

Moral Sentiments

When I met Hoa, a twenty-six-year-old woman, for the first time in five years, she gave me a hug—back then a rare greeting in Vietnam. Her time in the United States, I thought, had changed her. Hoa's cheery demeanor and expressive speech—now peppered with colloquialisms from the American South, as we caught up at a café near her brother's house in Gò Vấp District—were a striking contrast to the last time we had met, on an afternoon about a month before she moved to the United States. She had told me, like it was a secret, of a dread that grew as her departure date approached. Her older sister had recently married an American man she had met online, and her parents had decided that Hoa was to join her sister in Georgia to keep her company and help with any future children. Hoa was also to study to become a pharmacist (even though she had nearly completed her degree requirements in economics). At this point, Hoa believed there was no turning back, as all of the paperwork had been completed, tickets bought, and money borrowed. When I expressed my gratitude for her significant help with my research, she teared up and waved goodbye before quickly turning down Lê Thánh Tôn Street to her bus stop.

Much did change for Hoa when she moved to the United States. Initially, she struggled with language barriers, making new friends, and a sense of homesickness and dislocation. A few months later, her father suddenly died of a stroke, but her mother and sister kept his death from her, out of fear that she would return permanently to Ho Chi Minh City to be with her mother. She discovered the news only when her cousin expressed his condolences to her in a WhatsApp message. Forbidden from returning home for her father's funeral, Hoa persevered and eventually received a bachelor's degree in chemistry from a prestigious university, found work as a pharmacy technician, and had recently become engaged herself. She adored her nephew and enjoyed spending time with her new friends and traveling within the United States.

During this first trip back to Vietnam for her, Hoa spent most of her free time at her brother's house or in nearby Đồng Nai Province, where she grew up. Because she had yet to see the dramatic changes in the city's downtown known as District 1, we decided to go to the newly opened pedestrian walkway on Nguyễn Huệ Street. What was supposed to be a quick stop at her brother's house for Hoa to get a motorbike helmet dragged on when Giang, her fifty-six-year-old mother, came downstairs. She asked Hoa if she needed any spending money and gave her some anyway when she said no. Then Giang asked me if I was hungry. I said no, but she brought out a tray of candied ginger and coconut for me anyway. Before we could leave, she gave some more money to Hoa, who happily protested.

WORRY AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

Anxiety and worry take many forms in Hoa's story: her fear of the unknown in the United States, separation and social anxiety, economic risks, self-imposed and family expectations, and concern over the fate of loved ones. However, they are also present in the way Giang pressed money into her daughter's hand and asked if I had eaten yet. Finally on our way to District 1, I commented to Hoa on how much her mother doted on her. I thought she was going to say, "She cares about me," but instead she said, "She worries about me." The sentiment was not far off. Giang's actions can also be interpreted as displays of maternal affection, politeness, and generosity, but in Vietnam they occupy much of the same conceptual terrain as worry.

In everyday conversations in Vietnam, anxiety and worry carry a wide range of meanings that are interrelated but shift in emphasis according to context. First, not dissimilar to its predominant understanding in the West, *worry* (*lo, lo lắng*) can refer to the negatively charged mental activity that allocates cognitive resources toward the preparation of some task or the defense against a potentially unpleasant experience. Indeed, thinking and worrying can be used interchangeably, including in the psychiatric discourses discussed in chapter 4.¹ With its orientation toward an unknown future, worry is a form of imagination that links creative potential and political structure and leads to social action (Appadurai 1996; McMullin and Dao 2014). In an analysis of selective reproduction technologies in Hanoi, Gammeltoft (2014) suggests that anthropological analysis of the imaginary sheds light on the implicit yet influential moods and sensations at the convergence of subjective experience and political power. Second, worry is often discussed in behavioral terms, usually related to managing tasks, chores, and responsibilities. For example, people who can worry for themselves (*tự lo*) are praised for their independence and initiative. Conversely, people who do not know how to worry (*không biết lo*) are deemed feckless and irresponsible. In this context, worry is a positively valued indication that a person is competent, savvy, and able to take care of others instead of requiring that others take care of them. Within a cosmology of everyday life as a

series of tasks that must be resolved, the discourse of worry imbues even the most banal sources of anxiety with moral weight. Finally, and most germane to Hoa and Giang, *worry* also describes the social obligation to care for others. Feelings of concern bring people into relationships based on an acknowledged vulnerability and indebtedness that shape the social roles and expectations of those involved (Shohet 2021). Such enactments of worry are differently used as a means to forge and strengthen emotional relations to others vis-à-vis notions of sentiment. This makes it difficult to distinguish between the object of worry and the process of worry itself.

This chapter examines how Ho Chi Minh City residents make sense of all of these anxious states, gestures, and relationships in relation to morality and modernity. The everyday experience of worrying and being worried for in Vietnam is articulated in terms of everyday care and concern, family roles and obligations, and moral sentiments. Situated within assessments of gendered morality, Vietnamese discourses of anxiety emphasize the relations of sentiment (*tình cảm*) between individuals and the object of their care. The existentially fraught experience of focusing on life's uncertainties becomes a moral virtue when directed toward another person. Anxiety, then, is a matter of "worrying-for" as well as "worrying-about." For women especially, worry is a burden that is to be cultivated and endured as matters of social obligation and moral virtue. This was often portrayed as a timeless exemplar of Vietnamese culture in the way Ho Chi Minh City residents explained their understandings of worry to me, and many of these conversations veered toward essentialist tropes about gender and traditional values. These ideals may seem well-defined, but how people attempt (and often fail) to live up to them reveals a far murkier picture of morality. Moreover, as the *đổi mới* era has left so much of Vietnamese social life in flux, new opportunities arise for moral behavior and breakdown. Shifting models of anxiety presage new approaches to moral dilemmas. In the context of profound social changes, many communities may experience a society-wide moral breakdown (Robbins 2004; Zigon 2007).

Understanding how anxiety and related emotional states are configured through ethical modes of being and relating starts with the recognition that our affective, bodily, and ethical dispositions are entangled with others (Geurts 2002; Csordas 2008; Stevenson 2014; Mattingly 2014; Throop 2014). Attending to anxiety's relational qualities challenges the common assumption that it is fundamentally a private experience. When most Vietnamese discuss their and each other's anxiety, they delve into the complications of social relationships more often than the depths of feelings. However, while anxiety can be shaped and patterned by social institutions and discourses, it cannot be reduced to them. That is, our existence as humans is "at once excessive, uncertain, and emergent" (Mattingly and Throop 2018, 482). Grounding anxiety in social interactions and practices, I examine how affective experiences become a site of ethical reasoning and bring ethnographic data on gendered forms of care to bear on anthropological theories of morality.

People's understandings of the emotional inform their sense of the social, and emotions function partly as a critical discourse through which social relations are negotiated (Lutz 1982). Culturally specific models of anxiety provide people with the frameworks to interpret their worries and to help them order their lives. Thus, the emotions of expectation, whether positive in the case of hope or negative in the case of anxiety, are not only cognitive schemas but also "politically charged dramas that shape the rhythms of activity and the experiences and expectations of participants" (Mattingly 2010, 43). Because the experience of anxiety and the construction of the self are intertwined, how people understand anxiety cannot be separated from notions of self and personhood.

For example, the biological, psychological, and philosophical theories of anxiety so prevalent in Western understandings reflect a monadic orientation to selfhood in which the inner self is conceptualized as radically distinct from its external environment. Here, selfhood is generally considered to be contained within an integrated locus of thought, emotion, and personal responsibility (Shweder and Bourne 1984). Western theories of emotion emphasize a linear process that consists of a biophysical force (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). This is reflected in how psychologists typically distinguish between anxiety, stress, and worry. Worry manifests as thoughts caused by concerns and uncertainties about the future. In other words, it is an attempt to solve a problem mentally. Stress is the physiological response to these uncertainties. Experienced at both a bodily and a cognitive level, anxiety is the affective combination of worry and stress. The dichotomy between individual experience and social interaction prevents an understanding of anxiety and worry as an intersubjective phenomenon, an emotional exchange between individuals, or a sociopolitical condition.

In Vietnamese, however, the semantic distinction between anxiety and worry is not made. Relying on a relational orientation to selfhood, the Vietnamese discourse of worry emphasizes anxiety as both a form of social action and an interpersonal relationship. That is, anxiety and worry are understood not just as a private feeling but also as one that connects people to each other. Mediating the construction of moral personhood, cultural models of worry help people understand themselves as good children, parents, friends, and so on (Tran 2017). The answer to the question of who worries in Vietnam does not point primarily to a particular personality type like the neurotic. Rather, an analysis of anxiety's relation to personhood reveals its moral character.

SELF AND SENTIMENT

During my visits in her kitchen, Bác Lan often asked to practice her English with me. Like many people of her generation, socioeconomic status, and educational background, her English featured a noticeable French accent. Although past the age at which most women in Vietnam are made by law to retire (fifty-five years), she hoped that improved English skills would be useful in potential side business

ventures. The following exchange, in which she described a long-ago trip to Paris to visit her sister, comes from one of our impromptu English lessons:

AT: What do you remember about Europe?

BL: The houses [buildings] are very tall. The streets are very long, very wide. Everything is beautiful and clean.

AT: What about the people?

BL: *Cái suy nghĩ là gì, con?* (How do you say “suy nghĩ”?)

AT: Their thinking or mentality.

BL: Ah, *mentalité*. Their *mentalité* is real [realistic/pragmatic].² They think about money and work.

AT: What do Vietnamese people think about?

BL: Emotion.

AT: “Emotion” *bằng tiếng Việt là gì?* (What is “emotion” in Vietnamese?)

BL: *Tình cảm*.

Tình cảm is a core concept through which people in Vietnam organize their lives and their identities. It has previously been translated as *emotion* (Rydström 2003; Gammeltoft 1999), as *interactive sensibility* (Bayly 2020), as *affection* (Leshkowich 2014a), and as *love, care, and concern* (Shohet 2018). Although such conceptualizations certainly overlap, I propose understanding *tình cảm* through the lens of sentiment to explore how anxiety and selfhood are used to define each other in Vietnam, because it emphasizes intersubjectivity. Although *tình cảm* semantically includes the general category of the emotions (see chapter 3), it is discussed primarily in terms of an emotional attachment to someone. For example, a forty-seven-year-old woman explained to me that while the English language had only the word *love*, Vietnamese had two separate words: *tình yêu* (romantic love) and *tình cảm* (platonic love). Examples include the type of sentiments shared by parents and children, teachers and students, and fellow citizens with each other. As Thuận, a twenty-two-year-old man, told me, *tình cảm* is one’s own subjective commentary (*nhận xét chủ quan*) on another person. Thus, sentiment forms the indexical basis on which people interact with each other and understand themselves and their relationship with the world around them.

Tình cảm refers not just to one’s own emotions but to those collective feelings. It is considered to be inherently prosocial and moral. For example, negative feelings toward someone else (e.g., hate or jealousy) are not classified as *tình cảm* but rather as merely one’s opinions about that person. Thus, *tình cảm* contributes to the relational character of Vietnamese selfhood, which is defined not in opposition to the world but instead in relation to its social, physical, and supernatural surroundings. Throughout my interviews, hypothetical examples of emotions that were not about another person were rare. That notions of *tình cảm* strongly imply that its object is a person underscores its distinctness from Western understandings of emotion as a stand-alone category of individual feeling states. The sentimental self is a matrix of sociomoral relations to be cultivated and evaluated through other people.

According to Ho Chi Minh City residents, sentiment is so important because it fosters social relationships that are based on mutual interdependence and an ethical orientation to others. Enduring and harmonious relations are produced through “the continual affirmation of the value of *tình cảm*” (Shohet 2021). In their discussions of how sentiment is expressed, my interlocutors described both affective and material forms of care, especially inquiring (*hỏi thăm*, lit. visiting and asking) after people and their loved ones and providing material resources and support such as small, routine gifts or lending money to friends and family. Sharing in the joys and sorrows (*vui buồn*, which is also a general term for the emotions) of others is the grist of much of Vietnamese social life. Asking someone to send their respects to a third party is not a mere formality or pleasantry, as it is expected that those respects will be relayed. Demonstrating *tình cảm* requires an intimate understanding of proper decorum and a range of virtues, including respect, conscientiousness, and self-denial, in order to navigate the bustle of everyday social interactions with minimal confrontations (Shohet 2013).

Moral behavior requires the acceptance of the social role one occupies as prescribed by Vietnamese neo-Confucianism. A hierarchical and, to a lesser extent, mutual mode of emotional investment between lords and subjects as well as parents and children characterizes what Haiyan Lee (2007) describes as the “Confucian structure of feeling.” Similar to Mauss’s (1990) notion of the gift, sentiment facilitates reciprocity and sociality, and to reject a gift risks a loss of social and moral standing for all parties involved. The maxim *sống có tình có nghĩa* (When you live, you have sentiment and responsibility) highlights how affection/compassion (*tình thương*) for and responsibility (*nghĩa vụ*) and indebtedness to others are the foundation of stable, long-term, and meaningful relationships. Transgressions can range from trivial to dramatic. For example, Sơn, a twenty-nine-year-old man, recalled to me watching with equal parts fascination and contempt as a group of Canadian tourists paid for each of their own desserts at an ice cream parlor. He was even tempted to pay the tab on their behalf so that he could avoid witnessing what he admitted was a petty infraction of proper sentiment. Of course, extreme economic matters are cause for more concern as the moral economy of sentiment imbues interpersonal relationships.

Sentiment does not reside within an individual but rather circulates among individuals. Displays of sentiment that adhere to proper decorum across a wide range of situations demonstrate one’s intimate understanding of the virtues necessary to navigate the melee of hierarchical social interactions (Shohet 2021). Smooth, nonconfrontational sociality requires constant attention, accommodation, and adjustment to others. As a key force behind moral action, sentiment becomes embodied in and through practices that are rooted in specific social situations and interpersonal histories (Shohet 2021). Foregrounding the social and intersubjective quality of *tình cảm*, Rydstrom (2003a) argues that villagers in Vietnam’s Red River Delta are not concerned with the authenticity of the emotions so long as

they are expressed in a contextually appropriate manner. However, the people I knew in Ho Chi Minh City often questioned the sincerity of someone's *tình cảm*, possibly reflecting a greater degree of influence from Western preoccupations with personal and emotional authenticity. Indeed, ongoing and consistent demonstrations of sentiment are necessary to ascertain another person's true moral character. Thuận underscored this with a Sino-Vietnamese proverb: *Họa hổ, họa bì, nan họa cốt. Tri nhân, tri diện, bất tri tâm* (Draw the tiger, draw its skin, but not its bones. Know the person, know the face, but not the heart).

IDENTIFYING *TÌNH CẢM*

As I was flipping through a paperback at a Phương Nam bookstore, a man in his twenties, eager to practice English with a foreigner, wondered aloud why I would be interested in a book entitled *The Sentimental Way of Life of the Vietnamese* (*Lối sống Tình cảm của Người Việt Nam*). He himself was holding a book on accounting principles. Before I could finish telling him that I was a graduate student researcher, he said, "I know now. You want to understand Vietnamese culture." Sentiment is a core concept that structures multiple identities in Vietnam, and people invoked it to me as perhaps the most fundamental component of Vietnamese society. For example, after the introduction, *The Sentimental Way* begins with a detailed description of funerary practices for one's parents, especially a father, to highlight such a funeral's status as the ultimate expression of both sentiment and cultural tradition. While these sweeping pronouncements should not be taken at face value, they do illuminate how people reflect on themselves by comparing themselves to an imagined Other. Here, I examine these often essentialist tropes to explore how ideas about sentiment are used to negotiate Ho Chi Minh City's increasingly diverse landscape of social identities.

According to a common adage, Vietnam is "a poor country but rich in spirit" (*nước nghèo, giàu tình cảm*). With a mix of pride and some embarrassment, people usually said it when offering me food or drink in their homes, as if to simultaneously highlight their generosity and apologize that they could not be more generous. The negative correlation between wealth and sentiment juxtaposes several tensions—between tradition and modernity, spirituality and materialism, and Vietnam and the West—that are crucial to many Ho Chi Minh City residents' sense of national and regional identity. Perhaps most important to this identity is the dichotomy between individuality and collectivism. For example, in Bắc Lan's comparison of Vietnamese and Western mentalities, the latter are exoticized as wholly individualistic and independent.³ Conversely, Bắc Lan and many of her peers understand themselves, with a significant amount of ambivalence, to be collectively oriented and interdependent. Many argue that sentiment has the most important role in society because it provides the moral and emotional motivation for people to live cooperatively in the first place, and that members of societies

with low levels of sentiment are prone to loneliness (*cô độc*). Again, this is an exaggeration of both Vietnam and the West and should not be accepted uncritically, but it does reveal key stakes around which identity is constructed.

Although at times my interlocutors spoke of it as emblematic of Vietnamese national culture, sentiment varies significantly throughout the country. The greatest distinction is made between rural and urban expressions of sentiment. Discourses of the nation portray cosmopolitan, urban, and modern Ho Chi Minh City as less Vietnamese than the traditional countryside or even than the much older and more “cultured” cities of Hanoi and Huế (cf. Harms 2011). For example, when I told Ho Chi Minh City residents (including my research assistant) that I was interested in discussing sentiment with them, they often suggested I conduct research in the heartland of the Mekong Delta instead. Khuyên, a nineteen-year-old woman, misses her hometown of Bến Tre, where people still have sentiment “without a shore” (*vô bờ*, meaning oceanic). A recent transplant to Ho Chi Minh City, she distrusts her new neighbors and disapproves of their conduct. According to her, when a person’s desires are too easily met, as is the case in “modern” cities, then sentiment suffers because support and encouragement from others is no longer needed. Considering the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, some Ho Chi Minh City residents portrayed sentiment as an impediment to Vietnam’s economic ambitions. For example, corrupt business practices were attributed not just to individual greed but also to the triumph of affective ties between partners over transparency and contractual negotiations.

Furthermore, variations in sentiment are used to demarcate regional differences. If social structure and family organization vary widely, then sentiment manifests differently from locale to locale because it is rooted in the specificities of various relationships. These regional distinctions are most marked in descriptions of northern and southern Vietnam. With its stronger Chinese influence, which Ho Chi Minh City residents often disparaged, the North features a rigid and elaborate patrilineal kinship system stemming from Confucianism. Conversely, the South has a more flexibly defined kinship system, a reflection of the cognatic kinship systems typically found in Southeast Asia (Luong 1984, 1989). Thus, the sentimental bonds between southerners are portrayed by both northerners and southerners as more fluid and ephemeral but genuine, while the bonds between northerners is considered more formal and permanent but forced.⁴

Regardless of these regional differences, people held up sentiment as the best of Vietnamese traditions. However, they have also become ambivalent toward these traditions. Sentiment and other supposed remnants of traditional culture are problematic for Ho Chi Minh City’s middle class because they conflict with the modern lifestyles and individualized pursuit of wealth that have become emblematic of the reform era. For example, Vân-Anh, thirty-two, and I were on our way to pay our respects to a mutual friend’s family after her father died. As our taxi climbed over a newly constructed bridge, Vân-Anh clucked in disapproval. “People used to help



FIGURE 2. New infrastructure projects like the Ông Lãnh Bridge in District 4 ease congestion but also highlight inequality.

each other,” she said. Looking out her window at a woman in her fifties pushing a food cart up the bridge’s incline as motorbikes glided past her, she claimed that during the lean years of the postwar era a crowd of onlookers would have pushed the cart on the woman’s behalf. People used to be always willing to help strangers, even when they had so little. Now that they could finally afford to be generous, they were unwilling to share. Our taxi driver chimed in to agree, citing numerous examples of a culture of self-interest that he saw every day from the driver’s seat, as the car reached the other side of the bridge.

WORRIERS AND WARRIORS

When, during my fieldwork, people learned that I was from the United States, their questions usually focused on the details of everyday life in a country so many of them had fantasized about living in. How much are monthly electricity, water, and telephone bills? Is it true that you can get by with speaking only Vietnamese in the various Little Saigons? Does it snow in California? The answers to these questions helped them understand the lives of their relatives who had emigrated as refugees, and sometimes helped them imagine for themselves a life apparently free of worry. Hoa, however, had a different kind of question when we first met. “I heard that America has a lot of racism,” she said. “Is it true?” Perhaps because moving to the United States was not as remote a possibility for Hoa as it had been,

she wanted to assess possible threats. However, her question may have stemmed from something that was present in her life even before her sister got married. Hoa was a worrier. According to her, she had a pessimistic outlook on life and agonized over every decision she made, no matter how trivial. Even her father, who spent two years in a reeducation camp after the war, told her that she need not always assume that the worst would happen. Hoa often said that if she could change one thing about herself, it would be her insecurity and lack of confidence in her own abilities. Despite what she thinks about herself, her anxieties do not just reflect a nervous disposition. Rather, they are also rooted in family and gender expectations of sentiment and care.

Anthropological theories of care focus on the social relations that sustain life in states of emergency and banal normality alike, as well as considering how those relationships are implicated in political-economic forces (Buch 2015; Black 2018). That is, care is both a resource and a relational practice. While it includes a wide range of practices, here I focus on care as both a moral experience and a social obligation. Doing so focuses the analysis on the intersections of embodied experience, everyday practice, intergenerational relations, and political economy. Comparative analysis of caregiving is situated at the intersection of broad social transformations and intimate, everyday life. By considering the realities of care, including its stakes and barriers, anthropologists can examine the resources and practices that enable different kinds of people to live a meaningful life (Aulino 2019). As a social practice, care is contingent on who cares for whom and on the institutional and national policies that shape those roles. Care not only impacts those who receive it directly, but circulates across generations and communities.

Care can be translated in Vietnamese as *nuôi* (to nurture), *chăm sóc* (to look after or take care of), or *quan tâm* (to consider or be concerned with; lit., important to the heart). The most commonly discussed notion of care, *quan tâm* is evidence of sentimental attachment. To consider another is to assume their perspective and thereby anticipate their needs and wishes. Indeed, I found most Ho Chi Minh City residents to be close observers of others' behaviors—sometimes to the detriment, it seemed, of attending to their own feelings (see chapter 5). For example, as restaurant servers brought out the seafood dishes that Tuyết, forty-seven, had ordered for the table, she got up from her seat to direct their proper placement so that each guest would have easy access. Although the party of ten consisted mostly of her and her husband's friends, she hovered over her son and two of his friends (including me) to explain to us in detail what each dish was and which sauces to dip them in, point out the condiments on the table, and performatively ask me if I knew how to use chopsticks. I was getting hungry, and annoyed, so I quietly asked my friend why his mother was fussing so much. He pointedly responded, "Because she cares (*quan tâm*) about you." This form of care entails a thoughtful consideration of another person's desires and abilities while presuming the person's dependence and vulnerability. That is, it establishes a relationship based on

caring and being cared for. Similarly, when Giang insisted on giving Hoa more spending money that she did not need, she reestablished a parent-child dynamic that perhaps had changed over the prior five years. Although Hoa still lived with her older sister, she had graduated from college and become engaged, markers of a burgeoning adulthood and independence. Hoa found the offer sweet, but I wonder if she ever chafed at her mother's good intentions.

In Vietnam, care is deeply intertwined with neo-Confucian hierarchical family structures and tied to an ethic of sacrifice, of submitting oneself to others, especially family members (Rydström 2003a). The hierarchical nature of social relationships, often based on age and gender, is founded in what Shohet (2021) terms an *asymmetrical reciprocity* that fosters people's mutual caring and worrying. Epitomized by the aphorism *kính trên nhường dưới* (respect those above and yield to those below), asymmetrical reciprocity is first learned within the family, where filial piety (*hiếu thảo*) emphasizes respect for and subordination to one's elders, along with requisite support for one's juniors (Shohet 2013). Social roles for family members are strictly defined by gender. As the "pillar of the family" (*trụ cột gia đình*), fathers are responsible for the public face of the household, such as earning an income and participating in community organizations and rituals. Conversely, mothers' duties entail supporting and nurturing both their natal and their husband's families through domestic activities. Most relevant to Hoa, children are expected to obey their parents and, as they mature, fulfill a range of obligations related to care (Bayly 2020). For example, Khuyên's mother thinks that her daughter is mature for her age because she "never make[s] her sad" by going against her wishes. Within the family, harmony, rather than personal satisfaction, is the key measure of the ideal form of happiness (*hạnh phúc*; Taylor 1983; Kelley 2006; Pettus 2003). This kind of happiness is achieved when everyone carries out their assigned social roles and obligations, but it comes at a cost that is higher for some than for others.

According to many Ho Chi Minh City residents, in theory anybody has the potential to worry, but women consistently worry more than men. Despite the large number of historical and contemporary depictions of Vietnamese women as valiant warriors and "generals of the interior" (*nội tướng*; Tài 2001), most concur that women's social vulnerabilities make them more prone than men to worry about the future.⁵ Furthermore, many of my interlocutors, including women, argued that women are more cautious, detail oriented, and emotionally sensitive than men. These supposed gender differences have become essentialized as a matter of instinct and subsequently naturalize sentiment and specific forms of worry and care as a preeminently feminine trait (Rydström 2003b). Thus, the moral economy of care that sustains social ties depends on the greater social pressure for women to worry about others. That women in general—and mothers in particular—bear the burden of worrying is supported by a pervasive ethic of sacrifice (Tài 2001; Leshkowich 2006). For example, surrendering one's own time, energy, and

physical and mental resources configures selfhood as morally upright. Furthermore, this devotional sacrifice should be performed without drawing attention to it; to be considered virtuous, one should bear suffering with acceptance and fortitude (Shohet 2021). Even taken as an essential quality of womanhood in and around Hanoi (Gammeltoft 2021), endurance (*chịu đựng*) is a testament not only to one's personal mettle but also to the strength of one's attachment to others. Open confrontations are typically avoided, especially if they would complicate implicit tensions within a family. For example, many of my interlocutors complained about their in-laws to me, but they would not voice those complaints to their spouses, because doing so would create more conflicts than resolutions. Even much of their own friends' advice is geared toward how to yield one's own happiness for the sake of the greater good, rather than helping them achieve their own goals.

However much Hoa hated them, her anxious traits were tied to what she valued most about herself: her pride in being a good daughter. She spoke rapturously about how much she loved her mother and worried constantly about her father, who suffered severe arthritis due to his treatment in the camps. She was their third child, so, under Vietnam's two-child policy, they were pressured by local officials to terminate the pregnancy and were penalized for refusing. Hoa would find moments throughout the day to perform small acts of care, such as making fresh orange juice during their lunchtime nap, not because it was requested or because she sought praise from them. Rather, she felt indebted to them for the sacrifices they had made just to give birth to her. For Hoa, worrying, when directed toward others, is enacted through distinct social relationships and inextricable from social institutions. Registering as a gendered form of care in Vietnam, worry is both a practice and a feeling state that transforms individuals into moral persons through a specific orientation to the needs of others. Anticipating the needs of others, especially one's family and neighbors, is both a moral duty and an economic strategy (Dao 2020). While overtly worrying for someone in a vulnerable position in the United States implies that the object of worry is not self-sufficient, doing so in Vietnam is acceptable, since people readily acknowledge their dependence on others. Indeed, pity, compassion, and affection are closely linked, and people under duress may seek out the pity of others as affirmation of their circumstances.

MORAL BREAKDOWNS

That afternoon when Hoa told me of her apprehensions over her imminent move to the United States, I asked her what she was most worried about. She could not pick a single thing because she was anxious about everything—even not knowing what to be anxious about. Hoa knew that her entire life was about to be transformed, but she did not know what it would be transformed into. On the verge of what felt like being cut off from the relationships that were fundamental to her sense of self, Hoa found herself unmoored, and in this crisis of meaning the

rest of her world followed suit. Anxiety corrupts and undermines the meanings of bedrock assumptions about the world, as well as the very means of making meaning (Kristeva 1982; Salecl 2004). That is, anxiety in its most potent states is not just meaningless—it also makes everything around it so. Hoa was the envy of her peers, many of whom dreamed of studying abroad, especially in the United States, and the pressure to put on a happy face prevented her from sharing her troubles with most of them. Her worrying-about, focused on her own unknown fate, cast her as selfish and ungrateful. Her emotional breakdown was becoming a moral one too.

In our conversations about morality (*đạo đức*), Ho Chi Minh City residents often offered a simple phrase to sum it up: “It’s complicated (*phức tạp*).” Many stated that such complications made it difficult to discuss moral behavior. In a possible attempt to avoid the topic entirely, Phong, a thirty-one-year-old man, offered to buy me a fifth-grade civics reader, where I could learn to follow the ultimate role model of Ho Chi Minh himself by dressing simply and humbly and loving the nation as one’s family. Proper morality is communicated in state media and schools, where a moral education is considered just as important as a scientific and literary one (Bayly 2020). Moreover, Confucian principles also specify moral codes of behavior. For example, the “three obediences and four virtues” (*tam tông tứ đức*) prescribe that women are to obey their fathers, husbands, and sons (after their husbands die) and comport themselves with modesty in speech, manners, and work. Proper morality in Vietnam is typically framed in terms of absolute virtues such as patriotism and filial piety. While the standards of being an obedient child or upstanding citizen may be relatively clear, however, living up to them can still be difficult for the individuals who occupy those roles, especially when they do not make sense anymore. Perhaps this is why Phong was so uninterested in the topic.

How people navigate shifting ethical terrain provides insight into the construction of moral behavior and personhood. Anthropological scholarship has moved beyond analyzing static doctrines explicitly delineated as moral to differentiate normative social values from moral and ethical quandaries (Laidlaw 2002; Robbins 2013). Moral behavior cannot be reduced to a set of absolute principles or prescriptive principles found in sacred texts, and people are not moral just because they comply with conventional regulations. In other words, the moral and the social cannot be reduced to each other. Instead, people may strive toward an ethics that is fragmented, ambivalent, and contingent upon the situations that they find themselves in. Zigon (2010) proposes such moral breakdowns to be productive for ethnographic analyses of morality because they disrupt the relation between paradigmatic social norms and everyday experiences of morality. In these instances, people are forced to negotiate conflicting demands to achieve moral selfhood. Indeed, a relational ethics is grounded in care and concern for the space between people (Zigon 2021). Moral breakdowns are a problematization of everyday moral

dispositions and provide people with an opportunity to reflect on everyday, taken-for-granted ideals of morality and instead “work on themselves and, in so doing, alter their very way of being-in-the-world” (Zigon 2007, 138). However, anthropological theorizing on moralities has largely ignored the question of how emotions and sentiments are invoked in this moral reasoning, as well as their implications for organizing human sociality (Throop 2012).

Throughout Vietnam, people tend to be drawn to moral ambiguities more than to absolute principles (Shohet 2021). The lists of proper behaviors according to socialist morality (e.g., dressing humbly and following Ho Chi Minh as a role model) that they memorized in school are of little use in determining what makes a good (*tốt bụng*, kindhearted, lit. good stomach) person in ethically ambiguous contexts. Rather, moral reasoning is guided, to a great extent, by sentimental ties.⁶ A paragon of moral virtue is someone who is “blinded by sentiment” (*quảng mù tình cảm*) to the point of sacrificing their financial and emotional resources and even compromising their own virtue to someone who does not deserve such devotion.⁷ People living according to sentiment (*căn cứ tình cảm*) may well realize that they are being manipulated (*lôi kéo*), but seem powerless to advocate for themselves. These situations become particularly difficult when sentiment, romantic love, and platonic affection/compassion/pity are intertwined. For example, when Khuyên was eight months old, her father abandoned her and her mother to move to the United States with his first wife. Her mother’s relatives told her he was untrustworthy during their courtship, but she continued the relationship regardless. Furthermore, Khuyên, who knows the pain he inflicted on her mother and long resented him for it, told me she does not want to hate him anymore. Instead, she feels oddly proud of his accomplishments, from what little she knows of him (e.g., he is a hospital administrator). Both Khuyên and her mother demonstrate sentiment that requires significant forgiveness. Supporting loved ones, even when they are in the wrong, often takes precedence over a commitment to moral principle. Ethical behavior is more a matter of a practiced heart or a finely tuned instinct than of strict adherence to rules and decorum (Gammeltoft 2018). It stems from being keenly attuned to others as fellow moral selves so that one is able to anticipate and meet their needs and share in life’s ups and downs (Marr 2000). Thus, although morality in Vietnam is guided by normative expectations of one’s own behavior, a person’s moral character emerges through social relationships.

Sentiment is a critical component in the assemblage of discourses and practices that are broadly constructed as morality (Zigon 2010). Bayly (2020) argues that the “essence of moral agency” in Vietnam lies in a “warmth of feeling conveyed aloud as a bond of care and conscience” (37). Thus, care is not just required for sociality to function but is also a matter of morality. For example, Thiên, a seventy-year-old man, told me that “people with sentiment are different than those without. If I don’t have any feelings about a friend, then it doesn’t create any sentiment. If you want to have sentiment, then you have to have love (*tình thương*), and vice versa.”

According to him, an insensitive (*vô cảm*) person would be someone who feels nothing upon seeing a baby. Lacking an instant connection and a heart, their emotions are “brittle (*khô cứng*) with regard to collectives (*tập thể*) and communities (*cộng đồng*).” Moral actions must be motivated by one’s own genuine concern for others. Conversely, the same actions, when mandated by decree or formality, are considered mechanical. For Thiên, “the heart decides everything.” Personhood and morality are inextricable: smooth, nonconfrontational sociality depends on constant attention, accommodation, and adjustment to others, and everyday moral actions are concerned with one’s indeterminate and fluid orientation toward care for others.

When Hoa told her mother of her misgivings, Giang replied that her sister needed her help. In fact, the entire family needed her. Now that her parents were retired, Hoa was to be the family’s primary breadwinner by becoming a pharmacist in the United States and sending economic remittances to Vietnam. (Her older brother seemed unable or uninterested in providing for his natal family, and Hoa rarely mentioned him in our conversations.) Thus, the money that Hoa’s parents borrowed from relatives and banks alike was an investment in the future for a family that had long lived on the edges of poverty. At a disadvantage due to their unfavorable political history, they struggled more than most to make ends meet after the war, yet they were able to pay for their children’s education. Despite her upward mobility, Hoa felt she had less in common with her classmates at university than with her friends and relatives in Đồng Nai Province. This devotion to family was used to help motivate her to leave but also made the prospect that much harder for her.

This cultural model of worry articulates it as a moral experience by providing a framework within which anxiety is made meaningful as a reflection of one’s devotion, care, and sacrifice to others. The (negatively valued) existential suffering of *worrying about something* becomes a moral sentiment when it is understood as *worrying about someone*. That is, emotional relations to others, vis-à-vis notions of care and consideration (*quan tâm*), are forged by worrying-for. Here, experiencing “concern for an Other, which grows into some sense that one wants to make their lives possible,” is the basis for moral experience (Parish 2014, 34). Sentiment renders moral behavior subjectively meaningful, as Bác Dũng, a sixty-six-year-old man, describes: “People with *tình cảm* are different than those without. If I don’t have any feelings about a friend then it doesn’t create any sentiment. If you have sentiment, you have to love, and vice versa. The heart of a person who sees something like a baby . . . and doesn’t know how to love it is numb. . . . Their feelings are brittle.”

When discussing issues of morality, Ho Chi Minh City residents often invoke suffering, for the truest test and indication of people’s morality emerges from their suffering. Notions of morality are crucial in articulating suffering in meaningful terms (Das et al. 2000). Vietnam’s “valorization of suffering” (Jellema 2005)

and “cult of melancholy” (Nash and Nguyen 1995) play an integral role in the construction of moral personhood. Kate Jellema (2005) argues that revolutionary and socialist politics reoriented merit toward suffering for the nation. While in domestic arenas it typically refers to yielding one’s own interests (Shohet 2021), *sacrifice* (*hy sinh*) in state discourse refers to soldiers dying on the battlefield or to mothers whose sons became martyrs (*liệt sĩ*) to the revolution (Kwon 2008; McElwee 2005; Tai 2001). For Buddhists, merit (*công*) is acquired by performing good deeds without an expectation of reciprocity (Jellema 2005). These means of finding meaning in suffering provide a model for how worrying-about is transformed into worrying-for.

In spite of the attempts to keep her uncertainties unsaid, Hoa got into an argument with her sister over the phone and told her that she did not want to live with her anymore, before breaking into tears. Indeed, she broke into tears upon recounting this to me, pained not just by her own misfortune but also by the hurt she had caused her sister with her admission. Many young people in Ho Chi Minh City, including Hoa, describe remaining silent (*im lặng*) as one of the best tools at their disposal to subdue their tempers and prevent moral transgressions, especially disrespect to their elders. For them, controlling one’s emotions is principally about their expression, not modifying their inner experience. (However, this pattern has been changing in recent years, as will be discussed in chapter 5.) Although Hoa did not consider her doubts about her future plans to be immoral per se, she found it difficult to reconcile her personal anxieties with the love and filial devotion she felt—or wanted to feel—toward her family. To her, these anxieties were evidence of the insecure nature that she disliked about herself, as well as a sign of insufficient trust in and gratitude for her family’s plans. This moral breakdown led to an opportunity for self-reflection for Hoa and perhaps played a role in her eventual self-transformation.

Staying in Vietnam would allow Hoa to maintain the role of a daughter, yet would also be a failure to live up to that role.⁸ Backing out of the plans now would be both a personal and a family failing. To her, the constant worrying over matters, trivial and otherwise, was evidence of her insecure nature—what she often said she hated most about herself and hoped to overcome as she gained confidence with age. The more positive evaluation of worrying-for than of worrying-about creates a form of moral personhood that casts Hoa’s anxieties in a negative light. Perhaps it is at this intersection of conflicting ideas, feelings, and desires that Hoa might come to terms not just with moral discourses and sentiments, but with the ethical dilemma she found herself in. But questioning her relationship with her family and their designs for her seemed to be too painful, too anxiety-inducing to endure.

Ultimately, Hoa succeeded not through renegotiating the standards placed on her but through abiding by them. She was motivated to worry-for not because it was something she necessarily wanted to do but because it made her who she

wanted to be. The intentional act of worrying-for is part of being a good person, yet despite the explicit attempts to socialize and cultivate anxiety as a moral sentiment, it is also understood by many of my interlocutors as an innate reaction for someone who has the capacity to worry (i.e., someone who cares for others). Her anxiety was experienced as a “relational intertwining” as she attuned her own sensibilities to the needs of her family (Zigon 2021, 388). Anxiety produces moral personhood when it is transformed from a subjectively devalued feeling to an intersubjectively valorized sentiment. As Hoa discovered, this process is often tenuous and does not ensure success.

CONCLUSION

How people worry for each other reveals their commitments to and entanglements in the world. Instead of assuming the distinctions between subject and object, focusing on worry as a moral sentiment highlights how those distinctions are made, felt, and registered at bodily and communal levels (Mattingly and Throop 2018). From a perspective on anxiety that frames it as a social practice rather than an individual possession, extreme worry is a normal, even necessary part of everyday life, rather than an exceptional state of pathology. The Vietnamese moral economy of anxiety reveals how worry—simultaneously thought, affect, and practice—generates and sustains selfhood. In contrast to a Western conception of anxiety as an indication of the individual’s worth on account of their own business, industriousness, and importance, the cultural model of anxiety in Vietnam frames care and sacrifice as indication of an individual’s moral sentiment enacted in the service of others. However, the construction of moral personhood is an uncertain process that cannot be reduced to individual projects of self-making or to the ideals imposed on them by others (Pandian 2009). Rather, breakdowns and fault lines in these ideals can be just as productive to moral reasoning.

Seen in the context of care, sacrifice, and gender, the models and instances of worry that my participants spoke of were framed as distinctively Vietnamese. Worry, I was often told, came naturally to them because of a long history of collective and individual hardship. However, as the country’s economic future brightens, some Ho Chi Minh City residents worry about the state of worrying-for. Several years after Vân-Anh lamented the decline of moral sentiments to me in a taxi, I paid her and her mother, Hương, a visit as part of the Tết (Lunar New Year) festivities. During Tết, most of Ho Chi Minh City’s restaurants and markets are closed. Fearing that I would go hungry, Hương began to fill a large shopping bag for me with fruit and a container of fried rice that she had cooked in anticipation of stores closing, despite my repeated insistence that I had adequately prepared for the holidays. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Vân-Anh laughing at my failure to convince her mother otherwise. She later told me she was amused not just because she could tell that I did not want to take the food but also because she

knew that she used to be like her mother. “But these days I’m too busy with work,” she said. “I have to live for myself” (*sống cho mình*). The next chapter examines the implications of Vân-Anh’s apparent change of heart. To what extent is her fatalism toward worry as a moral sentiment warranted? What are the effects of the decreased viability of a model of worrying-for on the experience of anxiety? What, if anything, has emerged in its wake?