Between Nurturing and Nurtured Childhood Children Working on the Streets of Hanoi

Aiko TAKAI
Graduated Student
Universiteit van Amsterdam
International School for Social Sciences and Humanities

Abstract

This paper argues that globalisation has entailed a widening gap between the childhoods of the poor and the rich. The gap is between the nurtured childhood of the upcoming urban middle classes and the nurturing childhood of the poor. By opposition to the Western-inspired nurtured childhood, nurturing childhood finds its inspiration in reinvented Confucian tradition. Poor children are, from their early childhood, raised as productive members of the family and carry the burden of morality and filial duty on their small shoulders. Based on this particular pattern of upbringing, children feel responsible for the family even if it means that they have to sacrifice themselves. Exploring the traditional Confucian values and the impact of socio-economic changes in a context of an economic transition, the paper contends that while the lifestyle of children from the upper classes has come closer to that of their Western peers, that of poor children has increasingly been distanced from it. My argument is based on a case study carried out in Hanoi for a three-month period between August – November 2005.

Introduction

This paper considers the everyday lives of children working on the streets in the capital of Vietnam, Hanoi. The primary aim of the study is to understand the widening gap generated by globalization between the childhoods of the poor and the rich. The gap is between nurtured childhood typified by children from the urban middle classes and nurturing childhood for many, which is reinforced by reinvented Confucian traditional. The distinction between 'nurtured' and 'nurturing' childhood I borrow from Hecht's study on street children in Recife, Brazil. (Hecht, 1998).

In the past two decades street children in Third World have captured a growing concern for many national and international development organizations, academics as well as the media. Policy interventions have ranged from the international rights convention, national legislations to local charitable aid programmes and interventions in order to help street kids get a 'proper childhood'. Although the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 ensures human the rights to defend and practice his/her own culture, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) claims uniformly entitled rights to a decent childhood for the children of the entire world regardless of their socio-economic situation or cultural background. The underlying assumption in this contradiction is that despite the existence of multiple cultures of childhood, only one particular form of childhood, the one that evolved in modern Europe and North America would be in compliance with children's rights.

This model is perceived as a social stage that is unchanging and universally experienced in a similar manner by children around the world and over time, and is patterned on the experiences of a rather small number of children in the world. This rather specific form of childhood that 'development' proposes for the children of the poor is as defined by UNICEF (2005):

> *"Childhood is the time for children to be in school and at play, to grow strong and confident with the love and encouragement of their family and an extended community of caring adults. It is a precious time in which children should live free from fear, safe from violence and protected from abuse and exploitation. As such, childhood means much more than just the space between birth and the attainment of adulthood. It refers to the state and condition of a child's life, to the quality of those years."*

As a consequence, other forms of childhoods are treated as anomalous or inferior, transforming 'development' into the endeavour to standardise childhood across the globe (cf. Boyden 1990; Burman 1996; Nieuwenhuys 1998; Stephens 1995). Western childhood fails to embrace the diversity of the social forces and cultural practices that shape childhood in the developing world. The result is extremely ambiguous and leads to hide the growing gap between the lives of the urban middle classes and those of the poor.

Denying that there often exists considerable difference in perception between children and adults, the approach is also top-down. When observing children's real lives, I believe with Punch, that children are the most appropriate informants to consult about their own social worlds (2000: 56). Throughout my fieldwork, and in particular during data analysis, I questioned myself as to "how different discursive practices produce different childhoods, each and all of which are 'real' within their own regime of truth" (James and Prout 1990: 27). This has been fundamental to consider the ideological distortions of Western childhood, by which other childhoods are condemned or ignored. Focusing on children's perceptions and everyday experiences, the central question of this study is formulated as follows: "how do children in Vietnam who work on the street balance the opposing ideals of childhood in society, in particular, how do they come to terms with the tension between 'nurtured' and 'nurturing' childhood?"

The paper is organized as follows. First, I discuss the gap between what 'development' has suggested as the ideal and real childhood practices as the one I observed in the context of Vietnam. I contend that the gap between ideal and real childhood is not a matter of a lack of development. Development, I argue, generates a growing gap between the childhood of the rich and the childhood of the poor not only globally between the North and the South but also locally, among social classes. More specifically, my Vietnamese case study suggests that there appears to be a growing gulf in childhood practices between the rich and the poor, in which Confucian values and the emergence of market economy are tightly enmeshed. I examine the diversity of childhood experiences in Hanoi. I compare the radically different everyday experiences of rich children with those of the poor. I then take a closer look at the real life situations of street working children in terms of poverty and work. Their families being highly dependent on their earnings, poverty is a major motivation driving children to work on the streets. Their contribution being vital for the family, I claim that it is crucial to

understand how children perceive their roles and place themselves in the wider context of society (section 2). In section 3, I discuss tensions that children face in the course of their lives on the streets. To deal with the tensions, children keep going by highlighting the high moral value attached to their nurturing roles. Though causing pain and disappointment, they do not allow the sense of exclusion from nurtured childhood to take over their lives. Finally, I argue that the current discourse on childhood fails to account for dynamic socio-cultural constructions specific to a particular context in which they are enmeshed. More specifically, it fails to explain the childhood dichotomy, in which only rich children are able to emulate the Western model while poor children seem to be condemned to accept to be nurturing and therefore distance themselves from this model.

1. Ideal and practiced childhood

Here I begin arguing that there are basically two childhood models at work in Northern Vietnam at the same time: the one emulates the Western deal while the other evolves from the real life experiences of those who cannot or can only imperfectly emulate this model. I secondly contend that the two models closely follow class differences emerging from social transformation that shifted Vietnam from a collectivized socialist system towards an open-market capitalist structure.

The Western childhood ideal enshrined in the CRC, as said, articulates a typical image of nurtured childhood that has recently been enthusiastically exported as ideal for the children of the South. Ever since the rights of the child was declared, it has become vital for countries such as Vietnam to pursue this specific form of childhood to be accepted as a member of the 'international community'. As Nieuwenhuys claims (1998: 2), "the instrument is not culturally neutral but is grounded in the assumption both of the superiority of the childhood model as it has evolved in the North and the need to impose this model on a global scale". Ignoring significant differences in cultural backgrounds and social practices, other types of childhood practices are marginalised. Moreover, it denies children's agency to deal with tensions in enacting their childhood. As I shall argue next, this may be a very crucial aspect of the lives of poor children in North Vietnam.

Development for children of the poor in Vietnam in recent years has been something of a paradox. The values attached to children in Vietnamese society have for many centuries been inspired to Confucian philosophy. This philosophy, originally introduced by the Chinese, has played a dominant role in the family realm as well as in society. Familial morality was central to Confucianism and children were encouraged to show strong feelings of filial piety towards their parents. Filial piety is embedded in a broader concept of moral cultivation, through which the child learns to be obedient and respectful towards their parents, relatives, and elderly people at large and to understand and fulfil the responsibilities towards parents (Hojer *et al* 2004: 392). Gammeltoft and Olwig (2005) note that expectations of filial duty have a strong influence on ways of thinking and action in relation to children from different social backgrounds in Vietnam. Rydstrøm (2001; 2002; 2003), who carried out an extensive study on children's embodied morality in Northern Vietnam, highlights the local concern with morality/virtue/ethics. She argues (2003: 3),

"morality (*dao duc*) is, among other things, a matter of practicing and 'behaving oneself' (*an o*) appropriately, avoiding 'confrontations' (*cham*), having 'sentiments' (*tinh cam*), and 'showing respect for the superior and self-denial for the inferior (*Biet kinh tren nhuong duoi*)". Vietnamese children, in particular, the poor are raised not merely as children as perceived in the West but with duties and obligations towards their family as well as towards their society, rather than to themselves (Rubenson 2005: 21). Growing up in such a society, the meaning of self is intimately tied to the solidarity of family. Children are valued as a part of the collective family unit rather than as autonomous individuals, who hold independent positions in society. Hence, collective rights weight heavier than individual interests. As a member of familial unit, Vietnamese children do not necessarily see their contribution to the household as 'work', but as 'fulfilling the share' and confirm the responsibility attached to the task (Hojer *et al* 2004: 393). This 'fulfilling the share' notion is strongly linked to the way in which children learn to practice morality and show love to their family.

Recent economic transformation in Vietnam under *Doi Moi* appears to have transformed the Confucian ideology as described above. A rapid shift from a colonial administration, to a communist structure to state-controlled capitalism makes it difficult to classify the childhood models that are at work in contemporary North Vietnam. Roughly speaking, children seem to grow up in a situation in which divergent models of childhood are at work at the same time: on the one hand, children's lives are shaped by notions of filial duty that emphasize to be obedient, respectful and responsibilities to nurture families. On the other, children are informed by modernised, or westernised notions of vulnerability that emphasize the need for the protection, care, play and, above all, education. What is less clear is how children live the modernization process and experience socio-economic changes from their particular point of view. Particularly missing from the analysis is how real-life experiences are not only affected by but also impinge upon childhood ideals. Investigating how actual lives of those identified as 'street children' corresponds to the ways in which international society and local opinions associate with this social category, this study will unravel the real life situations of such children and will look at how they balance the two opposing ideas – nurturing and nurtured - in constructing their own childhood.

2. Real-life childhoods in Vietnam

During the fieldwork research, I remarked, unsurprisingly, considerable differences between a poor child and a rich child both in economic and social respect. In this section, I shall ponder on observed childhood practices based on the empirical data collected during fieldwork in Hanoi. I begin by describing characteristics contrasting a poor child with a rich child. I suggest that children are highly aware of their families' economic situation. Knowing that their contribution is indispensable for livelihood, children often work spontaneously, even if they do not like it, particularly when this work takes place on the street. For some, work is a duty they feel obliged to perform because of their circumstances, while for others, it is rather a voluntary act of love towards their family.

Differences between a poor child and a rich child exist, as I shall now proceed to illustrate, not only in terms of physical signs, but also in terms of their everyday practices with respect to work, education and play. In the course of my fieldwork, I had opportunities to visit several private English lessons open for upper-class Vietnamese children. In one school, lessons take place on weekends from 8am to 10am. During the break time, children play football or games with other kids in the courtyard. They also go to a nearby shop to buy snacks or drinks with pocket money given by their mothers. Comparing these children to poor children working on the streets, the first noticeable difference is their physical appearance. Although younger than most of poor children I knew, wealthier kids were generally taller and bigger than their poorer peers. This is probably due to the differences in nutrition. Rich children eat more calorie-rich and nourishing food like meat and fish, whereas poor children tend to eat simpler and cheaper food such as rice and vegetables, only rarely taking meat.

The clothing they wear is also very different. Rich children dress up with new and clean clothes just like European middle-class children, while poorer children wear plain Vietnamese clothing. For instance, a child street vendor will typically wear dark colored polyester trousers, a T-shirt and a long sleeved shirt on the top to avoid sunburn. Shoe shining boys almost always wear a cap with a brim and girls sometimes wear a hat. Poor children tend to wear the cheapest plastic sandals, whereas rich children wear more solid sandals with which they can play football. All rich children I talked to go to school and bring no resources home. They are first and foremost students rather than workers. During the school term and to a large extent also during holidays, rich children spend most of their time studying. It is very common in Vietnam to go to extra schools to learn Foreign languages, English being the most popular. One Vietnamese English teacher working for a private school said how eager the parents were to invest in their children's education. She also mentioned that the children's attitudes change radically when parents occasionally visit the classroom. Knowing that they are expected to study and perform well, children suddenly become enthusiastic participants in class for their parents to be proud of them.

The wealthy parents I met in Hanoi tended to have no more than two children. Even if they had many siblings themselves, having children nowadays, they claimed, would entail considerable expense. One upper middle-class mother was saving money for her daughter (11) that she wanted to go to a well-known English school in which the fee for three months exceeded her monthly earnings. The mother devoted much time to bring her daughter to school everyday and to different private lessons to learn English and piano. She found it satisfying that she could realize her daughter's wishes.

Once I asked a group of eight wealthier children aged 11 to 13 to draw a timetable of an ordinary day. Besides studying at school, they appeared to spend between 2-5 hours at home for doing homework or learning English. Girls usually spend about 30 minutes to 1 hour to help their mother preparing dinner and cleaning table after meals, whereas boys hardly do any household tasks. Most rich children spend their free time playing with friends or watching TV. Among boys, playing computer games was also very popular. Poor children spend their time in totally different ways. For the poor, the main activity of a day is doing productive work for the maintenance of the family. I also asked both groups of

children the questions: "what is the most important thing in your life?" and "what do you want to be in the future?". As for the former question, poor children commonly agreed that family was the most important thing in their lives. One shoe shining boy told me that it is a customary belief in Vietnam that family comes first. Rich children's answers varied from becoming rich, having friends, playing with computer games and studying. For only one girl family came first. Confident that their dreams would come true, rich children's dreams of the future were, when compared to those of poor kids, very ambitious. They wanted to become the most famous architect, an actor, a very rich person, a secretary general of the UN, president of the United States, etc.

Rich children in Hanoi have, in broad terms, much in common with the ideal of nurtured childhood prevailing in Western societies. Rich children are not productive members of the family, but consumers. Parents take care of their children in the belief that they are innocent in need of protection from the world of adults. Rich children have much time to amuse themselves both at school and at home. The only task given to them is to achieve academically so as to realize their bright expectations and to satisfy their parents. In contrast to nurtured rich children, poor children working on the streets, as I now turn to contend, experience a radically different type of childhood.

Though it may not be their sole concern, poverty plays a major role in prompting children to work on the streets of Hanoi. Of the children involved in this study, 6 out of 7 said family's financial difficulty was their foremost reason to work. Born as daughters and sons of poor parents, these children have experienced poverty from an early age. As they grow older, they become increasingly aware of families' economic situations, in which lack of income or the absence of a steady income source remains the main problem. While children in rural areas leave school before completing the compulsory education and migrate to Hanoi to work to help their family, urban children may get support from charity organizations or private donors and be able to combine both work and schooling. Nonetheless, both in rural and urban areas, children are very much aware that without the money they bring in, their families could not live.

Take for example thirteen-year-old Nguyet[1], who is the youngest in her family. Nguyet's mother, in search of a better life, migrated to Hanoi with two children she got from a previous marriage. Nguyet was born after her mother settled down in a small rented room in almost slum-like area of Hanoi with a new husband. Nguyet started working when she was 9. She sells postcards and books for foreign tourists around Hoan Kiem Lake. During the week she goes to a charity school in the morning and starts working after lunch until after 11pm. An international NGO provides with her school uniforms, textbooks, notebooks and pencils for free. On weekends, as there is no schooling, she spends all day long on the street. One Saturday, when we sat together on the edge of Hoan Kiem Lake, she told me why she started working on the streets:

"I started because my family is poor. Before I used to sell chewing gum and sweets, but now I know a bit of English so that I sell postcards and books to foreigners. I earn about

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[1] As far as anonymity is concerned, children's names are all changed in this study.

10,000VND to 20,000VND[2] a day. Because foreign tourists prefer to buy from small children, I earn almost twice as much as my sister or brother. If I don't work, my family does not have enough money to buy food and pay for the room."

Like Nguyet, Loan is a Hanoi born girl. She has been vending chewing gum on the streets for six years since she was 4. She hawks the streets near Hoan Kiem Lake with its many cafes, bars and restaurants. She lost her father a year ago and she lives with her mother and two older siblings in the South of Hoan Kiem district. Her sister (24) was recently arrested by the police while selling books on the street and, has been sent to a re-education centre for a period of three months. Her brother (22) also sells books. But he is addicted and spends all his money on drugs. Being left with a mother who is also a street vendor, Loan has to work even harder to fill the gap left by her absent sister and addicted brother.

Unlike Nguyet and Loan, 15-year-old Huyen comes from a rural peasant family in Ha Nam province 70km from Hanoi. She sells fried donuts on the main streets of Thanh Xuan district close to the periphery of the city. With a desolate look in her eyes, Huyen told me:

> "I decided to come to work in Hanoi because my family is poor. When I was 12 (after 7th grade), my father asked me to drop out school. My parents did not have enough money to pay the school fee for the three of us. So I left school for my younger sister and a brother. Since then, I worked at home all day long, cooking, cleaning, raising animals and working on the field. But after one year, I have become aware that we could not continue living in that way. My parents are farmers but farming doesn't yield enough for selling. We didn't have enough money to buy food. I really didn't want to leave home, but one day I told my parents that I would go to Hanoi to work. I knew a woman from the same village who was already starting a small business in Hanoi. She makes fried donuts. I talked to this woman, and she told me that I could sell them on the streets".

Although she wanted to continue schooling, Huyen accepted her father's instigation without muttering. She knew not only that her family did not have enough money for their subsistence but also that they have a substantial debt. Three years ago Huyen's parents rebuilt their almost collapsing house to secure one of the only assets they still kept. Having no financial means of their own, they borrowed 15,000,000 VND (equivalent to US 950$) from kin and friends. Though three years have already past, they have neither been able to pay off the debt nor any future prospect to ever return such a large amount of money. As the oldest daughter of the family, Huyen felt that it was her duty to leave home to work. Her family since then depends on Huyan's earnings of about 300,000VND (less than US 20$) a month, which is their only source of income to survive and pay for school. Similarly, 16-year-old boy, Dong is also the oldest child in his family. He migrated to Hanoi from Thanh Hoa province to help his peasant parents and a younger brother. In Dong's words:

> "I left school after the 8th grade because I knew that my parents were not able to afford the school fees. I wanted to continue but I understood that leaving school was the only solution for my family. I did not tell anything to my parents though, so when my teacher came to my house trying to encourage me to come back to school,

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[2] At the time of my stay in Hanoi, 1 US $ was equivalent to about 15,900 Vietnamese Don (VND)

they were very angry. They even forced me to go back to school. I told them that I would go to Hanoi to work but they didn't agree. I tried to convince them many times. They only let me go when I said that I wanted to work in the city to learn something new".

Though being aware that children's contributions would materially improve their living situation, like Dong's, a lot of parents found it difficult to allow their children to take up paid work to help them financially. They felt that the urban street is a hazardous place for a small child to be. Moreover, though children work at home to help with household chores, they could morally ill accept that their children would leave home to bring money back for the family. Some mothers expressed a feeling of regret but admitted that their economic situation did not allow her to provide her kids with a life as that of upper class children. Ashamed for 'failing' to be a good parent, these feelings are well expressed by Xuan's mother, herself a street vendor:

> "My children know that without money we could not live. I feel sorry for my kids that they have to work on the streets. Children from rich families can just go to school and spend their free time watching TV or playing games, but my kids have work to help me pay the rent and buy food. I have considered sending my kids to rich families to be adopted so that they need not to suffer from poverty. I do not want them to work on the streets and feel miserable. I tell them to stay at home to study for school."

In contrast to Xuan's mother, a few parents did not perceive working on the street as something negative, but rather as part of a poor child's natural way of growing up. In the case of 14 year-old shoe shining boy Minh, it was his father who encouraged him to work. Minh had been working since he was 4. He had managed to combine work[3] with school. Understanding his family's financial difficulties, Minh dropped out of school after the 7th grade on his own in order to lighten his father's burden. As his father believed that shoe shining would bring more money home, Minh had no other option than obey him. He travels at half an hour bus drive distance of his village in Ha Tay province every morning to work on the streets of Hanoi. Minh's father, besides farming, works as a porter, carrying goods on his back or shoulders, yet his income is too unstable to depend on. Although his older sister sends some money that she earns in a plastic factory, it is not sufficient to meet the family's needs as a grandmother, a stepmother and a younger sister depend on them and do not bring in any money.

Unlike the other children, 15-year-old Thanh, has migrated from Ha Nam province to Hanoi in search of adventure. He dropped out of school after 6th grade because he found what he learned there useless. Most of his friends also left school. Bored of the monotonous rural life, they came together to Hanoi. His mother disagreed vehemently, yet Thanh eventually convinced her. Thanh's father has left home with another woman more than 10 years earlier. But his family's livelihood was relatively stable as two of his older siblings send money home hat they earn in a noodle factory. Although not strictly necessary, Thanh

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[3] Minh used to make *Nons*, Vietnamese traditional leaf-covered hats in his village.

still sends most of his earnings home. When I asked why he does not spend money on himself, Thanh replied: "Because I just like it. I want to contribute to my family."

Like Thanh, all children involved in my research bring most of their earnings home. As children know that their families highly depend on their incomes, expenditures on themselves were generally kept to a minimum and devoted necessary items as food and accommodation. Though from time to time they would buy themselves snacks, a few pieces of clothing or accessories, they were extremely careful not to cross the boundary that would threaten their family's survival.

As said above, financial constraints played a crucial role in children's decision to start working. Decisions made to work on the streets were, significantly, almost always the child's own. While many parents disagreed with their decisions, a number of them perceived it as a life-course of children born in a poor family. In what follows I probe into children's rationale to work and how they relate to their specific working place, the streets.

When one asks a child working on the street why s/he has to work, the most likely answer is that it is because his/her family is poor. No doubt this is true, as the majority of children to whom I asked this question gave this answer. However, as I spent more time and had many conversations with children, I gradually became aware that poverty is not the only explanation. Dong (16) works in a lively area of Donh Da district called Kim Lien. The main streets are full of cafés, bars and restaurants, which attract locals in numbers. Dong usually wanders around the main street looking for customers in cafés or a local restaurant where he has gained a kind of right to customers above other shoe shining boys. He came to Hanoi to work not only to support his family:

Aiko: How do you find working in Hanoi?
Dong: I feel happy.
Aiko: Why?
Dong: Because when I'm in Hanoi, I have a lot of chance to meet people.
Aiko: Would you not prefer going back to your village?
Dong: I prefer staying in Hanoi. Of course I miss my family and I always want to go back to my village but there is nothing to do there.
Aiko: Will you remain in Hanoi also when you get older?
Dong: So far, I think so. Because I think Hanoi is a good place to earn money, learn how to do business and meet people.

Unlike other children, for Dong Hanoi was a place where to find opportunities unavailable in his village. Wishing to improve his future, he believed that staying in his village would thwart his and his family's prospects. Though his current life in Hanoi is, he felt, quite uncomfortable, he saw it as a first step towards his dream to open a restaurant and start his own business in the future. What encouraged Huyen (15) to work was slightly different:

Aiko: How do you find working in Hanoi?
Huyen: At the beginning I really didn't want to work. But I just had to do it because my family is poor. Now, I got used to it so it's ok. But if I have a chance, I would prefer to change job.
Aiko: Why did you think you had to do it? Did you feel responsible?

> Huyen: Yes, especially to my mother. My mother always worked very hard in the house and on the field. She was working all the time.
> Aiko: How about your father?
> Huyen: I don't feel responsible for my father. He spends a lot of the money I earn on alcohol and I am really unhappy about it.

At the core, Huyen had strong feelings of love for her mother, who for her is the most important person in her life. Having worked together with from early childhood Huyen firmly believed that she should help and support her mother. Huyen's love for her mother inspired deep abhorrence to her father. He had been very strict, particularly towards her, she felt, not allowing her to play with her friends and sometimes going as far as beating her. For Huyen, leaving home to work on the streets was a way to share her mother's economic hardships. Similarly, Minh (14) emphasized his compassionate feelings towards his hardworking father, who also happened to be his only blood relative:

> "It's for my father that I work. My stepmother doesn't work outside the home because she is mentally unstable. My grandmother is too old to work. My father works very hard for the family and I want to support him".

As a child born in a poor family, Vietnamese children are raised as productive members of the family from an early age. However, the degree to which they feel responsible and the burden they eventually decide to take on their shoulders varies. While some children felt that supporting their family was a duty to which circumstances obliged them to submit, others saw it more as a voluntary act of love. Dong (16) stressed that it was his duty as the eldest son to help his parents and pay for his brother's school fees:

> Aiko: Do your parents ask you for money?
> Dong: No, never. But I feel it's my responsibility to bring money home.
> Aiko: Why do you feel that?
> Dong: I am the oldest child in my family and I am already grown up! I am responsible for my parents and my younger brother. My parents are just farmers. My father from time to time works at construction sites but he hardly gets any work offered recently. So, I have to devote myself to work.

During the many conversations we had together, Dong once mentioned that he shouldered a heavy burden to support his family. When I asked him what he would like to change in his life, he immediately replied "I want my family to have better living conditions so that I don't need to worry about their economic situation anymore". Other children who have older siblings like Nguyet tended to feel less responsible. Nguyet seldom felt that she had to work. She was aware of the importance of her earnings for the family's livelihood, but underlined that it was rather on account of her spontaneous wish to help. Although Nguyet usually makes more money than her sister (22) or brother (15), when she cannot sell enough postcards, her older siblings give her money to buy lunch. Nevertheless, despite these varied feelings towards work, as said, all children involved in this study gave, voluntarily, most money they earn on the streets to parents.

I met no child in Hanoi claiming to like working on the streets. Although admitting that it gives freedom, all found working on the street was very hard in many respects. Firstly,

because no matter how severe the weather is, they have to work everyday be it under the hot sun in summer or on cold days in winter days. Secondly, they are constantly harassed by the police. All children were afraid of the police. Some had experiences of getting their goods or tools confiscated and a few had been arrested and sent to a reformatory for a few months.

When I asked whether they preferred to stay at home instead of working on the streets, I got different reactions. Loan (10) and Huyen preferred to stay at home and do the household chores. All the others preferred working on the streets. As Dong said "there is nothing to do at home", material scarcity of home was a commonly shared view. Further, the lower values attached to non-productive household work made home less attractive than the streets. For Nguyet, it was not only that she did not like doing the cooking and the cleaning, but also because of the higher values attached to the street as a place to generate income. Working on the streets, she wished other people (she meant her migrant neighbors in the same commune) to understand the difficulties of her family. For Xuan, it was also to escape from her older sister who, due to the mental disease she faces, oftentimes beats her. And for Minh, it was because he felt more comfortable being with his friends on the street.

In sum, this section has dwelt on distinctions between rich and poor children in terms of the type of childhood that they experience. Nurtured children in Vietnam experience a childhood similar to that of children in wealthy countries, their main 'work' being first and foremost to be a good learner. Protected by parents, rich nurtured children are allowed to entertain themselves and dream of a bright future. Poor children, on the other hand, far from being nurtured, nurture the household. Whereas nurtured children are consumers who heavily depend on their parents, poor children are productive workers who bring monetary resources home, without which their family could not survive. No doubt that poor children play a crucial role in the survival of the family and that consciously or unconsciously, they shoulder a substantial burden. What makes them keep going? Are poor children just simply nurturing by nature or do they have to force themselves to be so? If so, why and how do they struggle? Do they try to find a way out? In the following section, I shall consider these questions by looking at the tensions that inform nurturing children's lives who works on the streets.

3. Tensions in nurturing children's lives

Children working on the streets experience, as opposed to rich Vietnamese children, a nurturing childhood rather than a nurtured childhood. As argued, to be nurturing entails a certain degree of self-sacrifice, such as working on the streets in spite of being unwanted, dropping out school to work and devoting oneself to maintain the family. The children I researched accepted their roles as sons and daughters from poor families. Here I argue that although nurturing the family may not be what the children would wish to pursue if they had the choice, they carry the burden that familial solidarity puts on their shoulders. I begin to substantiate this statement by first describing a range of tensions that children face. I then turn to how they attempt to deal with these tensions in daily life.

I have contended that most children involved in my research work out of their desire to help their families. Rather than being an economic burden on their parents, children work on the streets to contribute for their families' income. Even if it means to sacrifice their own wishes or dreams, children abide by feelings of filial duty to nurture the households. It is this filial duty that is at the core of children's moral behavior. However, as one can imagine, it is not always easy to carry on working. During many conversations children told me about the obstacles, difficulties and anxieties they have to face in their daily life. These come first from government policies, second from parental expectations and third from the perceived gulf that separates them from the children who do not need to work.

First, children were highly concerned with the presence of the police on the streets while working. Many said they wish to change jobs due to the intense police patrolling that hindered them in carrying out their 'illegal' work on the streets. In the political capital Hanoi, in particular in tourist areas, one sees a considerable police force. In the eyes of local authorities, street working children are viewed as a disturbance that threatens the safety of foreign tourists as well as of the local public. Before *Doi Moi,* there seems to have been fewer children as well as adults working on the streets. And unlike recent years, 'the street children problem' was not such a serious social problem as it is today (Phung To Hanh 1996: 1). Urban administrators mostly ignored it or kept away from the so-called 'seamy side of society' (ibid, 1996: 1). It was after the reform towards a liberalized market economy that the presence of street working children became more apparent in the eyes of government as well as society. Simply rounding up children by police forces and putting them in an institution, it was believed that a 'social phenomenon' of street children would somehow be settled through institutionalization. Yet there were signs of growing numbers of children working on the urban streets.

It was with the arrival of foreign NGOs and ratification of the CRC that from the early 90's the Vietnamese government attitude towards children on the streets gradually changed. International organizations coupled their increasing global concern with children's rights with large sums of financial aid for the children in the streets. The media attention given to children has increased since then. As Bond puts it (2003: 14), in the mid 90s, "it suddenly became important [for the local authorities] to protect street children from the 'social evils' that surrounded them in their day to day life, the surest way being for them to return home permanently". This assumption is based on the CRC provision that children's healthy development should take place at 'home'. As opposed to 'home', streets are primarily viewed as a risky space, in which social evils (*te nan xa hoi*) such as crime, drug abuse and prostitution thrives and exposes children to the loss of a proper childhood (Nieuwenhuys 2003: 109). Defined as 'Children in Need of Special Protection (CNSP)' by local authorities, street children are beneficiaries of numerous NGO projects[4]. However, listening to children has made me aware that the current approach reflects a lack of interest for the diversity of their experiences. Neglecting the diverse contexts in which they in which they

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[4] Officially, all the street children projects in Vietnam require permission from the government to be implemented. Most international organizations are thus obliged to implement projects together with the local committee, namely, Commission for Population, Family and Children (CPFC). In the name of local ownership, the government strictly regulates what should be and should not be done for children on the streets.

live, local authorities see in them little else than a social problem in need of cure (Hecht 1998: 97). The treatment given to cure the problem is primarily geared towards prevention, protection and reintegration by building a firm bridge between children and home. In Hanoi, implementation of this policy is typically done by the police. Police patrols constantly inspect the main tourist area (Hoan Kiem district) and is at a higher state of alert during the period when major events[5] take place in the city.

Doi Moi's attempt at generating money through global markets, such as tourism, international events and other business activities has been important for Vietnam's economic development in recent years. In order to maintain the level of economic growth Vietnam has pursued a policy of integration in the international capitalist economy under the control of a socialist state. These policies have been accompanied by *de facto* privatization of welfare, education and health services. Rescuing 'Children in Need of Special Protection' whose childhood is at risk is not the primary concern of government but to hide street children away by sending them back to their homes. This policy has been reinforced after 2003, when there was a big sports event, SEA GAME23 involving ASEAN member countries in Hanoi. A lot of effort as well as money were invested to improve the infrastructure, provide better roads and control traffic. Believing that they would generate negative images of Hanoi to visitors, the government also started clearing up the street from working children. Under cover of protecting them from the exploitative streets, children were arrested by the police and sent first to a social protection centre for a period from two weeks to three months, then back to their home villages. Evacuating street children in this way was praised as a 'success' and the policy is pursued till this day.

A tourist who would visit Hanoi for a short period of time may think that there are no street children, and this is also what I felt in the beginning of my fieldwork. When I asked in the first week of my fieldwork research why there were so few street children, a middle aged woman replied: "Only recently shoe-shiners disappeared from the streets. Who can I ask to shine my shoes now? I don't know where they all went." As this woman, many locals told that there are scarcely any children working on the streets any longer. But I soon realized that it was not true. It is not that children are no longer on the streets to work, but rather, they have become highly skilled in making themselves invisible. Nguyet (13) for instance, always keeps post cards and books in a coloured plastic bag to pretend she is but a girl wandering around the lake instead of a street vendor. Like other children, Nguyet appeared very much scared of the police:

> Aiko: What are you most afraid of while working on the streets?

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[5] During my fieldwork, there were three major events in Hanoi: Ho Chi Minh's Declaration of Vietnam's Independence on 19th August, National independence day on 2nd September, and Hanoi's liberation day on 10th October. Local authorities begin preparing for each event one month to a few weeks prior the actual date of the event, which required a considerable number of police on the streets. Further, the year 2005 was the 60th anniversary since the end of the war in 1945, therefore patrol of the police to clear up the streets was intensified. Almost every corner of the main districts, the presence of police, army as well as local committee members was observed. In addition, during the whole month of October, there was a traffic/road safety campaign, which required the presence of police on major streets.

Nguyet: I am afraid of the police. They are very strict. I cannot work when there is police. When they come, you have to be very agile and quick to go into hiding.

Aiko: Have you been arrested?

Nguyet: No, not yet.

Aiko: Do you know what happens if you are arrested?

Nguyet: Yes, because my mother, sister and brother have been arrested before. They send you to a centre in Ba Vi. Ah, I actually got almost arrested about three or four months ago just near the bus stop. But at that time, they released me immediately after.

Aiko: Did you have to pay?

Nguyet: No, but they took all my postcards and books away.

Some children have experiences of being arrested by the police and sent to a re-education centre for a few months to live and work with other children. Loan (10) talked about it:

"I had to stay in Ba Vi for three months to do some kind of house work like cleaning and washing. People were not very nice there in the centre. They shouldn't have arrested me because I have to work to earn money! But after three months, I was free. My mother told me the number of bus to take so that I could come back to Hanoi alone".

Many children consider changing their work so big is the anxiety of being arrested, a decision precipitated, as we shall see, by the contempt in which their street-based activities may be held. Dong (16), who happened to quit shoe shining after a few interviews, told me:

"There were a few times when I was in Kim Lien that the police on the campaign to clear up the city came to the streets. I was so scared of being arrested. They took a couple of young boys. But now, as I work for the restaurant (as a motorbike keeper) I don't need to worry about these things anymore".

As he was the only one who switched his work during my fieldwork period, I further asked Dong the main reason why he no longer wanted to continue shoe shining. He replied, to my surprise, that it was neither because of police harassment nor because of the money he would make in the restaurant:

Dong: I didn't like shoe shining anymore because many people don't respect this job.

Aiko: Why did you choose to do shoe shining when you started?

Dong: My friend from the same village was doing this job so I started also. Nobody forced me to do it. It was just like a hobby for me when I started. It gave me great freedom (as he was self-employed).

Aiko: How many jobs have you done for the last two years since you migrated to Hanoi?

Dong: Many different jobs. So many that I don't even remember exactly… I worked in many different local open door restaurants, in a local bar (*bia hoi*) as a waiter, sold paintings on the streets, and did a few other things ….

Aiko: Why did you change your work so many times?

Dong   I didn't like any of the work I tried. None of them was suitable for me.

Throughout my research, Dong repeatedly showed low self-esteem and anxiety about his future. Dropping out before completing the secondary school, his concern for the family generated a feeling of inferiority. As mentioned earlier, in Vietnamese society, in particular, among the poor, morality plays a crucial role not only in showing respect for the superior but also to reinforce and legitimise self-denial in the inferior. In Dong's case, it is his being looked upon with contempt by the urban public that made him feel ashamed of his work. As if seeking a place to justify his existence in society, Dong keeps changing his work.

Far from protecting poor children, the government's policies have in practice the opposite effect. Official guidelines not only fail to help children return home but threaten their work opportunity and increase their vulnerability. This effect is strongly linked to *Doi Moi* open door policies and the transformation of the social security system it entailed.

Secondly, as remarked in the previous section, children are well aware of their position as poor in society. As daughters and sons of poor families, they accept their roles as income generators understanding it is essential for their livelihood. This does not mean, however, that they are satisfied with it. Even if children bring most of their earnings home, a number of them admit that they wish to keep more money for themselves. Generally, parents allow their children to keep a small sum of money to buy snacks, drinks, food and sometimes accessories or clothing. Although parents do not set a strict amount that children should earn, they know exactly how much money their parents expect them to bring home. When children cannot bring enough money home, parents react in different ways. Some conceal their disappointment while others, such as Loan's mother or Minh's father, express their dissatisfaction and resentment. Of course such parental attitudes reinforce children's feelings of failure to fulfill their parents' expectations. Minh struggles to live up to what his father expects from his only son. Noting that he felt more comfortable with shoe shining friends on the streets than with his parents:

> "I feel that I'm less loved by my parents than other children. I feel sad… because my father shouts at me. Whenever I bring a little amount of money, he shouts at me and says that I should work harder and earn more. But I wish I could go back to *Non* making. That job was not difficult and I liked it much more than shoe shining… But I cannot say it to my father because I know that with *Non* making, I cannot earn enough for my family".

Despite the fact that he actually desires to keep more money for himself, Minh cannot disappoint his father's expectation that his son should behave as the good child of poor parents and support the family. But even if he does share his family's hardships, Minh is not happy at home.

As a sole income earner of the family, the economic burden bears considerably on Dong's and Huyen's shoulders. They both voice serious concern about the financial difficulties of their families, whose survival is largely in their hands. Dong hoped that his family would improve its financial situation so that he could be released from the anxiety arising from poverty at home. Yet Dong emphasizes his responsibility to work to support his family. Huyen repeatedly claimed that her work, fried donut selling, no longer brings enough

money. Once I asked her what she would wish if her wishes were to be realized. As if working to support family was an ever-lasting duty, she answered,: "I just want a more stable job". In one of the last conversations I had together with Huyen, she told me that she does not think of anything else than the amount of money her mother would need to ensure the livelihood of the family. Both Dong's and Huyen's case reveals dramatically how the feeling of responsibility for the family leaves no room for more childish desires to keep some money to spend on themselves.

I have suggested earlier that the local interpretations of what an ideal childhood is about may differ according to social class. In explaining the meaning of '*Dao duc* (moral)' and '*Tinh cam* (sentiment)', which for Rydstrøm are crucial aspects of children's moral upbringing, Nguyet's reflects:

Nguyet	*Dao duc* means to help others. For example, if you are rich, you shouldn't look down upon the poor. You have to respect others. *Tinh cam* means that for instance when I am sad or happy, I tell others about it. Then I can share both sad and good things with other people. Because in this way they can show me sympathy. I want to get more *tinh cam*, it makes me happy.
Aiko	What do you think you have to do to get more *tinh cam*?
Nguyet	I have to be good. I have to learn well and work hard. I mean both studying (at school) and working (on the streets to contribute for the family). I am trying my best to get more *tinh cam.*

I have many times witnessed Nguyet rubbing the sleep out of her red eyes while trying to sell more postcards. She would not stop selling as long as there were tourists in the streets. As I gradually got to know Nguyet, I also came to understand how difficult she finds it to be a 'good child'. She has managed to work hard both at school and on the streets since she was 9. She is the best student in math, and does not go to bed before finishing her homework. Now, she is in the last year of her primary school and craves to continue her studies. But as the secondary school supported by the NGO is too far to reach for a small girl like her, she also knows that it would not be possible to continue schooling without a bicycle, something her mother cannot afford. She knew that a good learner could eventually attain through schooling for herself and her family much more than by following already paved ways that accorded with lives of the urban street workers. On the other hand, she also knew that her monetary contribution to the household had become indispensable to sustain the family. She continues to work on the streets as a daughter of the urban poor, with a tiny hope to realize her only wish.

For most children, poverty is a primal cause of hardships in their lives. A number of them claim that if only their families had more financial resources, they would have been happier than now. For instance, Loan described feeling about working on the streets: "I feel miserable working on the street. Why do rich people have so many different motorbikes while I don't even have a bicycle?" Working on the crowded lively streets, in which rich tourists gather to visit shops and cafés leaves her with disconsolate feeling. The children who experience poverty at home rarely dream to be rich when they grow up. Whether they believe such a dream is merely fantasy or hold antagonistic feelings towards rich people,

children wish to have little more than just enough to keep going. When I asked Xuan about her dreams for the future, she replied:

> "I don't want to be rich, because I come from a poor family. I just want to have enough money so that my family can be happy. In future, I would love to be a doctor. A doctor for poor people. There are many poor people who cannot afford to go to hospital. If I become a doctor, then I can cure those people".

Poverty causes tensions between being an ideal child as parents expect them to be and their desire to be released from economic burden. As their moral duties enjoin them to share the hardships of the family, children live in constant tension. As I now turn to discuss, poor children are also under another tension, the one that arises from the gulf separating their world with that of rich children.

Children often compare themselves with other children who go to school and need not to work for money. Children tend to separate, consciously or unconsciously, the world of the rich from that of the poor. As if they come from another social world, they draw a distinction between the haves and the have-nots. From the latter perspective the childhood of the former is happier because they can be full time students and have no other responsibility. Experiences at home, at school and on the streets create a range of tensions - stress, frictions and even hostility - against children of the haves.

The children may harbour hostile feelings towards non-working children who spend their time mostly in school. As a child who combines work with school, Xuan said:

> Xuan   I like going to school because my teacher is very nice. She is a new teacher in my school and she has been very kind to me. And she always tells me that the school is a happy place for children!
>
> Aiko   How about your friends at school?
>
> Xuan   My classmates tease on me because I sell chewing gum on the street. They call me 'a chewing gum seller' and make fun of me. I hate them. But I want to be like them so that I can tease them back.

Though Loan went to a different school[6], she too experienced bullying at school. Although her mother was planning to send Loan to a new school, Loan did not seem to be enthusiastic due to her dismal memories with school peers. Nonetheless, according to Nguyet who had similar experiences but overcame them, bulling rarely occurs as children grow older: "we, poor students in the final grade, have to be good examples for younger students so we behave well at school. But in Loan's class, there were only a few working children because they are small. That's why she was bullied". When I asked Nguyet what she thought about her friends who do not work, she replied:

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[6] At the time of my fieldwork, Loan was in the process of transferring to another school from the same charity school as Nguyet's, in which for small Loan was too far to walk therefore could not achieve enough attendance. Unlike rich children, none of her family had spare time to bring her to school nor means to send her to school, for instance, a bicycle. Although according to her physical age, she ought to be in the 3rd grade yet she has to start from the 1st grade in a new school, which may cause another reason to be bullied by other students.

> "I think they have more time to play. Sometimes when I'm bored of working, I wish I could play freely like them. But I don't envy them because my family is in difficulties and I have to accept that I need to help my family".

Persuading herself to accept the situation in which she was born, it is however not as straightforward as she hopes for. Nguyet continues, looking back how she has lived through practices of her childhood:

> Nguyet   When I was smaller like Xuan or Loan's age, I think I was happy enough. I had to work everyday selling chewing gum and sweets but I felt happy. But now because of the hardships that my family face, I don't feel as happy as before. I think non-working children are happier.
> Aiko   What do you think you would need to be happy?
> Nguyet   I need more money and also need to learn better at school. I want to be happy like others. So I would continue this work (selling postcards and books) for a few more years, then when I'll get my identity card[7] I want to find a more stable job. Maybe in a souvenir shop…

All the children saw themselves as less happy than non-working children who are looked after better by their parents and have more time for play and study. Even within the same family there can be differences. Huyen: "I think my sister and my brother are much happier than me because they just go to school and need not to work hard like me". When I continued to ask Huyan about her relationships with her siblings, she showed feelings of love for her brother, but not to her sister. Later when I visited her family 70 km South of Hanoi, I found out that thanks to a support of French foster parents living in Paris at age 13, the same age at which Huyen started working on the streets, her sister Mai, goes to school. Her parents explained that Mai's education is ensured till she completes upper secondary school. I soon sensed why Huyen did not like her sister. It was not, as far was I understood, because she hated her sister as a person. But rather, she found it difficult to accept the fact that, by sheer luck, her sister had obtained what Huyen had lost in order to share in the family's hardships. Strikingly, however, Huyen denies being envious of her sibling. As discussed earlier, children wished to pursue education and strongly desired to be released from the burden they shoulder. Why would they not be envious if they thought other children happier? The reason may be sought in how Vietnamese society oppresses poor children and prevents them from having dreams that are felt as unrealistic and unattainable. As said, among those who feel inferior, Confucianism feeds a sense of self-denial (*biet kinh tren nhuong duoi*) and divides society. As they become aware of their social position, the children of the poor understand and internalise that only the rich are entitled or deserve to demand for what they wish but not the have-nots:

> Aiko   What do you think of those children who go to school?
> Huyen   I feel sad (because I cannot go to school). But I don't envy them.
> Aiko   Why?
> Huyen   Because I'm not permitted to envy others.

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[7] In Vietnam, when a child reaches the age of 18, s/he receives an identity card from the authority. It is generally said by children that if they have an ID card, it allows them to engage with a more stable job.

Aiko	Why do you feel that?
Huyen	They can go to school and I cannot. It is just a fact, so there is no reason for me to be envious with those who can.
Aiko	But why do you think you are not permitted to envy?
Huyen	Because if I stay envious with others, I'll make my parents sad… To be honest, I envy those who can go to school, but I cannot say it loudly. I keep these feelings to myself. I don't want to tell others about it.

When children were asked whether they wish to go back to school, those who had to drop out of school to help the family showed mixed feelings. They tended to feel that it was too late or too embarrassing to start from the lower grades from which they had dropped out and sit with younger pupils in the class. Dong felt regret for leaving school as most of his friends are still in school. Likewise, Minh also felt contrite about having dropped out. Nonetheless, he never tells his father about it because he knows that if he goes back to school, he could no longer help the family.

In sum, children make a significant distinction between the world of the poor and the world of the rich. Seeing their world from the perspective of the latter leads them to devalue what they do. Powerful socio-cultural structures oppress poor children and lead them to behave according to social expectations. And eventually, children accept their roles to be nurturing. By looking at broadly three tensions that inform street working children's lives, I have shown that they are individual social beings who struggle but seek to make sense of their lives and negotiate the value of what they do. In a society in which the importance of market expansion grossly outweighs the protection of the weak, government policies to 'save' them are ineffective. They not only fail to support children working on the streets, but rather hamper their search for livelihood. Far from being nurtured, the children of the poor feel responsible for the well-being of their family. As if there were no other option than accept reality, children persuade themselves to share in the hardships of the family, regardless of their actual wishes to pursue education and play. Even if they do not oppose their parents, their lives are meshed with tensions between what is expected from a 'good child' and their desires, kept at a deeper level, to be like nurturing children.

Conclusion

Poor children working on the street may seem, at the first sight, as a group of undifferentiated children who can be legitimately labelled 'street children'. However, as I have been contending, each child has a different reason for being on the street, and different ways of viewing why s/he is using the urban space for work. In other words, the category 'street children' is wrongly equalled with a social phenomenon. Sociologically, the children labelled as such are a part of a far larger group of 'nurturing' children of whom only a small part happens to work on the streets. The term 'street children' actually reflects that for policy makers what cause concern are not the hardships that these children face, but their very presence and visibility on the city streets.

The analysis in this paper has attempted to show why childhood is not an unchanging or universal thing but a social process made by children, both those that are nurturing and

those that are nurtured. Children are social beings who have agency to come to terms with the tensions and negotiate values of their childhood. Children of the rich and the poor in Vietnam experience different practices of childhood and are expected to do so by their parents and society at large. Many children of the poor described their childhood as less happy than those who do not need to work and said that they shoulder a heavy economic burden to nurture their families from an early age. They face numerous tensions in their everyday life but somehow find ways to appropriate and contest the growing gulf between nurtured and nurturing childhood.

Rather than providing a complete picture to understand the diversity of childhood, the current discourse on childhood fails to account for dynamic socio-cultural constructions specific to a particular context in which they are enacted. More specifically, it fails to explain the childhood dichotomy, in which only rich children are able to become closer to the now dominant Western model while poor children seem to be fated to become increasingly nurturing. As shown, the tensions between nurturing and nurtured childhood that street working children experience is welded to a world in which the dichotomy between the rich and the poor is widening.

For further research, one should take into account the wider context of socio-cultural background to which those labeled as 'street children' belong to and how these notions are articulated in children's daily practices. In depth studies of how these notions and children's own perceptions interact would lead us to further understand the process at work in creating working children on the streets.

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