

# Wedding gift-giving: a glimpse on evolving sociability practices



The strong urban dynamics that have been occurring in Vietnam over the past decades have led to a reshuffling of social practices, especially in the field of social exchanges and ritual activities. This paper gives a glimpse at evolving urban sociability through the lens of gift-giving practices during wedding ceremonies, both in Hanoi and in a rural commune of the Red River Delta, named Giao Tân.

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## 'Non-commercial flows' in Vietnam

Social exchanges, also called 'non-commercial flows', are understood as transactions (of goods and services) occurring outside the market and state channels. Because they are based on personal ties and affect social relationships, they also constitute significant indicators of sociability; in this case we are looking at contemporary Vietnam. 'Non-commercial flows' encompass a wide variety of transactions, in various guises, with different ways of transference. Underlying this diversity, there are nonetheless common principles.

A 'typical system of non-commercial flows'<sup>1</sup> can be defined as a ceremonial gift-giving system based on mutual aid (*giúp đỡ*), reciprocity (*có đi có lại*) and moral indebtedness (*nh; tình nghĩa*). The system is embedded in strong moral and social obligations that bind the participants' relationships. As far as they fulfil economic and social functions, social exchanges widely contribute to the production/reproduction process of communities at local levels. Hybridisation of practices and traditions surrounding wedding ceremonies in the Red River Delta is a meaningful indicator to apprehend the evolution of society, especially in urban contexts.

According to a 2005 survey held in rural provinces (both in the Red River province of *Bắc Ninh* and in the Mekong Delta province of *Long An*), the expenses related to wedding gifts represent an average of 13% of a family's income.<sup>2</sup> A study conducted in Hanoi indicates that respondents participate in an average of 25 celebrations a year and spend 6% of their budget on gift-giving.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, many informants complained about these expenses, especially during the wedding season, from October to March. A quarter of respondents said they have to borrow money in order to fulfil their financial obligation for ceremonies. Even though city-dwellers attend fewer celebrations than village-dwellers, social exchanges remain intense in an urban context. However, in contrast with countryside practices, many transformations can be observed. The study of gifts and transfers during weddings celebrated in Hanoi provide important clues to these changes.<sup>4</sup>

## Unpacking wedding gift-giving practices in an urbanising society

Despite the social heterogeneity of urban dwellers in Hanoi, some general patterns concerning wedding gift-giving practices are identified. Among these trends, when attending a wedding in the Capital city, guests commonly bring a cash-gift in an envelope and put it in the appropriate box before entering the ceremony room. These gifts are called *mừng*, which means 'to congratulate'. Donors carefully write their name on the envelope and specify to whom they dedicate it: the parents or the married couple. In return, they will receive similar cash-gifts, generally of a higher amount, when they themselves organise such a ceremony. The monetisation

Above: 'Modern style' gift during a wedding ceremony in a village in Nam Định province (2008). Courtesy of Emmanuel Pannier.

of wedding gifts runs parallel with a broader monetisation process of non-commercial transactions in cities, brought about by the urban economical context and needs. Although monetisation of gift-giving also occurs in the rural commune of Giao Tân, it happened earlier in Hanoi, where it is also much more widespread.

During weddings in the Giao Tân rural area, even if gifts in kind still occur, most of *mừng*-gifts are in cash, but without any envelopes or boxes. The name of the donor and the amount of money are directly registered on a gift-list held by a family member. The transaction occurs in public, unlike in Hanoi where *mừng* are delivered within an envelope, reflecting the primacy of the 'bilateral relationship', without many external social controls; in rural areas, the bilateral relationship is also significant but much more deeply embedded in local society, where reputation and dignity (*face*) are at stake.

Other distinctions between rural and urban weddings highlight the specific feature of urban sociability. In the countryside, villagers usually organise the wedding ceremony at home, and the bride's and groom's personal celebrations are hosted separately. But in Hanoi, since the 1990s, new trends have appeared. Many more ceremonies are hosted in restaurants and even at luxurious wedding venues, if the family can afford it. At such events, the two families often gather their personal guests at the same banquet place. Consequently, wedding preparations are not performed by relatives and neighbours for free anymore, within a reciprocal scheme called *giúp đỡ* (mutual aid). People who choose to rely on service providers in the market instead of their relatives argue that contractual relationships "are more reliable and controllable than personal relationships, which are based on sentiment."<sup>5</sup> By contrast, in Giao Tân, even if some villagers share this opinion, most of them continue to lean on personal networks, both for economic reasons and for social obligations.

These variations illustrate urban social trends where market exchanges are being substituted for non-commercial transactions and where impersonal-contractual relationships are – in some circumstances – preferred to emotion-based bonds framed by strong moral and social obligation. City dwellers tend to emancipate themselves from moral debts-bonds, which are a central ingredient in sealing social ties in rural areas.

## Consumption and wedding ceremonies in Hanoi

The increasing consumption of commercial services for weddings, linked to the increasing standards of living in cities, leads to higher expenses for urban weddings than rural ones. My survey in Giao Tân indicates that wedding expenditures ranged from USD 250 to 1,000 between 1998 and 2009. A previous case study of a middleclass family wedding in Hanoi in 1996 revealed that a total of USD 2,000 was spent to host 800 guests.<sup>6</sup> Nowadays in Hanoi, organising a banquet in a 4-star hotel costs a minimum of USD 25 per guest; renting a place and

hiring catering services for a medium quality banquet costs an average of USD 100 for a table of 6. Taking the average income of urban dwellers into account (USD 150/month in 2012), these amounts are substantial investments. A lot of people have to borrow money in order to hold a worthy wedding celebration.

Wedding costs increase in an urban context, but so too do the value of the gifts. *Mừng*-gifts are viewed as a contribution to the event. Thus, if organisers spend more for the ceremony, so do guests. The amount of the gift varies according to the closeness of the relationship, but also according to the place and type of ceremony. For a 'normal relationship' (*quan hệ không thân thiết*), not an intimate relation (i.e., colleague, neighbour, distant kin), guests will give between USD 15 and 25 at a wedding in Hanoi; close friends and relatives will give a minimum of USD 35. In the countryside the average gift amount is less than half of this.

Organising a wedding or being invited to a wedding in Hanoi can definitely be a significant financial burden. This explains the Government's attempts to contain the increase of wedding costs,<sup>7</sup> especially by forbidding lavish banquets, by limiting the number of guests, and by discouraging prestige competition or status display. Locally, the Hanoi authorities even issued a decision (No. 07/2012/QĐ-UBND) prohibiting ostentatious excesses and indirectly targeting Party members.

In Giao Tân, except for when children migrate and organise their own weddings in a city, wedding costs are generally covered by the parents. Helping their children to start their lives is a strong moral duty that leads to many transactions from parents to children, and thus to strong moral debts for children who are expected to reciprocate when necessary. In Hanoi, more and more couples finance their weddings themselves, especially when they are in a better economic situation than their parents. These changes reflect broader shifts in child-parent relationships in an urbanising context, where reciprocal duties have been modified. The moral and legal responsibility of parents to support their children decreases, and obligations for children to take care of their parents when they get old, or when a parent dies, may also decline.

## Gift-giving practices as a window into urban sociability

Looking at wedding gift-giving practices both in Hanoi and in a rural commune of the Red River Delta provides a glimpse of sociability changes that occur within a fast urbanising context. Principles of 'non-commercial flows' are quite similar in both environments, but their expressions present distinctive features. The control of local society on the fulfilment of obligations is much stronger in the countryside than in Hanoi, where bilateral relationships, contractual relationships and utilitarian consideration seem to occupy a more important place. The practical utility of gift-giving tends to override its social function. Although the reality is more subtle, in general we can state that the flow of financial resources sustain social relationships in the countryside, while in Hanoi, social relationships sustain resource flows. But, as long as state and market regulations (i.e., contractual, impersonal and formal relationships and exchanges based on law) cannot produce enough trust to ensure cooperation and are not sufficient to support the production/reproduction of society, 'non-commercial flows' and personal relationship networks remain central issues for urban dwellers.

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