year. He will only work here for some months, then I will let him go home to prepare for the exam again. (Dung, cai, Hai Hung)

I asked the son of the cai of the Thai Binh group what he wanted to do in the future. He answered that, although he did not like this job, it was the only thing he could choose because he disliked studying. He would thus follow in the footsteps of his father and Cuong and Ty, his siblings.
Chapter 5

The key groups and city life

Every evening, the workers sat together and chatted. Their talks were mainly about things that had happened in the neighbourhood or in their home village. Some of them played chess or played cards. Other workers massaged each other or read some old newspapers given to them by the homeowner. Young, unmarried workers might spend their time writing a letter to their girlfriend or just a ‘flirt letter’ to a female friend. Vit, one young worker, had a new female friend. He wanted to write a letter, but he was not very self-confident about his writing skills. So he asked Ga, a peer, to write the letter on his behalf and paid Ga with a beer. It was an interesting game for both.

Once while the workers of the Thanh Hoa group were playing cards, the police came and asked them to come to the police station. A neighbour had complained about the gambling. Ultimately, they had to pay a fine – not for gambling, but for not being registered.

The workers’ sleeping quarters usually did not have a television. However, some nice homeowners might lend them an old one during the project. If it was a big project, the thau might buy a television and sell it to a worker after the project was finished. In this were the case, the workers could watch television in the evening. However, this was not the case with the two key groups in this study. The workers would sometimes stand in front of the window of neighbour’s house to watch television. The Thanh Hoa group had a nice neighbour who invited them to watch in her house. Only a small number joined because the house was not big enough for them all.

Some workers liked to go for a walk at night. Oftentimes, they went with a group of peers. Depending on the location of the construction site, the workers might wander about the streets of the neighbourhood or go to a public place, such as a park or a lake. One worker, Chi, said that when they were doing a project near a park, he and some peers enjoyed going to there in the evening to watch couples. It was quite the thrill for young workers to walk along crowded streets, flirting with the girls. In Vietnamese, this is called treu gai or tan gai. When they

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8 In Vietnam, if a resident of one region goes to another region, he or she has to inform the local authorities about his temporary stay. (Dang ky tam tru, in Vietnamese)
would come across a girl on the streets, a worker would make courteous advances such as, “You are very beautiful” or “Would you like to go out with me?” Although city girls usually ignored this, the workers enjoyed it. Sometimes, the girl’s friend would become angry and scuffled with the workers. Then the cai or some older workers had to intervene and stop the fight. Some workers told me that when they worked in rural areas, it was easy to make friends with girls in the neighbourhood, go out with them and even visit their house. In Hanoi, however, this was not possible because city girls were very arrogant. According to Trung (phu, Thai Binh group), “Country girls are gentle and well-behaved. City girls are arrogant. Hanoi people scorn people from the country like us.”

Instead of flirting with girls, some workers teased street prostitutes:

Sometimes, I went out with Quan. He was very playful. One evening at around 8 o’clock, we were on Buoi street. It was full of ‘street girls’, among them a pregnant woman with a belly that was as big as a basket. Quan kept asking the girls questions like these: “Would you like to go with me?”, “Is 10.000 dong ok?”, “Or 20.000 dong?” A girl thought that he was serious and followed us. After a while, Quan said that he did not have any money; he even emptied his pocket and let her check it (Hoang, phu, Thai Binh)

Workers sometimes went to a cheap pub to drink some wine or beer. They liked it when the construction site was close to such establishments. Some workers from the Thanh Hoa group complained about how boring it was because the neighbourhood did not have any cafes or bars. At other sites, they could go to a cheap bar or a karaoke. Some cafes even offered movies on the street. The customers only had to purchase one drink and could sit watching movies for hours. Now and then, workers went to these cafes to buy a coffee or beer and stayed there the whole night. Usually, however, they only stood and watched the movies from a distance.

Sometimes, workers were mischievous. Ngan from the Thai Binh group told me this story. On night, he and two others went to a banana garden where many couples were having sex. He said that couples who went there were usually sex workers and their clients. They met a couple that was having sex and shouted: “What are you doing here? You want to steal bananas, don’t you?” The couple ran away and left a bag behind. Inside, they found a nice belt and some clothes. A worker took the belt and they left the bag there.
Friends in the city

Most of the workers said that they did not have any friends among the urban residents. Hai from Thai Binh said that he had made a few friends in the neighbourhood on some old projects, but that he could not maintain the friendship after the projects were over. It was difficult to make friends with city people due to the differences in living standard and social class.

I don’t want to have contact with city people. Sometimes, I want to be friends with them, but I find it difficult. I knew a few, but I was not very close to them. I am afraid that they would think badly about me. Maybe they think that they are better than us. We aren’t city people, we’re from the country. So I hesitate. (Son, Tho, Thanh Hoa)

Some workers had relatives who lived in the city, but they rarely contacted them:

Although I have many relatives here, I rarely visit them. I don’t like it. If they go to the village, we are very happy together. But when I work here, it’s different. I come here to work. If I see them frequently, they think that I’m visiting them to ask for help. All of them are richer than me. Sometimes they give me money, but I never accept. Once a cousin gave me many clothes since I did not accept the money. He thinks I am so poor that I don’t have money to buy clothes for myself. But you see, how could we dress up when we do this job? (Hai, Tho, Thai Binh)

Workers can make friends with other migrant workers. If they are doing a big project, they might have friends who work in the other teams.

Our social relations here are mainly with members within our group. If we have friends, most of them are our colleagues from other rural areas. We meet each other on a construction project and then we may not see each other after the project finishes. Very few people have a friend who is not a construction worker. Today we work here; tomorrow we may work somewhere else. Thus, our relationship [with those friends] is not close. At first, we keep in touch, but then we forget each other gradually. (Quang, phu, Thanh Hoa)

Obviously, the mobile nature of their work and the feeling of inferiority regarding their social class hinder close relationships and friendships in the city. Their social relationships in the city are mainly with their peers. Even when fellow villagers do another kind of work in the city, they usually do not visit each other while in the city.

Some married workers stated that after they were married they no longer made real friendships. Their family was their whole life and the rest of their time was devoted to work.
The Thanh Hoa group

Dat, the cai of the Thanh Hoa group, had worked as a tho for many years. As I mentioned before, Dat and nearly all of his workers came from the same village, xom Quat. Dat no longer did construction jobs himself; he only assigned jobs to his employees. Still, he lived together with them.

The workers in the group had close relationships with each other. Many of them had worked for Dat for a long time. Peers shared stories about their family, their work and their concerns. It was clear that everyone in the group knew each other’s families and about the intimate relationships between other peers. For example, the female cook, Tuyet, told me this about another worker:

He is a very nice husband. He loves his wife very much. It is hard to find such a nice man in the village. He works hard to earn money and then brings everything to his wife. They have a good house in the village. When we worked on a project in Ha Long, he even brought his wife there so that she could visit the city. One time, he bought ten slips for his wife. His wife reproved him because she thought it was wasting money. How could we find such a man in the village? (Tuyet, female cook, Thanh Hoa)

The workers told me that their group was like a big family.

You only come here once in a while, so perhaps you do not know. Actually, we are like a big family. We are fellow villagers. Everyone is the brother in a family. The young workers sometimes make bad jokes and quarrel with each other. We then have to ask them about the story to know who is wrong, who is right. We reprove [the person who is wrong] and admonish him. We are responsible together.

But there is no competition among us. Competition only happens between two different groups. We admonish each other because we have the same benefit. If something goes wrong, then the whole group will have a bad reputation. (Mao, tho, Thanh Hoa)

We are very close to each other. We are from the same village, so when we work here, we need to protect each other. If my family needs some money, my wife just conveys the message to a peer, and then I know the news. If I can go home, it is ok. But if I cannot, I can ask someone going to my village to bring the money to my wife. (Mui, tho, Thanh Hoa)

There was a hierarchy in the group. The young workers had to respect the older workers. The small tasks were the responsibility of the young workers. If the workers wanted some wine with their dinner, for example, one of the young guys had to go buy it. The older workers were in turn responsible for admonishing as well as protecting their younger colleagues.
All people in the group are fellow villagers. So we [young workers] have to respect the older workers. They are like our uncles. We have to do the small jobs. For example, although Tuyet is the group cook, we must prepare the meals. We bring food and arrange the bowls and chopstick before every meal. Then, after the meal, we bring the trays of bowls and chopsticks to the kitchen and Tuyet will wash them. When we flirt with girls, we may scuffle with other groups. Then the uncles [he means: older workers] will defend us. (Tuan, phu, Thanh Hoa)

Since age is considered important for a person’s position within the hierarchy of Vietnamese society, even a young tho has to respect an older phu:

I am a tho, but I am young. I sometimes feel awkward when I have to ask some older phu for something. Nguyen, for instance, is as old as my father. If I need some mortar, I could ask a young phu by saying just “mortar” and that is fine. But with Nguyen, I must ask: “Could you bring me some mortar?” And when I am working, I am tired; I do not want to say long sentences. Sometimes, I forget this and say just “mortar” to him. Then I feel sorry. (Tuyen, tho, Thanh Hoa)

The relationship between the cai and his worker is not just a relationship between an employer and his employee. The cai is responsible to the worker’s family for his life and work in the city. When Dat invites a young unmarried worker to work for him, he has to ask both the worker and his parents. Without his parents’ approval, the worker cannot work for Dat. Dat is also in charge of the worker’s behaviour in the city. If the worker gets spoiled, the cai will get a bad name.

When Dat received a new phu as a beginner, he had to take care of him like a nephew:

I still remember the time I started this job. We worked in Lang Son. I went there in January and I could not visit home until September. Dat did not allow me to go home alone. He was afraid that I might get lost. He said if I wanted to go home, he would bring me home. He went home many times to pick up the workers. So I did not want to disturb him. He was very busy. But in September, when he went home to visit his wife, I followed him. (Tuyen, tho, Thanh Hoa)

The cai is responsible to the worker’s family for his wage. The workers usually only asked Dat for an advance when they needed some money in the city. At the end of the year, Dat gave their wage to their parents or their wife. When a worker’s family needed money, Dat or his wife brought the money to his house in the village while the worker continued his work in the city. If the workers were given too many advances and spent too much money in the city, Dat would be thought less of:
I never give them many advance payments. The maximum is 15% of the wage. If I give them more money, their family is not happy. They know that if their husband or son works so much, but only brings a little money home, that I will get a bad reputation. I may lose the worker. The worker will spend too much. His wife will become angry and they'll quarrel. Eventually, the worker will quit his job and work for another cai. (Dat, cai, Thanh Hoa)

In turn, the cai got the worker’s respect. The young workers respected the cai not only because he was older, but also because he had given them their job and took the responsibility for their work and life in the city. With older and skilled workers, the relationship was on a more equal footing. There was a certain amount of respect that the cai had to show his skilled workers.

The Thai Binh group

Thang, the cai of the Thai Binh group, had also worked as a tho for a long time. During the period of my fieldwork, he had two construction projects going on at the same time. One was a state project on Hoang Quoc Viet Street. The other was a private house on Thai Thinh Street. He let his oldest son, Cuong, carry out and supervise the project in Thai Thinh. In Thai Thinh, Thang was the person who signed the contract with the homeowner, but Cuong was the person who directly implemented the project. Thang visited the work crew in Thai Thinh around three or four times a week. In the eyes of his workers, Cuong had all the rights of a cai. Cuong received projects, hired workers independently and, more or less, operated his own business. But, in fact, he could not survive on his own. Cuong was a playboy. When he earned money, he spent it all, but when he suffered losses, he asked Thang for help. Thus, it is hard to say whether Cuong should be considered as a cai or not. To distinguish him from his father, this study will mention Thang as the cai and Cuong as the son of the cai. But the group’s workers considered both of them as cai. My fieldwork took place among the men working on the project in Thai Thinh.

Thang and Cuong lived at the construction site with their workers. Unlike Dat, they also did construction jobs as tho. Seven workers came from a village, xom Ca. Four workers were from another village, xom Muoi. The other workers came from different villages in the same province.
Four months before I came to the group, Cuong had engaged a new female cook, a 25 year-old woman named Thu. She was also from xom Ca. She was married and had two relatives who worked in the group. Two months before my fieldwork began, Thu went home for a month and Cuong received another female cook, a 31 year-old woman named Huong. Huong was divorced and she did not have any fellow villagers or relatives in the group. When Thu returned, she had to work as an assistant because Huong already filled the position. In the second month of my fieldwork, Thu’s husband asked her to come home and she did not return. One month later, Huong was involved in a traffic accident and broke her leg. She had to go home for the remainder of my fieldwork.

Both Thang and Cuong did not get much respect. Workers spoke ill of them with me. They reported that when Thang got money, he brought it home; and when Cuong had money, he indulged in playing. They did not trust either of them, especially not Cuong. On some occasions, the workers did not treat them like their boss. They talked back when they were asked to do things that they did not want to do. The following incident took place when the workers were at dinner:

Sometimes, Thang chose burned rice [at the bottom of the pot. In Vietnamese: mieng chay], and thus ate slowly. And I had to tell him: “Can you eat faster? Otherwise, they [the workers] will eat it all.”
(Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

Although Thang was 55 years old, a 22 year-old worker could tease him like this:

Sometimes, I like to tease him [Thang]. I said: “Shall we go out to night? I know a nice bar with young women. You will have the feeling that you are 20 years younger”. Then he said he would beat me and laughed. (Viet, phu, Thai Binh)

Moreover, the cai was afraid of the skilled, veteran workers. I visited the group once when they were having dinner. While I talked with the workers, Thang spoke impolitely to me. Two workers got angry and stopped their dinner immediately. Thang apologized in front of the group, while I did not really understand the situation and went home. The day after, Thang apologised to me. Afterwards, Thang was nice to me and tried to gain my sympathy. All of this was different from the situation in the Thanh Hoa group. Though Dat also respected his skilled workers, it was still easy for him to assert his authority as the leader of the group.

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9 He said: “Why do you ask such a stupid question?”
Unlike the Thanh Hoa group, the hierarchy among members of the Thai Binh group was not based on their age or the time that they had worked on a project. Those who were either more skilled or more sharp-tongued were the most powerful. The workers liked to bully someone who was considered silly. The group had a worker who was meek. He was asked to do the small jobs that no one else wanted to do. The workers enjoyed teasing him that he was like a woman and that he got married but did not know how to sleep with his wife. A 46 year-old worker showed his discontent about the situation in the group:

I'm getting fed up with this job. I am tired. I am too old to compete with the young [workers]. They are healthier and can learn new skills faster. They like to compete with each other. Those who are talented are quite arrogant. I am not close to anyone in the group. They are very insolent. They treat me like I am the same rank as they are. They trifle and talk with me very rudely. Sometimes, I feel self-pity. This group does not have any hierarchy. Everybody argues. Those who are more sharp-tongued work less hard. So, I don't like anyone. I keep a distance from them. (Manh, tho, Thai Binh)

The workers who came from the same village were closer to each other than the other workers. They discussed how to deal with Cuong. After one project was finished and Cuong paid them only a little money to go home with, some workers did not want to work for him anymore. They stayed in the village. A worker named Ngan decided to go back to Hanoi to wait for his wage. His fellow villagers asked him to let them know whether Cuong paid him. If Ngan was given his due earnings, they would return as well. Otherwise, they intended to work for another cai. As it turned out, Ngan did not receive his pay and his fellow-villagers quit working for Cuong. In addition, I learned some more sensitive information from workers who came from other villages. They kept this information within the group of their fellow villagers. I will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

In sum, the two key groups provided two different pictures. While the workers in the Thanh Hoa group trusted their cai and accepted to get their wage at the end of the year, the workers in the Thai Binh group found any ways to get the wage from their cai. Moreover, Dat, the cai of the Thanh Hoa group, was responsible to his workers' families. Dat would get a bad reputation if he gave too many advance payment to his workers and made them 'spoiled'. In contrast, the cai of the Thai Binh group gave his workers many small advance payments to deal with their complaints about the delay in their wage. As you will read in the next chapter, this affects the workers' visit to sex workers in the city.
Chapter 6

Sexual relations

This chapter will discuss the sexual behaviour and sexual relationships of the workers in the city. First, I will look at this issue by focusing on the two key groups. Then, I will discuss this theme as it pertains to construction workers in general and include the opinions of the workers in the FGDs.

The Thai Binh group

At night, the workers involved with the project in Thai Thinh put planks together to make three ‘beds’. One was located in a tent on the pavement in front of the construction site. This tent was pitched at the end of the day and was folded up in the morning. The two other beds were on the second and third floor of the house under construction. If the workers needed to use the planks during the day, they would disassemble the two beds and reconstruct them in the evening. These three beds made up the ‘sleeping quarters’ for twenty workers and two women. Compared to normal beds, they were very big ones. Half of the bed on the second floor was for the two women. The rest was for the workers. The workers and the women did not sleep separately. The sleeping places were not assigned, so on one day a worker might sleep in the tent, while on the next day he might want to sleep on the bed on the second floor.

It was evident that the two women of the group, Thu and Huong, had sexual relations with Cuong and some other workers in the group. The relationship between Cuong and Huong was obvious. The workers said that Huong and Cuong had sex just next to their sleeping area and made it difficult for them to sleep. Because there were no separate sleeping places, this really disturbed them. Quite often, Cuong assigned tasks to the workers and took Huong elsewhere during the day. This made Thang angry and, on one occasion, he went to Thai Thinh and reproved Cuong and Huong in front of the group. A worker reported:

They are like spouses. They sleep together at night. Many times, he asked Huong to boil water for him so that he could take a shower with warm water. He asked Huong to bring the water to the bathroom and then asked her to rub his back. When I had just come from Hoang Quoc Viet [another project], I
wondered whether they were husband and wife. When I asked her [about her family], she said that she was married [with someone else] and already had children. (Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

Huong and Cuong did not explicitly admit their relationship, but they also did not hide it. I went to Huong’s house in her village when she went home for the harvest. Some days later, Cuong visited us at night. He said that he would stay there, and the next day he would take Huong and me to his house and the houses of some other workers. (Huong’s house was 25 km from Cuong’s house). Huong said that Cuong would sleep in her house and Huong and I would sleep in the house of Thuong, her neighbour. She then took me to Thuong’s house and went back to her own house. She said that she had to bring the rice from the yard to the house (during the harvest Huong left rice in her yard during the day to let it dry up), and when she had finished, she would come back. That night she did not return. The next morning when I went to Huong’s house, she was cooking in the kitchen. She explained that she finished her work too late and she did not want to wake me up, therefore she had gone to her relative’s house (also her neighbour). While she was explaining herself, Cuong was wearing a slip, lying on the bed and he asked: “Huong, where are my clothes?” During our conversation at her house, Thuong told me that Cuong had been visiting Huong and spending the night at her house for several months.

It was obvious that Huong liked Cuong very much. She was the only employee in the group who had good opinions about Cuong. In contrast, Cuong told me that he had a girlfriend and did not plan to have a serious relationship with Huong.

Ngan, one of the workers, said that Huong sometimes had also sex with other men in the group. When somebody wanted to have sex with Huong, Cuong deducted an amount from his wage. More or less, he assumed the role of a pimp. This is part of an interview with Ngan:

For example, Cuong says that tonight he will allow Manh to be with Huong, and tomorrow he will give Huong 50,000 dong and then he will deduct 50,000 dong from Manh’s wage.

Question: Does Manh discuss this with Huong or Cuong?

With both. They work together. You only come and visit us, you cannot know, you may not realise anything special, but if you work here, you will know.

Question: Cuong is also with Huong. Did he give her something?

Yes, of course. Money. And she doesn’t do anything, only cook. Thang got angry, he reproved her harshly once.

10 Huong’s house had only one room and the room has only one bed. She stayed alone in the house. When she worked in the city, the house was empty.
Question: Are there other ones who had a relation with Huong besides Cuong and Manh?
Loi, Thai and Hai

Question: How about Viet and Thanh?
No, Viet and Thanh are not involved. They are from a different village. Minh got two benefits at the same time. He finds a woman, then he makes money and also he has a cook. (Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

I got this information from only one worker of the group; it was therefore hard to verify.

Thu also had sexual relations with Cuong since she worked as a cook. But the relation between them was not obvious, since Thu was kept an eye on by her nephew and brother-in-law. Cuong rarely had sex with Thu at the construction site. Rather, he sometimes found a reason to take Thu somewhere else for a few hours. When Thu came back to the group from the village, Cuong had sex with both women although he had to be more secretive in his relation with Thu.

Thu and Huong, Cuong uses both. Sometimes, they lie on the plank upstairs [he means: on the third floor]. Cuong is in the middle, Thu and Huong are on both sides [of Cuong]." (Hai, tho, Thai Binh)

As one might expect, Thu and Huong did not like each other. They make sarcastic remarks about each other whenever they had a chance. When I had just started visiting the group, Thu hung out with me and she was the first one to tell me about the relationship between Cuong and Huong. She did not criticize Cuong, but described Huong as a spoiled woman. Later on, when Thu’s husband asked her to come home and she did not return, Huong started to speak ill of Thu with me.

Cuong used Thu and Huong not only for his sexual pleasure, but also as a tool to his advantage. The story about Cuong and Huong offering ‘sex services’ to some workers offers clear evidence of this. Moreover, a worker named Hai, Cuong’s cousin, reported that Cuong invited him on many occasions to have a relationship with these two women:

Several times Cuong told me: “Can you take one? They follow me too much.” The two women were jealous and tormented him. He got angry and wanted to give me one. Even in the beginning, when only Thu was there, he sometimes invited me. But I do not have a good feeling about them [about Huong and Thu]. (Hai, tho, Thai Binh)

Hai was a skilled worker and also the dau canh of the group. When Cuong was not at the construction site, he was the one in charge. It is understandable that Cuong wanted to offer Hai some favours. Although Ngan said that Hai sometimes had sex with Huong, Hai did not
admit that he had had relations with the two women. He did, however, acknowledge that he
sometimes went out with Cuong to buy sex in some bars.

The workers realised that Cuong was an extravagant playboy. He made them feel insecure.
Even though Cuong offered them favours, they worker were worried about losing their wages.
As a result, many of them quit their jobs.

We work hard, but he took Huong somewhere during the day, then at night they are together until 1-2
o'clock. It is very frustrating. Once, all of us stopped working and wanted to go home because he did
not care. He was just stuck to her all the time. (Trung, phu, Thai Binh)

Now, I will return to the story about Thu. According to Huong and some other workers, Thu
also had sexual relations with two other people. One was Suu, the cai of another group. He
was Cuong’s cousin. Suu used to visit Thai Thinh because his project was nearby. The other
was Loi from the Thai Binh group, Huong’s old boyfriend. Loi was the one who introduced
Huong to Cuong. Having doubts about Thu’s activities in the city, her husband asked her to
come home. Loi took Thu to her home village on his motorbike. They left Hanoi in the
evening and did not arrive until the following morning. Her husband got angry when he
learned that Thu was somewhere during the night. After that, she was not allowed to return to
the city.

Many workers admitted that they had bought sex in the city. They also told me about the
behaviour of their peers. In this way, by the end I knew that almost all workers of the group,
with the exception of two, had visited sex workers in the city. Often, the men went out right
after their dinner, around 8 o’clock at night, and came back to the construction site two hours
later. They sometimes returned very late, at midnight. Cuong used to complain about this
because this would make the men tired and affect their work the next day.

There were three levels of sex services the workers had experience with. The first was the
most luxurious. Only skilled workers could access this service. It was a service the cai offered
his best and most reliable workers. In the Thai Binh group, there were at least two who were
granted this special privilege. One was Cong, a tho hoan thien. He only worked on a project
during phan hoan thien and he could do many jobs that no one else in the group was able to
do. The other was Hai, Cuong’s cousin. Although Hai was less skilled than Cong, he was the
dau canh of the group. Cong told me that he refused but Hai said that he accepted it. This is
Hai’s description:
We sometimes go to Khoang Xanh on our way home. Last month, he took me to Gia Lam. We spent 700.000 dong for only one night. [Question: How much for a girl?] 350.000 dong for the whole night. They offered 2 coffees, 2 cigarettes and 2 lemons. And we had to pay for the room separately. The most expensive room is 120.000 dong. It has an air conditioner. (Hai, tho, Thai Binh).

The second level of sex service was when workers would go to a bar to have some drinks and then buy sex. The cost was around 100.000 – 150.000 dong for one hour. The client could also pay for the sex worker and the rent separately. I interviewed a worker named Ngan in a bar in Thai Thinh street, a normal bar that looked similar to many other bars on that street, at least at my first sight. In that interview, Ngan described how buying sex services in bars was organized:

I go to a bar like this one and ask secretively how much it costs, a room with a girl. They may say 100.000 [dong] per hour. I stay there for two hours, and then I pay 200.000 dong. This house also has that service. [Remark: I do not see any rooms!] Yes, they have them in the second floor. For example, we saw the girl that brought the drink to us. If we like her, we can ask. [We] always pay by the hour. If our group has two people, we can ask to rent a room for two hours. Often around 60.000 dong per hour [only for the room]. After that we pay the girl. (Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

Buying sex in bars was an expensive option for the workers. It was thus not a popular choice. Oftentimes, they looked for ‘street girls’, which I consider as the third level of sex service. The workers said that there are even different levels of ‘street girls’. The cost of a quite acceptable girl who looked between 30-40 years old ranged from 30.000 to 50.000 dong. But some street workers accepted less, from 10.000 to 20.000 dong. With 20.000 dong, a client could be able to afford a girl that looked ‘dirty’ or ‘horrible’.

A worker might go out alone or with some other peers. He might have to borrow a nice shirt for going out. He might go by bus or on foot. If someone had a bicycle, he could use it. Because Thai Thinh was near to Nga Tu So, the place where many cheap sex services were offered, the workers used to walk there. When a worker discussed the price with a ‘street girl’, he could sometimes not reach an agreement. Then he would go back to his place, and the woman followed him to the construction site to continue the bargain.

After finding a sex worker, the men might spend 30.000 dong renting a room. If they did not want to pay the rent, they would have sex in places like the corner of a street, a park, a garden, or next to a river or lake. They would also bring the sex worker to the construction site:
Some days ago, Viet brought a woman to our place. Cuong and I were sleeping on the beds downstairs [he means the one in the tent on the pavement]. Suddenly I woke up. I saw Viet, Dai, Than and a woman. At that time, Viet finished his work. Dai and Than were going to do [he means: were going to have sex with the sex worker]. I said: “Take her to somewhere else right away, otherwise Cuong might wake up and will become angry.” Viet said: “I bring her here for you, but you reprove me.” I saw the woman; she covered her face with a cloth. I thought, perhaps she is an acquaintance, hence I opened the cloth. Do you know, her face was distorted, maybe inborn? One side of her cheek was big and the other was small. When I saw her, I felt horrible. I said to Viet: ‘Take her somewhere immediately, otherwise I will kill you’. They had to gather their clothes and went right away. They went to the corner of the playground for children nearby our place to continue. (Hai, tho, Thai Binh).

Other workers also told me this story. In fact, after that night, the story became a topic that the workers used to tease each other. They referred to the woman with the name ‘con bit mat’ or ‘ba gia’. These stories showed that some peers might share a sex worker, whether she is a ‘street girl’ or a sex worker in a bar.

I noticed that the Thai Binh group was divided into two main subgroups, though some workers belonged to neither of these. Those who came from the same village formed a subgroup. They were closer to each other. These workers went out together to seek sex services. One subgroup was involved in sexual relations with Huong. The other was involved in the sex service offered by ba gia as I mentioned above. In the interviews, a worker would often tell me about the sexual behaviour of peers in the other subgroup. In fact, I heard the story about ba gia from Huong and workers who were not involved in it. Similarly, I got the information about Huong’s relations from a worker of the other subgroup. After commenting on the behaviour of other peers, some workers started to talk about their own behaviour. After Hai told me the story of ba gia, he said, for instance, that Viet always chose the cheapest options and went to ‘dirty places’, and that he himself also went out but chose the cleaner and safer places.

While peers told me sensitive information about other peers who were not in their subgroup, they kept the sensitive information about those from their own subgroup to themselves. The following interview with Ngan, a fellow villager of Thu, is an example of this:

Recently, Thu’s husband heard the news that Thu had something with Loi, going out or something like that. So he beat her seriously.

Question: Did Thu really have some thing with Loi?

31 In Vietnamese, con bit mat means ‘the woman who covers her face’ and ba gia means ‘old woman’. 
I don’t know. At that time I worked at Hoang Quoc Viet. That night, after beating her, he came to my house. He said he got furious with Thu and cracked down on her seriously. He didn’t know then whether she was still alive. He came to my house by bicycle. My house is three km from his house and in the middle of the forest. I said: “You beat your wife seriously, why are you sitting here now?” Then he asked me to go to his house with him. So he and I went to his house by bicycle with a lamp. We went there and drank wine with chicken for some hours.

Question: Who cooked the chicken?

His wife. When we went there, we knew that she was fine although her face was considerably swollen. So he asked her to catch a chicken in the stable and to cook it for us. I said to him: “I do not know whether she had something or not, but if you saw it by your own eyes or you heard it by your own ears, then you should beat her. But in fact you were not sure, thus it is not good to beat her. If she had died, how could you have found enough money [to compensate]? Even if she had died, it was not the worst thing possible. You would have lost your wife; you still could have married another wife. But if she had become disabled, you would have had to bear her during the rest of her life. That is enough to let you die of suffering. So, now the best way is to talk to her to find a solution.” I talked a lot that night and went home very late. Now they are fine. (Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

Ngan gave me a great deal of information about the relation between Huong and Cuong and about other relations that happened in Thai Thinh. Therefore, working in Hoang Quoc Viet was not the real reason that he did not know about Thu’s affair. Moreover, he also worked at Thai Thinh later on while Thu was still there. In addition, even I, an outsider who had only recently been in contact with the group, knew Thu’s story. How could a worker in the group like him not know about it? Thus, I believe that he knew about Thu’s affair, but that he wanted to avoid admitting this. Since Thu was his fellow villager, he felt reluctant to disclose sensitive information about her. He tried to direct the conversation to the topic of the conflict between Thu and her husband. In this way, he had an opportunity to describe his role in arranging the affairs of his friend’s family. I will come back to this case later on in this chapter.

The Thanh Hoa group

The Thanh Hoa group provided me with quite the opposite picture. Since Tuyet, the female cook, was the wife of a worker in the group, there was no doubt that she did not have sex with anyone in the city except her own husband. None of the workers in the group admitted to buying sex for themselves in the city. A young worker said that when he had worked for another group, which also included fellow villagers, there were some workers who had
bought sex and had told him about it. Since the information I got was mainly about how to buy sex in the city and no difference from what the Thai Binh group had told, I will not mention it here. Some workers and the cai said that, although buying sex happened among construction workers, it was not a popular phenomenon. Consequently, my questions focused on the reason for this.

When I asked why buying sex among the men of the Thanh Hoa group was so unpopular, most of them mentioned their fear of getting a bad reputation. According to the workers, this kind of information traveled very fast within the village.

We are staying here, but any information about us is transmitted to the village as fast as electricity. Do you still remember the story about how some of us were kept at the police station for a night? Only two days after that event, all the people in the village, including children, knew that. They talked about it everywhere. Only two days, and during these days, no one [he means: no workers in the group] went home. I do not know how the news could spread so quickly. (Mao, tho, Thanh Hoa)

I also experienced this when I went to Tuyet’s house in the village. I arrived in the village at 10 o’clock in the morning. At noon, I came to the house of Thong, Tuyet’s neighbour. They invited me to have lunch there. Around 2 o’clock in the afternoon, when Tuyet and I were visiting houses of workers, we had to stop several times on our way to say hello to the villagers. I was surprised that all of them not only knew about me, but also knew all the details of my trip so far, including the fact that I had had lunch at Thong’s house and what we had eaten for lunch.

The workers explained that news the village was very quick because the villagers were very honest and showed their concern for each other more than city people did.

We care about each other. We [rural people] are very different [from city people] about affection. If a person gets a serious illness at midnight, then everyone in the neighbourhood will get up to take him to the hospital. Here, you only need to make a call and after a few minutes the ambulance will stop in front of your door. That is why we have the saying “we live on the neighbours, we die with the villagers.” If anything happens, no matter whether it is a small or big affair, all villagers will get the news. When a worker goes out [to buy sex], one of his peers will tell his wife. That woman will tell her neighbours. In that way, the news will spread all over the village. If a worker goes out, we know of course. Because we come here from the village, we do not have friends here. If someone has a new relationship, anyone [in the group] will know it right away. Rural people are very honest, they will tell other people. If

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12 See: Chapter 5
13 Vietnamese saying “Song nho dan chet nho lang” means people always need the help of their neighbours and fellow villagers even after they die.
somebody goes out one or two times and does not tell us, we may not know. But if a person has that manner [he means: sexually active], he cannot go for only one or two times. He will go many times and we will know. We will notice that he always goes out alone without any reason [he means: do not tell peers where he goes] (Mui, thọ, Thanh Hoa).

If a person has a bad name in the village, he or she will have to live in shame:

Having a bad reputation in the village is quite awful. If the villagers know that a person has an extra relationship, he or she may not dare to look at anyone in the village. That kind of news can spread very fast in our village. And when he goes out, the only way is to bow his head and not to look at anyone. (Tuan, phu, Thanh Hoa)

Moreover, if a person has a bad reputation, this will affect all of his family and relatives:

Everything has its fame [He means: Everything that happens is reported and affects the reputation of the persons involved]. That fame affects not only you, but also your family, your parents and your relatives. If you have a good reputation, then all of your relatives are proud of you. But if you have a bad reputation, it will influence your whole family. For example, my daughter is going to get married. If someone in the village says that I am a playboy and that I usually go out in the city, my daughter will have a difficult time. No boys in the village will want to marry her. That is why we always have to be cautious about this” (Hoi, thọ, Thanh Hoa)

Some workers in the Thanh Hoa group said that sex service is too expensive for them since their income is quite low. Therefore, they had to constrain their sexual desires to save money. One worker, named Thong, implied that he would masturbate rather than buy sex, in order to save money:

Some people choose that way [buying sex]. But not many, only some stupid people. 30.000 đong per time, and the wage of a work day is gone. If you think like this, you will regret it. Yeah, we are human, we are not rock. But we have to find a way. Clever peoplemasturbate, stupid people have to die. [He means: going out and wasting their money] (Thong, thọ, Thanh Hoa)

Another reason that the workers in the Thanh Hoa group did not access sex services is related to the cai’s involvement in their lives and how he pays them. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, Dat was responsible to the workers’ families for their wages.

All members of our group are either relatives or fellow villagers. So I have to be careful. Their family trust me and allow their husband/son to work for me. If a worker, after some months of work with me, gets spoiled, I will get a bad name. As a person who conducts the work for the villagers, I will suffer

14 The worker used the Vietnamese phrase ‘nguoi hieu biet’ which means ‘people who have knowledge’.
discredit with their family if their husbands/sons [the workers] come home without [much enough] money. (Dat, cai, Thanh Hoa)

If a worker goes out and spends too much money, his wife or parent can reproach the cai:

Some years ago, a worker went out too much. His wife came to my house and reproached me. She asked me not to give him advance payments. I should give him them only when he had an appropriate reason. Sometimes it is difficult for me, when I do not give to some people [the advance payment], they stage a sit-down. They say that they are sick and not able to work, and just lie on the beds the whole day. (Dat, cai, Thanh Hoa)

This shows that the cai and the worker's family can control the worker's expenses in the city. It is really hard for the workers to buy sex frequently when they get no money from the cai. Dat said, however, that it is sometimes possible for a worker to go out. In his opinion, this used to be the case with married workers:

Young workers are easier for me because they are more docile. They go out less. They are too young. When they come here, they are still shy and do not know much. Moreover, young workers are easier to handle financially. But older and married workers, those who have that manner [he means: sexually active], will go. I cannot control them. They ask for money many times and sometimes I have to give it. (Dat, cai, Thanh Hoa)

Interestingly, only one worker mentioned HIV as the reason for not buying sex in the city. All the others did not mention it. Even when I asked about it in a suggestive way, they still denied this:

Do you think that the risk of HIV is one of the reasons that the workers do not want to go out? (Laugh) No, of course not. We are afraid of getting a bad reputation. (Mao, tho, Thanh Hoa)

All workers knew about HIV and the ways HIV is transmitted. They said that it was an issue even children knew about. They were also aware of the risks of HIV. When I asked: “Are you afraid of the risks of HIV?”, everyone said, “Yes”. Later, I understood that the workers were afraid of HIV like it was a monster. They told me about how people living with HIV in their village were discriminated against. They showed their horror when I told them a story I knew about HIV. But the topic of HIV was something far away, while reputation in the village was part of their daily life.
For some workers of the Thanh Hoa group, buying sex was a form of bad behaviour and also costly. If they wanted to have extra-marital sex, they would prefer to have a relationship with someone in the neighbourhood of the construction site or with a female peer:

Among construction workers like us, a few people go out or go to bars [to buy sex]. If they have a relation, they often have relations with people who also have left their home village for work in the city. Because it is related to the financial issue. [He implies: Because they do not have much money] If we go to a bar and sit together with a girl, it costs 100,000-200,000 dong. It is really too much for us. (Son, tho, Thanh Hoa)

Tuyet, the female cook of the Thanh Hoa group, told me about the 'love affair' of two young workers in the group during work at a project in Lang Son. A young married woman 15 fell in love with a 19 year-old worker. She used to stay overnight at the worker’s place. Later on, she introduced her younger sister, a 15 year-old, to the younger brother of her lover, who was 17 years old. The two couples used to stay at the construction site. The two workers did not, however, get a bad reputation for this because the two girls had initiated the love affair and the workers did not have to pay for it. In this case, Tuyet commented that those two workers were lucky in love.

Sexual relations of the construction workers in general

Above, sexual relations of workers from the two key groups have been discussed. I will now address the issue in general, including information from interviews and focus group discussions.

Between colleagues

In the case of the Thai Binh group, sexual relations between construction workers and their female colleagues were not exceptional. Some workers said that this was quite typical if the woman was unmarried or if her husband did not belong to their group. A worker who was chosen by the woman was considered to be lucky in love:

Question: Are there any cases of a female colleague having a relation with a worker in the group?

15 This woman had just been married. Her marriage was arranged and she did not love her husband. In her minority group, new wives do not stay in her husband's house during the first two years of their marriage. Thus, this woman still lived with her parents.
In my opinion, that is unavoidable. It is said that men need women like rustic cigarettes need the feather of a chicken\textsuperscript{16}. We live together, so it is difficult to avoid that.

Question: If your group has such a case, how will you react?

For me it is ok. But it should not be too open or affect other peers. If they behave like close friends, it is fine. But [they] should not behave like spouses. (FGD, Nghe An)

Some years ago, I undertook a project for building a theatre. The two teams that implemented the project had a conflict because of a woman. The woman liked a worker in the other team. The workers in her team became jealous and quarreled with the workers in the other group. (Dat, cat, Thanh Hoa)

\textit{With neighbours}

For workers, it is difficult to make friends or develop a relationship with city people, as mentioned in Chapter 5. Most workers said that they did not know of an instance in which a construction worker had an intimate relationship with a woman from Hanoi. In other places, however, this was not a rare phenomenon. The case of the two young workers in the Thanh Hoa group is an example. A worker in the Thai Binh group also admitted that he had had an extra-marital relationship with a woman in Bac Giang when he worked there some years ago.

\textit{With sex workers}

Although the two key groups gave me two different pictures, it was evident that the construction workers were able to access sex services in the city. In the Thanh Hoa group, no one claimed that he himself had used sex services, though many said that this happened occasionally among construction workers. Some factors certainly influenced the frequency of buying sex among the construction workers. In the following sections, I will discuss these factors.

\textsuperscript{16} Vietnamese folk song: \textit{Dan ong phai co dan ba, Dieu cay phai co long ga moi keu}. In Vietnam, people smoke rustic cigarettes by a tobacco pipe that is made of bamboo. It makes a sound when they smoke this way. The louder the sound is, the better the smoke. The tobacco pipe needs the feather of chicken to make the sound strong and loud. This folk song says that men always need women like the tobacco pipe needs a chicken feather.
THE CAI’S ROLE

In the Thanh Hoa group, it was clear that the worker was under the careful supervision of the cai and his family when it came to their pay. Since getting an advance was difficult, they could not use sex services, at least not frequently. The workers acknowledged this responsibility of the cai:

Dat has to be responsible. He has to keep his prestige in order to keep the number of workers in the group. If he gives a worker advances too frequently, then at the end of the year his wife will find out that her husband only earned a little after a whole working year, and she will not allow him to work with Dat. Our group does not have anyone like that. When we are bored, we just go out for a walk. (Mui, tho, Thanh Hoa)

In the Thai Binh group, on the other hand, where the cai was from another village than his workers and showed no responsibility for their wage to their family, it was easier for the workers to get advances. Moreover, since the cai did not want to pay the workers their full wage, he would often give them these advances to quiet their complaints. Consequently, these workers had more of an opportunity to visit sex workers. The fact that the cai did not pay them timely and fairly became a good excuse workers could use on their families. The following is a talk I had with Ngan, who had just returned to the city from home:

Question: Did your wife complain when you did not give her money this time?
How could she complain? She knew that they did not pay me. I am in the same situation as Dai and Than. All of us know that. But she was a little bit sad. (Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

The cai became the culprit here and the worker could spend his advance without having to worry about complaints or suspicion from his family.

BAD REPUTATION

My fieldwork data shows that the fear of a bad reputation did not only exist among the workers of the Thanh Hoa group. All workers agreed that they were afraid of getting a bad reputation. They consider reputation as an integral part of village life:

Reputation is very important in the village. In the city, whatever you do, no one cares. But in the village, it is different. If you have a [bad] reputation, you will have a very hard time. When you leave your house, everyone will look at you and talk about you. When you meet other villagers, you will be very
embarrassed. Therefore, going out to work like this, we do not like such a situation. We have to try our best to avoid getting a bad reputation. In the village, it is like that (FGD, Hai Hung)

A worker of the Thai Binh group expressed his fear of this when I interviewed him in a bar:

There are many women in my home village who come here [Hanoi] to work in bars and restaurants. I know that no villagers or acquaintances work in this area, so sitting here is ok. I don’t want to be in some other areas, for example near Giai Phong Street, which has many villagers. Once, some friends in Hoang Quoc Viet asked me to go to a bar for a drink or karaoke. Then I came across some acquaintances there. I felt uncomfortable and decided to leave. I told them [peers] that I saw some villagers; that I do not want to join any more. It is better to go home [the construction site] and drink tea. (Trung, phu, Thai Binh)

In the Thanh Hoa group, social control was strong because most of the workers and the cai came from the same village. The workers of the Thai Binh group were freer to do as they pleased because the cai came from a different village, and the group had fewer members who were fellow villagers. Thus, every member felt that he could control the transmission of information better.

Having a bad reputation in the village was usually related to financial issues. The real reason one was looked down upon was extravagancy. As will be shown in the next chapter, the workers only acquired a bad reputation and their family’s scorn when they spent too much.

**The role of peers**

Without doubt, peers played an important role in the workers’ behaviour and relationships in the city. It was shown in the Thai Binh group that some peers might even share a sex worker. Peers also shared their sexual experience with each other, such as how to use a condom and where sex services could be found. One peer taught another who had just started working in the city how he could arrange things with a sex worker:

Viet kept saying to me, “Please teach me how to do that”. Last week, I gave him 70,000 dong and guided him to the petrol station in Nga Tu So. He can find a girl there; the price is 40,000 dong, 30,000 dong for renting a room. He can find a room over there, at the end of that street 17. (Hai, tho, Thai Binh)

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17 He showed me the direction when he was talking.
A peer may intervene in the sexual relations of another peer. Viet, the worker that once took *ba gia* to the construction site, kept paying the same woman for her services. Thanh, a peer of his, did not think this was a safe. Thanh and another peer put a stop to it:

I asked him often to stop with that *ba gia*, but I knew he didn't. He and Ngo used to go together. One day, I and Trung went to her place and insulted her so that she would stop with him. I was so drunk that day that I spoke quite vulgarly, but I wanted her to stop being involved with him anymore. She is dirty and looks older than 40; it is very unsafe. Trung calmed me down and then he asked: “Aunty, why did you choose this job? Where are your children?” She said that she didn’t have any children, so she had to make ends meet that way. I told her “Whatever you do, I don’t care. But don’t entice *thang dau troc* from my group, otherwise I will call someone to catch you.” She said: “I don’t want to go with him, but he usually hangs around during the night.” (Thanh, phu, Thai Binh)

A peer may advise another peer to avoid a trouble relationship. In the neighbourhood of Thai Thinh where the Thai Binh group had their project, there was a young girl who used to flirt with the workers. The workers said that there was up to no good. One worker advised another not to have anything to do with her:

Hai: She is very flirtatious and spoiled. One day, when Trung was standing on the stage, she stood on the pavement and called him. I asked Trung: “Who is she?” Trung said he had just met her the day before at the street vender. I told him right away: “Stop the relation with her immediately.” I feel that she is not normal. Later on, everyone realised that.

Question: One time Huong told me that she liked Cuong. Is that right?

Hai: That girl likes every man.

Remark: Huong said that she bought shampoo for Cuong every day.

Hai: Yes, that’s right. Therefore, I asked Cuong to stop the relation to her immediately. She knows his name. People might see him talking with her. If she gets pregnant with someone, she might say that he is one responsible, then he will be in trouble. (Hai, tho, Thai Binh)

Peers control other peers’ behaviour and relationships. Peers relay information about other peers on to the village and their families. In the way, the workers believe that they are helping maintain the happiness of their friend’s family. In the case of Thu, peers told her husband about her relationship in the city so that he asked her to come home. However, they also helped the two avoid a divorce. Ngan told me the story with some pride about the role he played in keeping his friend’s family happy.

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18 In the interview, he described the place (on a street) where the woman usually stood.
19 The workers called that worker ‘*thang dau troc*’ because he had short hair.
20 In fact, the worker used the term ‘*sang nang chieu mua*’, which means sunny in the morning and rainy in the afternoon. The term was used to denote a woman who changed her sexual partners frequently.
Most workers said that they would not intervene if their peers looked for sex services to a limited degree or even when they had extra-marital relations. But if a worker would have a serious relationship that may affect the happiness of his family, they would try to put a stop to it:

If he only wants entertainment, it is fine. If that’s the case, I even help him. But if he crosses the boundary of entertainment and lets this influence the happiness of his family, it is unacceptable.

[Question: What is crossing the boundary of entertainment? Or how do you know that?] If he does it only for fun, it is fine. But if he has a relationship with a woman and wants to divorce his wife, then it is deplorable. In this case, I might tell his wife about it and bring her here so that she can intervene. It is to put pressure on him so that he stops. Otherwise, with whom will his children live? (FGD, Bac Giang)

If a worker does not spend too much money buying sex or is involved in an extra marital relationship that is not serious, his peers will ignore it or even support him:

A little bit of indulgence is ok; we will protect him from his family [he means: not tell his family about that], even if he has something [limited relationship] with a female colleague. It is ok with us, and we may even support him. But if too it’s much, if he goes out too late every day for example, it is unacceptable. (FGD, Hai Hung)

In summary, peers act as both supervisors and accomplices. Because the workers lived and worked together, they knew nearly everything about each other. To some extent, every worker needs to protect his peers by keep their information confidential so that he can get protection from them in turn. Especially when peers deviate from the norm to a similar degree, they need to protect each other more. But when a peer breaks the standard of what is acceptable, other peers play the role of supervisor. Then they will report his activities in order to prevent him from making further missteps. These social norms related to relationships will be explored more deeply in the next chapter.
Chapter 7
Extra-marital sex, social norms, and the wife’s role

This chapter sheds light on how workers and their wives communicate about extra-marital relations and discusses the reasons given for having extra-marital sex. I will also cover how a wife typically reacts when her husband has an affair, and the social norms related to this issue. It is shown that workers might have a casual or trivial relationship without the objection from their wives or peers. But once they cross this boundary, they will be controlled by the social network of their home village which includes wives, peers, the cai and even other villagers. This social network is based on the villagers’ belief concerning the role of a husband in the family and uses the notion of a ‘bad reputation’ as an effective means of control.

The role of the husband

I start with a case study from the field. Hoang was a worker in the Thai Binh group. In my interview with him, Hoang admitted that he had had casual sex with sex workers. In another one of our talks, he told me about a phenomenon in his home community. Recently, some pimps had come there to seduce unmarried girls into selling sex in towns. Oftentimes, a pimp would get introduced to a girl through some friends and ask her to ‘go out to work’ with the promise that she would earn a lot. If the girl agreed, they would make an appointment and one night the pimp would come to the village to pick the girl up and take her to a bar in town. The next morning, he would bring her back home. Some girls went out like this for several days. Hoang said that, although these girls earned a lot of money, they quickly got a bad reputation. They would be able to get married with a man in the community. Many of them had to marry a man from somewhere else. A year before, two female friends of Hoang got involved in such a job. Hoang told me how he reacted when he heard the news.

I had two friends in xóm Förng. At that time, when I had just gone home, I heard that they also made money that way. In the evening, I went to see them and said jokingly: “I heard that you just had a holiday. Do you have much money? Can I borrow some?” They said: “We don’t have a lot, we only
have this much.” And then each of them gave me two 50,000 dong bills. Thus they have 200,000 dong. I held the money up and then tore it. I said: “You can go anywhere, you can do anything, but don’t look me in the face and don’t consider me as your friend anymore”.

Question: How did they react?
Hoang: They didn’t do anything. Just sat and kept silent.

Question: How was your relationship with them?
Hoang: They are quite close friends of mine. We are from the same community. And I said: “If you don’t have money, you can eat simple meals at home, if you want to earn money, you should choose a good job. Don’t go out like that. In that way, you can make some money but then when your youth is gone, the only thing you can do is to stay alone in the hills. No one will look you in the face.” I pretended to borrow their money, to let them show evidence. Two days later, they went to my house to apologise. Now one of them is married and the other is going to get married this October. The former married a guy in the same village. Before her wedding, we met each other once. Then we went for a drink. They kept apologising. I said “If I didn’t admonish you and let you follow that way, now no one would look you in the face”. They are good-looking. That’s why they were seduced. (Hoang, phu, Thai Binh)

As a city person, I was impressed by the worker’s extreme behaviour toward his friends, at least in my subjective thinking. For me, it was understandable that in a rural area, a friend reproves other friends when he learns about their mistakes. But tearing the money that his friends gave him was such an excessive reaction that it surprised me. I thus inferred that his behaviour was strongly supported by the social norm. Otherwise, he could not have demonstrated such behaviour and his friends would not have apologised. Moreover, this worker had bought sex and had had an extra-marital relationship himself. Is his behaviour considered (in the village) to be a deviation from the social norm? If so, he might not have the right to criticise those two girls. Or did he do so because the girls did not know about his own sexual activity? If not, what are the differences in the social norms regarding men and women in the village? These questions encouraged me to raise the topic in the FGDs.

In the FGDs, the workers listened to the story and were asked to comment about Hoang’s behaviour toward the two girls. The discussions helped me better understand the roles of husband and wife as well as the ideal model of a man and of a woman from the workers’ perspective.

21 The worker did not elaborate on this, but he meant that it was a large amount of money that rural girls usually do not have.
22 For ethical reasons, the identity of the worker was changed in the FGDs. The worker was mentioned as a migrant worker. This worker and the participants of the FGDs did not know each other since they worked in different crew and for different cai.
Most of the participants in FGDs agreed with Hoang. If they were in Hoang’s shoes, they would also have admonished the two women, although some workers said that they would not tear the money. A worker explained:

In my opinion, those two women did not comply with the model of a Vietnamese woman. A Vietnamese woman should be well-mannered, faithful to her husband and assiduous. She should take care of her family well. Those two women weren’t married yet, but they had such behaviour. That is not good. I fool around, but it is only for fun. My wife and my children still have a comfortable life. [He means: He still earns enough money for his family so that they have a good life]. Although I fool around, I still play the role of a friend to dissuade them from doing bad things. For me, it is different. I fool around, but my family has a good and comfortable life, my children can go to school, they don’t lack anything. I wanted to try it once to know what it was like and to have an experience. People said that [buying sex] was enjoyable, so I wanted to try. (FGD, Hai Hung)

The workers’ explanations revealed their ideas about the ideal model of a man and of a woman. The value of a woman is based on her virtues. This idea is influenced by Confucianism, which holds a women’s faithfulness in high esteem and considers it an essential virtue. Meanwhile, the value of a man is based on his capacity to earn and ensure a comfortable life for his family. A woman who has extra-marital relations is considered a spoiled woman, because she deviates from the social norm of the virtuous woman. On the other hand, a man who has extra-marital relationships is not held accountable if he can still provide a good life for his family. The man is not considered to be bad because he has not departed from the notion of what a good man is.

Every region has its norms and customs23. We, rural people, have this saying: “a wise man works for only one boss, a virtuous woman has only one husband”24. A woman is not allowed to be with more than one man. We are men, we can get married even if we are spoiled or have a bad habit. Perhaps they [women] know that, but they still marry us. But if a woman has a bad habit, no man will marry her. Therefore, those two women are not allowed to be envious of us even if they saw that I had just come out of a bar. If I were Hoang, I would have admonished them like that too. It is to help them to understand, so that they don’t do harm to themselves. (FGD, Nghe An)

In the workers’ opinion, this is the norm that everyone must follow. Those who deviate from it will develop a bad reputation and suffer its consequences. Thus, they considered Hoang to be a good friend because he gave his friends good advice: “Only our relatives or very good friends give us the most faithful advice” (FGD, Nghe An).

23 The worker used the Vietnamese saying: dat co le, que co thoi
24 The worker used the Vietnamese saying: tra khan thi tho mot chu, gai ngoan thi lay mot chong
Based on this point of view, the FGD participants thought that it was fine for a man visit sex services sometimes or to have an extra-marital relationship:

It is said that: "a virtuous woman has only one husband but a virtuous man has seven wives". If a man has extra-marital sex, it doesn’t matter. He will not be thought less of. But if a woman does the same, she will develop a bad reputation. Old people would say that she has lost the good image of a Vietnamese woman. Nowadays, people would give her bad names, such as ca-ve [prostitute]. (FGD, Nghe An)

This seems to be a contradiction to what was said in Chapter 5, where I mentioned a ‘bad reputation’ as something that deterred workers from visiting sex workers. Looking into this issue from the workers’ perspective about the role of a husband helps us to understand this better.

Since a man’s value is based on his ability to earn money, a good husband is supposed to be the breadwinner of his family. Many workers said that they accepted to work away from home in order to fulfil the role of a husband and they would feel bad if they saw that their wife and children were living under hard conditions. When the wife of a worker did not want her husband to work away from home, he used this as a reason to comfort his wife:

When I work here [Hanoi], my wife is very worried about me. Many times, she’ll say: “Please stop going. Other [women] get married; their husband is a real husband. I also get married, but my husband is ‘chong mong chong ma’. The day you visited us, when you went out to brush your teeth, I told her that I had leave the next day. She was displeased and said: “You can go immediately”. I had to comfort her. I said: “Some men can live like that, I can’t. I don’t want that my wife and children are uncared for.” (Hai, tho, Thai Binh)

According to many workers, this was also what the wife expected of her husband. A wife would not be satisfied with her husband if he could not earn enough to offer her a comfortable life. Some wives were not happy when their husband did not earn as much as the husband of a neighbour. This put pressure to some men:

Thong: When I saw another man’s wife with a new shirt or her house with new furniture, I felt bitter. I am also a man, I don’t want that my wife has less than other people. But we should look at the situation.

25 The worker used this Vietnamese saying: gai chinh chuyen thi mot chong, trai chinh chuyen thi nam the bay thiep.
26 In Vietnamese: chong means husband, mong means buttock, ma means cheek. When a woman wants to make up, she makes her cheek and buttock beautiful to attract the men. She used the term Chong mong chong ma to imply that her husband is just jewellery, not real husband, not have the function of a husband.
My wife sometimes looks at other families and nags me. She says other [men] are also as old as me, but their family has more than mine. She says some things... [He bowed his head and kept silent]

Question: that hurts you?

Thong: Yes, it hurt me deeply. Other men can do many things, but I can't, so I have to choose this job. Many people can, for example, do this or that [he implies that many people can cheat somebody or choose an immoral work], they earn money and they are happy. I cannot do that. And when she looks at other families, she should also look at herself. Who is she? Why does she require that much? (Thong, Tho, Thanh Hoa)

To fulfill the role of a husband, a man has to be a good earner. This will make his wife happy and him a good husband:

To make the wife proud of her husband, the man has to know how to earn money. He does not always have to stay home. Faithfulness means he should not go out [visiting sex workers] too much. To be a good husband, we have to give our wife and children a comfortable life. If we just stay at home, many wives will not be pleased. They might get jealous of their neighbours. My wife accepts that I go out to work like this and is actually happy about that. When I come home, she is very glad. (FGD, Hai Hung)

This is not true in all cases. Some wives, like Hai's for instance, do not really want their husbands to work away from home. One worker said that he did not only think about earning money, but also about his wife's wishes:

Money is important, but sentiment is also very important. I will consider my wife's wishes. Whether she wants to compare the income of my family with that of the neighbour? Whether she is ready to take on all the housework by herself when I'm gone or whether she wants me to stay at home [with her]? I work here because she is willing to assume the housework and farm work. (FGD, Hai Hung)

It is clear that most workers consider that earning is one of the most important tasks of a husband. Moreover, they assume that their wives expect this as well. Consequently, a husband can sometimes visit sex workers or have extra-marital relationships if he still can ensure a good living of his family. The men consider money as a sign of their love and as the fulfilment of their responsibility towards their wife and their children. In this regard, husbands who brought their wives money were considered to be husbands who loved their wives. If they then had an extra-marital relationship, it was not taken too seriously.

I go to work like this: everything I have I give to my wife and my children: money and affection. It is 90 percent. The 10 percent left, I sometimes fool around, it is just for fun. I think it is ok. (FGD, Nghe An)
In the workers’ opinion, the wife also used this criterion to measure her husband’s love, or at least the fulfilment of his responsibility. Thus, many wives did not object if their husband had an extra-marital relationship. “In the village, if a husband has an extra-marital relations, but doesn’t give extra money to his lover, his wife often does not react.” (Mao, tho, Thanh Hoa). I was surprised at first when I heard this. But when I raised this issue in other interviews and FGDs, most workers agreed. They found that the wife did not lose anything. The husband gave his wife money; that meant he loved her. She had both: money and affection.

Question in a focus group discussion: Some interviewees have said that if a worker has an extra-marital relationship with a woman, but does not give money to his lover, then it is fine. Do you think so?

In my opinion, it is ok. If I have an extra-marital relationship with a woman in which the woman does not tie me down to a serious affection and this relationship does not limit my financial possibilities, then it is fine. This happens [he means he has seen this happen among construction workers]. Often, the wife does not object because she doesn’t lose anything. Her husband still brings her both money and his affection, she has no reason to object.

Question: I understand that in your opinion, when the husband bring his wife money, that means he still love her. In other words, the fact that the husband brings his wife money is evidence to the wife that he still loves her. Did I understand you correctly?

Exactly. If I do not bring her money, then I have no way to explain [that I am in due].” (FGD, Hai Hung)

One worker disagreed with this:

If I have an extra-marital relationship like that, my wife would be furious and burn all the money I give her. The affection between the wife and husband is sacred, we do not lose anything but it is very complex. (FGD, Hai Hung)

Nevertheless, the former is the opinion of most workers. From this point of view, a wife controls her husband through the money he gives her. If the husband gives her almost his entire wage, she should not complain if he sometimes goes out to buy sex:

I rarely tell [whether he had a serious extra-marital relationships or not]. I go out to earn money, every month I get one million [dong]. I work three months and then I give my wife three million [dong]. So my wife never asks. If I give her less than three million [dong], she might ask me why. My wife and I sometimes have intimate talks. My wife asks me whether I have gone out or not. I am old enough, so I do not conceal. I say sometimes, because my friends ask me or because of the situation, I go out little bit. My wife is quite easy to accept that. It is fine with her because I am very honest. If I hide it, I might get into trouble. Thus, she sympathizes with me. (FGD, Nghe An)
Another instance in which the wife did not respond harshly to this kind of behaviour was the case with Ngan of Thai Binh. Some years ago, when he worked in Bac Giang, he had an extra-marital relationship with a Tai woman. Ngan said that this woman really loved him and was willing to have a relationship with him, although she knew that Ngan was married. They had a son, although later on he did not dare to acknowledge the fact. This relationship stopped when the project was finished and he left Bac Giang. Ngan talked about his wife’s reaction at that time:

My wife asked me to come home, saying that we had a family affair. Then when I was at home, she asked me: “I heard that you have something with a Tai girl.” I explained: “I go work, if I have a good relationship with someone there [in the neighbourhood of his work place], it is easier for me”. Then she said: “I heard that you really want to marry her”. I said: “No, it is just for fun. Don’t believe what they said”. Then she did not say anything else because I did not have to pay. If I spent all money on the girl or gambling, then she would [have a reason to] complain. But I did not. I brought her all the money I earned. We didn’t lose anything. After that, I still went back to Bac Giang to work” (Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

I will now return to the topic of ‘bad reputation’. As I mentioned in Chapter 6, many workers said that they were afraid of getting a bad name if they used sex services. The issue I want to raise here is “What does having a bad reputation really mean?” The following is a worker’s explanation:

We leave [of the village] to work like this, and when we come home, the villagers usually ask us: “Did you earn much this time?” If I spend too much in the city, I will hear them talking about me just as I arrive at the gate to the village. They would say that he was very extravagant, he spent all the money he earned on gambling or playing with girls. It is horrible. (FGD, Nghe An)

The description shows that the villagers’ attention focuses on his income. When a person has a bad reputation, the villagers not only talked about his behaviour, but also about his extravagance. Moreover, his behaviour is used to explain his extravagance. Although my question was about extra-marital relationships, in expressing his fear of a bad reputation, the worker included extravagance to his answer. If a worker spent a lot of money on gambling, he also got a bad reputation. This shows that the workers will suffer discredit if they are profligate in spending. The implication is that visiting sex workers is equivalent to wasting money or extravagance. If a worker buys sex, the behaviour itself is not condemned. Unlike the two girls in Hoang’s story, it is not considered to be a deviation from the social norms

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27 Tai is a minority group in Vietnam.
regarding his virtue. Rather, he is blamed for his extravagance. This worker’s departure from the social norms is related to his role as a man and a husband. This was also the reason why some workers thought that buying sex was worse than having an extra-marital relationship, “because going out with a girl, we have to pay.” (Tuan, phu, Thanh Hoa).

The cai has to help his workers keep money in order to fulfil their roles as the financial head of the family. This means that the cai’s behaviour supports the implementation of the social norms related to the man’s role in his village. Otherwise, the cai would also incur a bad image.

It is therefore easy to understand that when a worker has an extra-marital relationship for which he does not have to pay, he will not develop a bad reputation and his wife also will not object too strongly. This was the case with the two young workers in the Thanh Hoa group (see Chapter 6) and the case with Ngan in the Thai Binh group. When workers sometimes visit sex workers, their wives can accept this to some extent. The workers only suffer the scorn of their wives and family when they spend too much on sex services. It is understood that when a worker fulfils his role as a husband, his reputation will stay clean and he will have the acceptance of his family and the village.

When the worker in the FGD of the Hai Hung group offered two criteria for an ‘acceptable extra-marital relationship’, he unconsciously had this in mind. Not being seriously involved with the lover and not giving money to her means that he is fulfilling the role of a husband. His wife does not lose anything this way. Several workers formulated a similar rule for an extra-marital relationship they could be involved in:

I never do that28. I only choose safe relationships. A woman who knows that I am married but still wants to have a relationship with me without any expectations [that he will marry her or will give her money]. If it is carefree, and I don’t have to think [worry] about anything, then I will do it. (Hoang, phu, Thai Binh)

**Reasons for having extra-marital sex**

There are some reasons the workers use to explain why they have extra-marital sex. One is the belief that men have the right to do so, as a worker stated above. It is considered a privilege for men that women are not allowed to envy.

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28 Before this quote, the worker talked about sexual behaviour of other peers.
Moreover, several workers believed that, from a biological perspective, men could not constrain their sexual desire while women can. When a man is away from his wife, having extra-marital sex is a matter of nature:

Biologically speaking, women who are away from home for more than one month can constrain [their sexual desire]; but among men, I would say, no one can constrain it longer than 2-3 months. Thus, we sometimes have to tell [our wife] the truth [that they buy sex]. (FGD, Bac Giang)

Another reason is that men want to experience something new. One worker said that his wife was old and not very good-looking, while 'city girls' are young and beautiful. He wanted to try something new:

I sometimes go out to experience a new feeling. Actually, when I go home and see my wife, I get bored. Other [women] look delicious, but my wife doesn't look tasty. She is in a hurry all the time. When she sits on the bed to have dinner, I often see that her legs are still smeared in mud. I sometimes joke: "When I see you, I do not want to come home, you are always untidy?" Actually, I come home every month, but each time I stay only 2-3 days at home. When I get bored, I leave. (Hai, tho, Thai Binh)

I tell her that, unlike normal couples, we are away from each other. So I sometimes fool around. My wife says: "Isn't it better if you spend that money coming home?" I said each time I come home, I will have to stay there for some days [he means: then he could not work and then does not have a wage for those days] and I also have to pay for transportation. [Question: I think an expense for transportation is less than buying sex. Is that right?] Yes, that is right. My wife sometimes says: "You fool around like that, it is costly and you might bring diseases to the family. Also, you should come home to make the children happy." I know she is right. But actually, she is old sometimes I want to have something new. For example, if we watch on an old television for a long time, we get bored and we want to use a new one. To keep using the old one all the time is boring. (Hung, tho, Thai Binh)

Intimate communication between husbands and wives

Some workers never talked about the issue of extra-marital sex with their wives. They said that they did not think that it was necessary, since they had a relationship of good trust with

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29 The worker used the phrase: "chan thap chan cao, quan thap quan cao", which means "one leg of the trouser is high, the other is low". When a person goes to the field to do farmwork, he or she has to roll up his/her trousers to keep them clean. Otherwise, the trousers get smeared with mud. Because the worker's wife was too busy, she even forgot to roll the trousers down after doing the farmwork. Then one trouser leg might be still up while the other might be down by itself. The worker used the phrase to describe this.

30 I said that because I knew the price for public transportation to his house and I knew the price of the sex services that he told me about before.

31 In Vietnamese: cu. The worker did not mean 'aged'. In Vietnamese, cu is used to describe things such as furniture that have been used for a long time.
each other. In their opinion, husband and wife live closely together and the relationship among them is very special. They simply had to understand what kind of person their spouse was. Once they understood each other, they did not need to discuss things like that. Trust is considered a foundation for the happiness of their family. Otherwise, the husband and the wife cannot have a harmonious marriage.

In my opinion, we [husband and wife] understand each other. [We] should not talk about it because it is very difficult. Talking about it doesn’t help us to trust each other. If the woman gets easily jealous, a conflict between the wife and the husband is unavoidable. We are spouses, we live together, and thus we have to understand each other. About such a topic, if the wife knows her husband’s manner, she does not need to talk [about it]. Even if the husband talks about it, the wife never trusts him. [He meant: whether a wife trusted her husband or not was not changed by what the husband said] (FGD, Nghe An)

Some workers said that they never discussed the topic with their wife because she then might start to get suspicious:

I never talk about that with my wife. And my wife also never asks me. I am reluctant to mention it. I am afraid that if I bring up the topic, then she might doubt. (FGD, Bac Giang)

However, many workers said that they sometimes talk about the topic with their wife and that the intimate talks between spouses were essential for every marriage. “Yes, we sometimes have an intimate talk. I think every family does that.” (Son, tho, Thanh Hoa)

The wife often initiated the talk. She made jokes to express her concern about whether her husband was having an extra-marital relationship. Joking is the way she investigates the husband’s reaction and thoughts. Sometimes, the wife told a joke to the children to see how the husband would respond.

If I do not come home for quite a long time, when I visit home she asks me why or she pretends to joke: “Perhaps you have someone there?” (Tuyen, tho, Thanh Hoa)

My wife sometimes tells a joke to the children. She says things like this: “You [the children] go there [Hanoi] to care for your brothers [his children with another woman in the city]. That is all.” (Hung, tho, Thai Binh)

My wife sometimes tells a joke. She tells our children: “Some people [after a period away from home] bring home an extra wife. But up until now, I haven’t seen your father doing that.” She pretends to joke in order to see my reaction. I also respond with a joke back to her. (Manh, tho, Thai Binh)

In other cases, the husband made jokes to explore his wife’s thought and reaction. They brought up the topic to see whether their wife would become jealous or not. They thought
their wife’s jealousy meant that she loved them. They told their wives that they had an extra-marital relationship or frequently visited sex workers in the city. They said an exaggeration would make their wife understand the opposite and trust them:

I often tell her that I usually fool around in the city. She does not believe it. She says: “How do you have money to fool around”? She trusts me, but sometimes she still ask me about it” (FGD, Hai Hung)

If the wife of a person who usually fools around asks him about it, he will not admit. But if a person tells his wife that he has fooled around, that means he has not. He just wants to check whether his wife still loves him or not. (FGD, Bac Giang)

When a worker had to reassure his wife that he was not having an extra-marital relationship, he usually mentioned his responsibility towards his wife and children. He showed his wife that he was aware of his role as husband. The purpose of the work away from home was to earn money. Thus, his wife had better trust him.

My wife and I sometimes have intimate talks about it. I say: “I go out to work. If you do not trust me, then the best way is that I just stay at home. I put it like that to see how she would react. But she said: “It is up to you. I can’t forbid you. Who could follow you all the time to know that?” (Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

I usually comfort her. I say that I am away from home to earn money for the family. Thus, I would not waste money on indulgence. (Thong, tho, Thanh Hoa)

Many workers said that they told their wives half of the truth because if they denied it altogether, the wife would get suspicious.

If I have not been home for quite a long time, she asks whether I am busy or spend my time fooling around. For example, if I fool around three times, I will tell [my wife that I fooled around] once. I do not want to make my wife too worried [that he went out too much] (FGD, Hai Hung)

According to many workers, concealment was the worst approach. It would make the wife lose trust in her husband. Rather, they told them the truth or half-truth to get their wife’s sympathy. Some workers said that they did not conceal a relationship, but had another way to explain for it.

Some people tell lies or beat about the bush. That is why their wife does not trust them. But I do not. I am straight speaking. (FGD, Nghe An)

I did not conceal [that relationship]. If I conceal, I will get in trouble. Rather, I say that during the time I work there, her parents adopted me. Then my wife believes. If I have something, then my uncle will ask
When the wife of a worker knows about his extra-marital relationship, the worker will try to convince his wife that he did not give money to his lover or that it was not a serious relationship. Such was the case with Ngan from the Thai Binh group, as previously described.

The wife's reaction

According to many workers, most wives accept that their husbands sometimes visit sex workers, just as long as it is not too much. The wife would accept the fact that the husband might have sex in the city, but she tried to convince him not to fool around too often. The wife might be afraid that her husband might bring diseases home. It is the case of Hai’s wife that I mentioned above.

As discussed, when a worker had an extra-marital relationship but did not spend money on his lover, his wife would also ignore it or at least not react too harshly. The wife would only be greatly dismayed if her husband spent a lot of money on sex services or the extra-marital relationship seemed serious. If this is the case, she could ask her husband’s parents and relatives to admonish him. She could also ask the cai not to give her husband more advances. The intervention of the husband’s family is not always successful:

Their wives often react by getting the husband’s relatives involved. Then the family will have a meeting to admonish him. But often, the family of men like that had to give up after failing to correct his behaviour. If they only go out occasionally, the wives will usually ignore it. (Dat, cai, Thanh Hoa)

When the husband goes out in the country but does not bring money, the wife often ignores it. But that depends on the wife. Some wives might be jealous. But even if she is jealous or dissatisfied, she might not dare to do anything, especially with a cruel husband. Women are weak. Although she knows that her husband did something, she will not dare to complain seriously because the husband may beat her up. In this case, she will ask her parents-in-law to intervene. [Question: How do her parents-in-law intervene?] They admonish him. If they keep admonishing him, but he still relapses, in many cases, they have to give up. My aunt already has two children. But her husband still chases women. Her parents-in-law hate that and admonished him many times. But he did not change. That’s just the way he is. Now they have to give up. My aunt has to endure in silence. But the children know their father is like that, so they do not love and esteem him. (Mui, tho, Thanh Hoa)
There are two ways to explain the acceptance or silence of a wife when her husband has a relationship but does not spend the household’s income. Firstly, the wife might concur with the workers’ point of view about the role of a husband in the family. She might agree that the most important criterion in evaluating a man is his ability to earn and that a man can have many sexual partners if he just fulfils the task of a breadwinner in the family. Secondly, it must be assumed that the above ideas are raised by male workers. It expresses the bias of the worker’s opinions. A wife in the village may not agree with that point of view, but she cannot do anything in that situation. The fact that a wife often asks her husband’s parents and relatives to talk sense into her husband shows that she is the weaker party and cannot solve the problem alone. It is often the case that the husband’s parents will not be too bothered if the man does not exaggerate his indulgences. So the wife has to keep quiet because she cannot expect much support from her husband’s relatives. Since this study investigates the issue from the workers’ point of view, it is not possible to find a definite explanation. In order to find a satisfactory explanation, it is necessary to look into the issue by conducting a new study in which the women’s perspective is taken into consideration.

It is evident, at any rate, that the social norm in the village was more tolerant towards men with regards to extra-marital sex than with women. It is acceptable for a worker to sometimes engage in casual extra-marital sex. His peers will conceal his actions, and his family will not see it as a big issue. However, if he becomes extravagant with his escapades, or if a relationship becomes serious, he will violate the social norm concerning his role as a husband. The social control mechanism – his peers, the cai, his family – will kick in. His peers will tell others about his behaviour, creating pressure forcing him to stop. Word will get to his wife, who will ask his parents and relatives to exert more pressure on him. The cai will also end up supporting the wife by restricting the amount of advances her husband gets. Although the workers live and work away from home, they are in this way still controlled by the social network and norms of their home village. And these networks and the control mechanisms are stronger when the cai and his work crew are all from the same village. This helped to reduce the workers’ involvement in extra-marital sex. Nevertheless, it did not reduce the probability that a worker had multiple sexual partners, since casual sex itself was tolerated.

32 see the comparison between the two key groups.
Chapter 8
Conclusions

As a female researcher conducting a study about sexuality among a group of men, I was aware of the difficulties I faced. I thus took an indirect approach to the topic when I went into the field. I combined the subject of the workers’ sexual behaviours with their social life and relationships. I spent a lot of time doing participant observation and making friends with them. As a result, I got much more information about their sexual behaviour than I had expected. It was, however, difficult to connect the theme of HIV/STDs with the workers’ lives. Questions about the risk of HIV/STDs were quite sensitive for them, since the workers thought they were considered a high-risk group. Hence, the topic of HIV was touched upon only through the lens of related topics. Still, the information allowed for a better understanding of the relation between a worker’s awareness of the risk and his behaviour.

Condom use and awareness of risk

This section discusses the worker’s awareness of the risk of HIV/STDs and his attitude towards condom use. It is not the main theme, but rather an additional theme of this study. The general opinion of the workers was that a condom was a tool for HIV/STD prevention, and not something especially relevant to family planning. It was understood that using a condom implied casual sex or the promiscuousness of the user. Accordingly, the workers did not use condoms with their wives. If a couple did not want to have a baby, the wife would use IDUs. The workers said that if they used condoms with their wives, she would begin to get suspicious about him. Moreover, condom use was not convenient in a house in the village.

In our village, most people choose IDU for birth control because they do not want to take pills. But no one uses condoms [with their wife]. Condoms are for preventing diseases. In fact, in the village it is not convenient to use a condom. Using a condom between husband and wife is not nice. It is no longer pleasant. (FGD, Bac Giang)

If I use condom with my wife, she will be very surprised. And surely she will become suspicious about me. She will think that I fool around with other women when I am away from home (Dan, tho, Thanh Hao)
In the city, you have dustbins. But we [the villagers] don’t have them. So it is inconvenient to use a condom since we have no place to throw it away. You see, a house in the village has four rooms that are located next to each other like this, it is difficult to dispose. Our parents would see it, the children would see it. The life in the countryside is so backward that even we do not dare to use condom. For example, if we do not have the proper place to throw it away, then our children might pick it up and use it as a balloon. (Cong, tho, Thai Binh)

During my trips to the two villages, I learned that houses in the village did not have dustbins. The villagers threw rubbish in the garden. In fact, their garbage was usually just organic garbage such as dust from the floor of the house or waste from food like vegetables. This kind of garbage would work its way back into the soil. They rarely had inorganic garbage like plastic, for instance, so a dustbin was not needed.

The workers in the Thai Binh group used condoms when they had sex with sex workers. Unfortunately, it was difficult to know the frequency of condom use among them. Once, a worker found a box of condoms under the bed in the house under construction. But no one in the group dared to claim it.

If I check their coat pocket, I might find some [condoms] there. A few days ago, when I turned over the plank of the bed, I found one. The box looked like this box of matches. I do not know whose it was. Perhaps Cuong and Huong put it there and forgot it. I wanted to have some fun, so I asked Thai to pour water into it and then hang it on the tree. (Viet, phu, Thai Binh)

Some workers expressed their concern about the quality of the condoms they use with sex workers. The sex workers offered them condoms, but they did not trust their quality. On the other hand, the sex workers did not let clients use their own condoms because they did not trust their quality:

The women [sex workers] always have them. They do that job, so they always have them. If I give one to them, they will not accept it. [Question: Why?] Because they do not believe [in the quality]. In case it is not safe, they will get pregnant. But I do not really trust their condoms. If it is torn, it is very dangerous. (Trung, phu, Thai Binh)

The women [sex workers] never accept my condom. They even want to put it on for me. I am worried about that. Their pocket is full of condoms. I do not know which one is new or old. Often, they sell the whole box, it costs 2500 dong. Thus the box was always opened. I am afraid that they reuse it. After using it, they might wash it and then put it back to the box. [Question: Have you ever seen that?] I have

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33 The worker meant that each condom was not packed in a separate bag but 10 condoms were put in one box. Thus, after the box was opened for the first one, the user did not have to open the box for the other ones. The worker then could not check whether the condoms in the box were new or old.
never seen it. But once when I was in a room of a bar, I heard some room maids outside talking about that. They said that a woman had gathered all condoms from the rooms and put them into hot water. After that she asked them [house maids] to clean those condoms. At that time, they were complaining about that. When I heard that, I turned over the mattress and I saw many condoms there. I became frightened. (Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

Hoang of the Thai Binh group said that he had to refuse a sex worker after he had seen her condom:

Once, I went out with a guy in My Dinh [he meant: a worker who worked for another project in My Dinh]. When I saw the woman taking the condom out of her bag, I was afraid. It had the colour of bo kei. Then I asked him [the guy in My Dinh] to stop. (Hoang, phu, Thai Binh)

The above shows that the workers were aware of the risk of HIV/STDs when they accessed sex services. The quotes raise an issue about the quality of condoms that were used among sex workers that should be investigated in another study.

The attitude of the workers in the Thai Binh group towards HIV risks was different from that of the workers in the Thanh Hoa group. While the workers in the Thanh Hoa group considered HIV as a horrible yet far away disease, that fear among workers in the Thai Binh group was clearer and nearer. It seems to me that they saw the risk everywhere.

[Question: Are you afraid of HIV?] Yes, very much. I am afraid of [the risk from] food, drink, hairdressing and even shaving. When I go to have a shave, I buy a razor blade and give that to the hairdresser. Only when I see that he uses the one I gave him, I feel at ease. (Ngan, phu, Thai Binh)

In Chapter 6, I talked about a worker who advised his peer to stop having sex with a sex worker who was quite cheap. He even reproved the woman so that she did not dare to sell sex to his peer. This worker said that having sex with her was unsafe. Still, he did not consider other services to be safer:

...She is dirty and looks older than 40. It is very unsafe... [Question: Is (having sex with) more expensive girls safer?] No, it is not safer. Perhaps it is worse. Since they are more beautiful, many men choose them. (Thanh, phu, Thai Binh)

The worker seems to contradict himself. On the one hand, he considered the sex service of the woman named ba gia as unsafe. That was why he did not want his peers to choose her service. He also told me that he never chose her for himself: But on the other hand, he supposed that

34 Bo kei is a kind of fruit in Vietnam which is used to wash hair. Bo kei is dark purple.
more expensive services were even more unsafe. I noticed that both workers, Ngan and Thanh, admitted that they sometimes bought sex in the city. This shows a psychological anxiety among workers who visit sex workers.

The fear of HIV did not discourage the workers from accessing sex services. Rather, it made them concerned about the quality of the condoms. This reinforces the conclusion from the previous chapters that the worker's awareness of the HIV risk did not greatly influence their decision to buy or not to buy sex. However, the fear of getting a bad reputation and the manner in which they paid them had a stronger effect on the frequency of their visits to sex workers.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

From the findings of this study, we cannot conclude whether or not the construction workers are at particular risk for HIV/STDs. It is obvious that several workers use sex services and engage in extra-marital relationships. We have no reliable information about the prevalence of condom use among them, although some workers admitted that they used condoms with sex workers. Moreover, the condoms were offered by sex workers and the workers' concern about the quality of those condoms showed that even they themselves were not sure whether they were free from the risk. Therefore, to define their actual risk for HIV/STDs, it is necessary to conduct another study in which the issues of condom use and condoms' quality are investigated more comprehensively. Furthermore, the limited sample of this study might not fully represent all possible scenarios. The two different situations in the two key groups suggest a diversity of sexual behaviours among the workers, especially regarding how frequently they accessed sex services. Thus, research with a bigger sample will help to gain a more comprehensive and representative understanding of this issue.

The study, however, provides important suggestions for HIV/STD prevention programmes. No matter whether or not the workers are concerned about the risks of HIV/STDs, it is evident that the fear of HIV and/or the awareness of the risk were not the main reason for discouraging the workers from having casual sex partners. At the same time, the fear of acquiring a bad reputation had a remarkable influence on their sexual behaviour. This confirms that effective HIV/STD prevention programmes should be conducted with a great deal of consideration of the cultural factors and the context of the target group. In the case of
these migrant construction workers, it was the social norm regarding the role of the husband that became a reason for the workers to decide if they participated in extra-marital sex. Also, the control mechanism of the traditional social network was very present as soon as the workers deviated from these norms: The peers, the wife, the worker’s relatives and the villagers only reacted strongly when a worker failed to fulfil the role of a husband by spending too much money on his indulgences. Moreover, the gender inequality regarding sexuality in Vietnamese society played an important role. Although Vietnamese marriage law espouses monogamy, the saying “a virtuous woman has only one husband but a virtuous man has seven wives” was still valid from the workers’ point of view. This is why HIV/STD prevention programmes and sexuality research should not only focus on sexual behaviour itself, but also consider the specific social norms and cultural values of the persons involved.

The influences of peers and cai on the workers’ sexual behaviour suggest that peer education programmes can be effective in interventions directed at this group. Peer education programmes will take advantage of the control mechanism of the worker’s traditional social network. As mentioned before, peers could serve as both supervisors and accomplices. Promoting the peer in his role as supervisor will have a positive effect on the workers’ sexual behaviors. And at the same time, peer education programmes should help discourage the peer’s role as an accomplice.

To improve the situation of the construction workers, it is necessary to have intervention programmes that are not limited to the risk of HIV/STDs, but also emphasize welfare and improvement of the working and living conditions. One worker described his work as an occupation in which one sells his health in order to buy food; and whenever they eat, they feel like they are eating their health. (In Vietnamese: Nghe ban suc khoe an dan). The description of their living and working conditions make it clear that his statement is a reality. Under such risky and unsafe working conditions, these workers have little to no guarantee for their own security. People are not able to care too much about HIV when they encounter so many other risks on a daily basis.

This study focused on male migrant construction workers and did not pay much attention to women involved in construction work and their point of view. It would be useful to have studies done on the role of women, since the findings of this study showed that, for example, the female cook and female assistants were also involved in extra-marital sex. This
information would also be important in understanding how risks of STDs/HIV infection can be created and how they might be prevented.

The fact that the workers who accessed sex services were concerned about the quality of the condoms offered to them by sex workers implies on one hand the importance of condoms in HIV prevention. On the other hand, this suggests that it is useful to have more studies done on the quality of condoms of cheap sex services. It is obvious that not only the frequency of condom use among sex workers, but also the quality of condoms is important for HIV/STD prevention. In addition, the distrust between the sex workers and the clients about the quality of the condoms suggests the need for a study on the communication and trust between sex workers and their clients. On what is the distrust based? There must be all kind of rumours. HIV is an easy topic to create rumours about, and people may project their anxiety into the belief in such rumours. Such a study will provide helpful information for intervention programmes.
Appendix: Consent form

Introduction

My name is Bui Thi Thanh Thuy, a student of the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. I am currently doing a study about the life and family relations of migrant construction workers in Hanoi. I would like to ask you to participate voluntarily in the study. Now I am introducing to you briefly about the purpose, procedures, benefits and risks of participation in my research. After listening to/or reading this introduction, if you do not like to take part in the study, you can feel free to not.

Purpose of the study: The study aims at understanding the social life and family relations of informal migrant construction workers. It will contextualize the living conditions of these workers to understand how the migration situation and construction work affect their personal and family life.

Procedures: Participating in this study, you will be asked to share your views and experiences about your daily activities, especially the relationship and friendship in the city, about your family relations during the time you are away from home and about urban lifestyles. If you agree to take part in the study, there is a possibility that, after the first interview, I will contact you again to re-interview you in a more detailed way. The interview will take about 3 hours of your time and be audio taped if you agree.

Risks: Some questions may make you uncomfortable or create some negative feelings that are not desired by both of us. Additionally, there is also a risk that your information may be overheard. In both cases, I will try my best to ensure the privacy and confidentiality.

Benefit: This study will not provide you any direct benefits. However your participation in the study will help to understand more about the life of migrant workers that give meaningful suggestions for health programs targeting mobile populations.

Confidentiality: All research materials will be held in strictest confidence and then be will be destroyed when the study is completed. You will be referred to by a false name so that your identity and information will be kept as confidential as possible. The result of this study may be published or presented at scientific meetings in which your words may be quoted with your false name.
Subjects’ right: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions. Your withdrawal will not affect any rights to which you are entitled.

Consent

I have read the above information and agree to participate voluntarily in this study with all of the above articles. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time I want.

Hanoi, date............................

Participant’s signature

Researcher’s signature

Bui Thi Thanh Thuy


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