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The Pivotal Role of Vietnamese Women: Guardians of Ecology

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Vietnam was once a matriarchal society, a characteristic reflected in the innumerable contributions of women throughout its 4,000-year history. The historical narrative of Vietnam commences with the legendary matriarch Au Co, who is said to have led 50 of her 100 children to mountainous areas—symbolizing part of the foundation of Vietnamese civilization. In the first century, the account of the Trung sisters—Trung Trac and Trung Nhi—depicts heroes who played a pivotal role in the nation’s early pursuit for independence.

In Vietnamese literature, female figures are also celebrated for their contributions. Notable is Huyen Thanh Quan (1805-1848) who is renowned for her poems written in the styles of Double Seven-Syllable and Six-Eight Couplet.¹ In addition, the Vietnamese literary canon includes the classic “Song of a Soldier’s Wife,” (*Chinh Phụ Ngâm*) by the poet Doan Thi Diem (1705 – 1748), which was also translated into the traditional *Nôm*² script.

Beyond their historical and literary contributions, Vietnamese women have also played a central role in family life, often referred to metaphorically as the “domestic general.” Indeed, within the structure of traditional Vietnamese families, most household activities are planned and executed under the direction and control of women. This role of domestic leadership also extends to another significant domain—environmental stewardship. In traditional Vietnamese families, as managers of household

¹ Double Seven-Syllable, Six-Eight Couplet/*Song Thất Lục Bát* is a traditional Vietnamese poetic form that combines two different verse patterns: a pair of seven-syllable lines followed by a six-eight couplet. This structure is distinct to Vietnamese literature and reflects the rhythmic and tonal nature of the Vietnamese language.

² Vietnamese characters before the birth of the Vietnamese modern Latin alphabet-based characters, known as “*quốc ngữ*” (national script).

finances and daily consumption, especially food, women have historically functioned as primary agents of sustainable living. They are responsible for managing food preparation and preservation, both before and after each meal. Within this system of management, wastefulness—especially of staple foods such as rice, even a single grain—is unacceptable. Culturally and spiritually, rice is regarded as a precious gift from “Mr. Heaven” (*Ông Trời*), the divine figure in Vietnamese Traditional Religion. Therefore, it must not be squandered, even in the smallest measure.

This essay seeks to explore the pivotal role of Vietnamese women as ecological guardians. First, it will briefly examine their social and cultural roles across Vietnamese history. Second, it will investigate the origins of food-related ecological practices within Vietnamese society. Third, it will discuss how women in traditional households have come to be recognized as custodians of ecological balance. Finally, the essay will analyze how these roles have evolved in response to sociocultural transformations in the modern era. As Vietnamese society continues to modernize, the responsibilities and perceptions of ecological stewardship among women have likewise undergone significant shifts.

Basic Features of the Vietnamese Culture

Vietnam is situated within the tropical zone of Southeast Asia. Its climatic conditions—characterized by tropical weather, an extensive network of rivers, and the two major river deltas, namely the Red River Delta in the north and the Mekong River Delta in the south—have profoundly shaped the cultural and economic foundations of the country, particularly through the development of an agrarian society centered on wet-rice cultivation. This agrarian feature, in turn, dictates the Vietnamese staple diet, which primarily consists of rice. Complementing this staple, the traditional Vietnamese meal is composed principally of the trio of rice, vegetable, and fish.

Geographically, Vietnam lies closer to the Tropic of Cancer than to the Equator and is bounded to the east by the Eastern Sea (South China Sea). Its elongated S-shape, stretching from north to south, results in significant climatic variation across regions. The northern region, particularly in mountainous areas, experiences a climate akin to that of temperate zones. For example, Hanoi, the capital located in northern Vietnam, experiences four distinct seasons reflective of a temperate climate. In contrast, Central and Southern Vietnam—including cities such as Hue and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon)—are characterized by a tropical monsoon climate, with a rainy season from May to October and a dry season from November to April.

Vietnam’s overall climate is characterized by monsoonal patterns, high annual rainfall, abundant sunlight, and high humidity. These climatic factors collectively contribute to the fertility of the Red River and Mekong River deltas, resulting in consistent successful rice harvests annually. In 2024, Vietnam ranked third globally—after India and Thailand—in rice production and export.

The Role of the Vietnamese Woman

Vietnam's agrarian culture plays a significant role in shaping the status and responsibilities of women within the family structure, which includes the responsibility of managing household tasks, particularly those related to the rice cultivation and meal preparation. In this context, the Vietnamese woman functions not only as vital contributor to agricultural productivity but also serves as a "domestic general," overseeing the coordination of household tasks. Her role often encompasses supervising crop cultivation, preparing and managing family meals, and educating her children.

While these contributions are indispensable to the functioning and well-being of both household and community, they are largely confined to the domestic and subsistence spheres. Consequently, traditional gender roles persist, in which women's labor—though vital—is frequently undervalued or rendered invisible in public and institutional discourses.

Co-worker in the Rice Paddy and Leader in the House

Rice cultivation in Vietnam, much like industrial labor in a factory, requires coordinated, collective effort. This communal aspect of agricultural labor explains the large number of workers typically seen in the rice fields, particularly during soil preparation, planting, and harvesting. Consequently, at the onset of the rice season, one often encounters the scene of a man plowing the field with the aid of a buffalo while his wife simultaneously clears grass or channels water into the field. This image of marital collaboration in agricultural labor is deeply ingrained in Vietnamese cultural consciousness and is captured in the proverb: "*In the upper shallow rice field and the lower deep rice field, the husband harrows, his wife thins out, while his buffalo tills.*"

This portrayal of a wife working alongside her husband in the rice field highlights the egalitarian dynamic within traditional Vietnamese agrarian life, wherein the wife is not merely an assistant but an equal partner in labor. In other words, both heads of the Vietnamese family equally share the responsibility of sustaining the household economy, particularly in ensuring the provision of rice for the family. This ethos of equality between husband and wife in Vietnamese society finds symbolic resonance in the foundational Vietnamese legend of Au Co and Lac Long Quan, from whom the various ethnic groups of Vietnam are believed to have descended. According to the myth, after Au Co gave birth to one hundred sons, the couple divided their children equally: fifty followed Au Co to settle in the mountainous regions while the remaining fifty accompanied their father, Lac Long Quan, to the lowland plains. This narrative reflects a cosmological basis for the gender complementarity observed in Vietnamese society.

Beyond the rice fields, the role of the Vietnamese woman expands significantly within the domestic sphere. After a full day of labor, there is no time to rest and the woman quickly immerses herself in her responsibilities at home—preparing meals, managing household affairs, and caring for the children. Consequently, the Vietnamese woman, in the family setting, assumes not only the role of a co-worker but also that

of a leader. She selects the daily menu, organizes the preparation and timing of meals, and oversees post-meal activities such as cleaning. Thus, in addition to being a co-laborer in agricultural production, the Vietnamese woman also assumes the central role of household leader, orchestrating the rhythm and sustenance of family life.

Matriarchal Society

In addition to her dual roles in agricultural labor and household management, the Vietnamese woman also bears the sacred obligation of sustaining the family through childbirth and child-rearing. Beyond the physical act of giving birth, Vietnamese culture entrusts the woman with the moral and intellectual formation of their children. As a reflection of this cultural expectation, when seeing a child misbehaving in public, societal judgments often fall upon the mother, based on the prevailing belief that a child's conduct is a direct reflection of maternal upbringing.

Since the domestic sphere, particularly the kitchen, is traditionally considered as her domain, the Vietnamese woman is expected to be knowledgeable about her family's financial situation. She must carefully plan daily expenditures to ensure adequate nutrition and sustenance for all family members.

In light of all these responsibilities placed on her, Vietnamese society, prior to Chinese influence, recognized women as leaders of the household, or "domestic generals." At its roots, Vietnam was a matriarchal society. The legacy of female leadership in Vietnamese history is most prominently embodied in the figures of the Trung sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, who led a successful rebellion against Chinese Han rule in 40 AD. Under their leadership, the Chinese dominion over Vietnam, which had lasted since 111 BCE, was brought to an end. Although their reign lasted only three years, it laid the foundation for Vietnamese resistance to foreign domination and eventual independence. This legacy culminated in the decisive victory of General Ngo Quyen at the Battle of Bach Dang River in 938 AD, which ended over a millennium of Chinese domination.

Although Vietnam eventually transitioned from matriarchy to patriarchy, the role of women as domestic generals has remained intact. This is aptly expressed in the Vietnamese proverb: "*If the father dies, his child still eats steamed rice and fish. If the mother dies, her child licks leaves in the market.*" As Anthony Le Duc asserts, "Despite the deep influence that resulted from long periods of [Chinese] domination, women in Vietnam still retained a degree of equality that was not seen in the Chinese culture."³ More broadly, he argues that "the traditional Vietnamese culture has always given great importance to women, even without Western influence."⁴

Joseph Nguyen Van Chu remarks, "The Vietnamese [woman is] loved and esteemed by her husband, loved and respected by her children, occupied a prominent

³ Michael Q. Nguyen, *Missiologial Resonances in the Vietnamese Culture of the Multiplication of the Leaves in John 6* (STL, Tagaytay: Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies, 2024), 248.

⁴ Nguyen, *Missiologial Resonances*, 248.

position in the family which she holds with great dignity.”⁵ Through her “endless sacrifice and total dedication to [her] loved ones, [the Vietnamese woman] shows [her] children how important and significant the family is.”⁶

As this discussion illustrates, the Vietnamese woman plays dual roles—as co-worker and household leader—each of which reinforces her pivotal position within the family. This dynamic is particularly evident in her involvement with food preparation, where her role intersects with broader ecological systems. Mealtime thus becomes not only a familial ritual but also a site where the woman’s ecological awareness and stewardship are made manifest.

Vietnamese Woman, A Leader during Family Meal

In Vietnamese culture, the woman plays the central role as the leader in family meal preparation, bearing responsibility for cooking dishes that meet the tastes and needs of each family member. At mealtimes, it is she who assumes the role of host, calling everyone to gather at the table. Moreover, her hospitality often extends beyond the nuclear family, as she is also entrusted with the responsibility of welcoming and feeding unexpected guests on behalf of the household.

Preparing the family meal

As the “domestic general,” the Vietnamese woman commands authority over the household, particularly the kitchen, which is traditionally regarded as her exclusive domain, her “forbidden city,” so to speak. In this private sphere, she exercises full control, with only daughters permitted to enter and assist. Her responsibilities encompass all aspects of meal preparation, both before and after each meal.

Before preparing the meal, Vietnamese women are typically carefully in selecting dishes that not only suit the family budget but also provide sufficient nutrition to family members. In addition, since freshness is a defining characteristic of Vietnamese food,⁷ before the widespread adoption of refrigerators in domestic kitchens, “the only way to keep things fresh was to keep them alive.”⁸ As such, fish and prawns were expected to be sold while still alive. Seafood should “be sold swimming or jumping in their vats.”⁹ Likewise, live chickens were commonly kept in the cages at the marketplace, awaiting purchase. To obtain the freshest pork, chefs were often advised to visit the abattoir in the early morning.¹⁰

To ensure the freshness of daily meals, the Vietnamese woman typically visits the market after breakfast. With a basket in hand, she walks “to the market [in search of]

⁵ Joseph Nguyen Van Chu, *The Veneration of Ancestors and Evangelization in Vietnam* (Quezon City: Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia, 2005), 13.

⁶ Nguyen, *Missiological Resonances*, 251.

⁷ See Vu Hong Lien, *Rice and Baguette: A History of Food in Vietnam* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 162.

⁸ Vu Hong Lien, *Rice and Baguette*, 162.

⁹ Vu Hong Lien, *Rice and Baguette*, 162.

¹⁰ Vu Hong Lien, *Rice and Baguette*, 163.

fresh groceries”¹¹ to prepare meals for the day. Upon returning with the necessary ingredients, she assumes her role in the household and prepares lunch for the family. In the same manner, as the sun begins to set, around 5:00 PM, she returns to the kitchen to prepare dinner.

“Ringing the bell”

At mealtime, the Vietnamese woman ensures that each family member has their designated bowl and pair of chopsticks neatly arranged on the table or sedge mat. The individual dishes—likely prepared over several hours with care and culinary expertise—are arranged on a round tray. This tray, often bearing a variety of dishes showcasing her culinary skills, is then brought to the table or mat where the family gathers.

Once everything is ready, she calls her husband and children, informing them that it is time to eat. During the meal, she often attends to the needs of each family member, replenishing bowls or dishes as needed, and observing attentively, all while refraining from drawing attention to herself.

When she notices that all members have finished eating, it becomes her responsibility to signal the conclusion of the meal. This is typically done by quietly gathering the used bowls and chopsticks or by clearing the table. Her role does not end there, as she often takes charge of cleaning up and ensuring that the kitchen is restored to its pristine condition, ready for the next family gathering.

Feeding family guests

In Vietnamese culture, it is generally not customary to notify friends in advance before making a social visit. As a result, it is not uncommon for guests to arrive unannounced, even during mealtime. When this happens, the host family will warmly and immediately invite the guests to join the meal. It is considered both courteous and culturally significant to offer the guest a delicious meal as a sign of the family’s hospitality. This practice is deeply rooted in Vietnamese cultural values, where hospitality and generosity are prioritized, particularly toward guests. The importance of treating guests with respect and care is encapsulated in the proverb, “When guests arrive at [your] house, a dish of chicken or duck should be offered.”

The roots of this custom can be traced to Vietnam’s agrarian heritage, particularly its foundation in wet-rice agriculture. Working in the rice paddies and harvesting the ripened grains is not an individual endeavor but rather a collective task shared among couples, extended families, and their neighbors. The traditional Vietnamese family is an extended family, and a village is often composed of a cluster of interconnected family units. Within such a social framework, hospitality emerges as a natural and vital practice. Among the many expressions of this cultural value is the prioritization of guests during family meals, where visitors are customarily offered a place of honor at the table alongside family members.

¹¹ Nguyen, *Missiological Resonances*, 247.

Furthermore, Vietnamese society places a strong emphasis on concepts of honor and shame, which influence both individual behavior and familial reputation. Honor is highly significant, not only to the individual but also to the family as a whole. A family's reputation would undoubtedly suffer if it failed to provide its visitors with a "decent meal." This emphasis on both hospitality and honor underscores the importance of treating guests with respect and ensuring their comfort during meals and throughout their stay with the family.

In practical terms, the mother will quickly prepare additional dishes to ensure that the unannounced guests can thoroughly enjoy their visit with the family. If the wife cannot go to the local market for more ingredients, she will head to the backyard in search of a suitable chicken. "Until recently, the sight of someone chasing a squawking hen in the back garden [was] a familiar scene in Vietnamese life."¹²

Ecology in Vietnamese Society

Ecology, the New Science

Since the mid-20th century, in response to the growing challenges posed by global climate change, ecology has emerged as a significant and rapidly developing discipline. This scientific field raises awareness of the sacredness of creation and emphasizes the complex interconnections between humanity and all other living beings on earth.¹³ Ecology is fundamentally "concerned...with relations,"¹⁴ highlighting the dynamic interplay among living organisms, including humans, and their surrounding environments. By focusing on these connections, ecology calls for deep introspection and a transformation in how individuals worldwide should view and interact with other creatures. It urges humanity to recognize that human actions have undeniable consequences on the delicate balance of ecosystems.¹⁵

While "ecology as a science is rather new,"¹⁶ having been formally established as a distinct field in the mid-20th century, the principles of ecological thinking and practices of living in harmony with the natural world are not. These concepts have been embedded in human consciousness and behavior since the dawn of history. For millennia, through Traditional Ecological Knowledge passed down through generations, indigenous and traditional cultures worldwide have understood, respected, and

¹² Vu Hong Lien, *Rice and Baguette*, 162.

¹³ See Denis Edwards, "'Sublime Communion': The Theology of the Natural World in *Laudato Si?*," *Theological Studies* 77 (2016): 377-391.

¹⁴ Christian Tauchner, "Mission and Ecology," in *Mission beyond Ad Gentes*, Jacob Kavunkal and Christian Tauchner, eds. (Siegburg: Franz Schmitt Verlag, 2016), 180.

¹⁵ See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *A Statement of the US Catholic Bishops: Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue Prudence and the Common Good* (Washington, D.C., 2001), 5-6, 19-23.

¹⁶ José R. G. Paredes, "Eco-Theology: Only Wholeness is Sacred: Towards a New Theological Vision," *Religious Life Asia* 10, no. 1 (January-March 2008): 60.

embraced the profound interconnectedness between humans and other living beings.¹⁷ These traditional cultures have often lived sustainably, drawing on a deep-seated wisdom that sees the earth not merely as a resource to be exploited but as a living entity deserving of reverence and care. As noted in Jewish belief, “The Lord God put the man in the Garden of the East to cultivate and to care for it” (Gen 2:15). This Biblical verse suggests that God entrusts humanity with the mission of cultivating and caring for the Earth and all creatures. Similarly, Native Americans view all life on earth as interlinked and balanced, represented by the image of a web. These Americans believe that humanity does not create the web of life, but is merely a strand within it.¹⁸ Thus, when humanity destroys a strand of this web, it damages the entire system. As human life faces threats from climate change, the wisdom of Traditional Ecological Knowledge has resurfaced, now recognized as vital for addressing global ecological crises.

Additionally, ecology seeks to understand the interdependencies within natural systems, the impact of human activities on earth and its ecosystems, and the ways humans can contribute to maintaining ecological balance. Moreover, ecology encourages people in the digital age to delve more deeply and foster an awakening in the spiritual realm. For example, Judaism and Christianity call on their followers to value the lives of non-human beings. Judaism praises God, Creator who blesses all creatures and deems them good (Gen 1-2:4a), while Christianity recognizes the beauty of the lilies in the field and the intrinsic value of birds in the air (Matt 6:28-30). Consequently, thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and Francis of Assisi believed that nature is imbued with sacredness and that the world and everything in it reflect the beauty of God. The growth of this cosmocentric view toward all forms of life challenges the anthropocentric perspective that has long dominated human history. As humanity rapidly advances into the digital age, ecological spirituality promotes the protection of biodiversity as essential for the survival of all life on this planet.

Vietnamese, a Traditional Culture

Vietnam represents one of the traditional cultures in which ecological practices have been deeply ingrained throughout its history. This long-standing commitment to environmental stewardship is evident in various aspects of Vietnamese cultural life, including daily practices, and customs, all of which reflect a strong awareness of ecological sustainability.

In Vietnam, the family household serves as the primary locus where ecological values are both taught and practiced. Central to this process is the figure of the “domestic general” in the family—the woman who assumes a pivotal role in both

¹⁷ Edgar G. Javier, “God’s Dream for Humanity and Creation: One Earth – One People,” *Religious Life Asia* 10, no. 1 (January-March 2008): 15.

¹⁸ Michael Q. Nguyen, “The COVID-19 Pandemic from Ecological Perspectives: The Prophet SARS-CoV-2,” in *Church Communication in the New Normal: Perspectives from Asia and Beyond*, ed. Anthony Le Duc (Bangkok: Asian Research Center, 2022), 91.

modeling and instilling environmental consciousness. Vietnamese women actively teach their children the importance of living in harmony with nature, often during meals and through everyday interactions. These everyday moments become pedagogical spaces in which values of harmony with nature are taught and reinforced. The teachings of mothers extend beyond mere words. They are woven into daily routines and practices that emphasize sustainability and mindful consumption.

One significant way in which Vietnamese women ensure that ecological practices are respected in her household is by encouraging family members to adhere to core ecological principles, particularly minimizing waste and conserving resources. A common example is the emphasis on saving leftover food. Rather than discarding surplus food, Vietnamese households are encouraged to find ways to reuse it in future meals. This practice not only helps prevent waste but also reflects a broader cultural attitude of frugality and mindfulness, which is deeply connected to an ecological mindset.

In this sense, the Vietnamese family meal serves as a classroom, where the Vietnamese woman assumes the role of an educator imparting valuable lessons on ecology. Through her actions and words, she teaches her children and family members about the importance of respecting natural resources, avoiding food waste, and embracing sustainable practices in daily life. Each meal becomes an opportunity to emphasize the sacredness of food, illustrating how every grain of rice represents the hard work of farmers and the blessings of nature. By encouraging mindful eating and instilling the philosophy of frugality, she not only fosters ecological awareness within the household but also ensures that these principles are passed down to future generations. In this way, the family meal in Vietnamese society transcends its basic function of nourishment, becoming a cornerstone of ecological education rooted in tradition and practicality.

The Roots of Ecological Ethos in Vietnamese Society

The roots of ecological practices in Vietnamese society can be traced to three significant areas. They are the beliefs of Vietnamese Traditional Religion, the role of women in agriculture, and the cultural philosophy of frugality. These aspects shape a unique approach to sustainability that intertwines spirituality, daily labor, and cultural values.

Grains of rice: jewels from heaven

As previously noted, Vietnam is traditionally an agrarian society grounded in wet-rice cultivation. From a scientific perspective, wet-rice agriculture requires sufficient amount of water and sunlight for successful harvests. While people can prepare the soil for good rice paddies, water and sunlight are the two essential elements that lie beyond human control. These are perceived as divine provisions, with God regarded as the ultimate source who determines the appropriate balance of these natural elements necessary for agricultural productivity.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary Understandings* (New York, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 74.

In response to this agricultural dependency on nature's forces, the Vietnamese have developed a distinctive spiritual framework known as Vietnamese Traditional Religion. Within this belief system, "Mr. Heaven" (*Ông Trời*) is viewed as a benevolent provider, and rice is considered a sacred gift bestowed by him. This theological understanding is illustrated in the folktale titled "Mr. Heaven and the Jewel of Rice" in which rice is not merely portrayed as a dietary staple but as a precious jewel, a gift to humanity due to divine generosity.²⁰ This deep cultural reverence for rice is embedded in common expressions like: "A grain of [steamed] rice is a jewel of heaven;" "Do not drop a single grain of rice;" and "It is a sin if one steps on a grain of rice." These sayings, often taught by mothers to their children during mealtimes, reinforce the idea that rice is sacred and should be treated with the utmost respect. Consequently, wasting even a single grain is considered a serious offense.

From her own sweat and labor

Women in Vietnam play a crucial role in agriculture, particularly in rice cultivation, which remains central to both the country's food production and its cultural identity. In rural areas, it is common to witness women laboring diligently in the muddy rice fields, often under the harsh sun and enduring great physical strain. These women work tirelessly to ensure that their families are provided with an adequate and nutritious diet, typically consisting of steamed rice, vegetables, and fish. The cultivation of rice, which is both physically demanding and time-consuming, is deeply intertwined with the daily life and well-being of the family.

This hard work is poignantly captured in the Vietnamese proverb, "While enjoying a bowl of steamed rice, forget not that a single grain equals countless drops of sweat." This saying not only reflects the effort involved in food production but also serves as a reminder of the sacrifices and hard labor that sustain the family. It emphasizes the value of every grain of rice, a symbol of the farmer's toil, and encourages an attitude of gratitude and respect for the food that nourishes the body.

Due to the inculcation of these values, Vietnamese women often develop a deep sense of frugality and resourcefulness. They are keenly aware of the labor and time invested in producing the food they consume, and as such, they are cautious in managing household resources. Leftovers are carefully saved and reused, as nothing is taken for granted. After each meal, the mother might collect any remaining food and remind her children of the importance of not wasting it. Through these everyday practices, she not only instills in her children a mindset of sustainability and respect for resources but also teaches them to value what they have and make the most of every opportunity.

The philosophy of frugality

While modern technology has made food more abundant and accessible, historical experiences of scarcity have instilled a deeply rooted philosophy of frugality in

²⁰ See Nguyễn Trung Tây, *Chúa, Com Hằng Sống [God, Steamed Rice of Life]* (Epworth, Iowa: Divine Word College, 2005), 126-127.

Vietnamese culture. For centuries, Vietnam faced periods of hardship, including famines, wars, and economic struggles that shaped the collective mindset of its people. These experiences of scarcity fostered an ingrained respect for available resources, particularly food, and a strong cultural emphasis on using them wisely.

In contrast to some Western societies, where food waste is more common due to overabundance and convenience, Vietnamese households uphold a robust ethic against wasting food. The proverb asserting “Wasted food is frowned upon in Vietnam” reflects a broader cultural attitude that prioritizes mindful consumption and resource conservation. This perspective is not merely a matter of personal discipline but is woven into the very fabric of Vietnamese social and familial values.

Since food in Vietnamese culture is seen as a divine gift, a product of hard work, and a symbol of the efforts required to bring it to the meal table, proper management of food resources is not only an act of respect but also a way to avoid waste. Thus, reusing leftover food, sharing meals, and minimizing excess are common practices within the Vietnamese household.

This deep-rooted approach to food is also connected to economic pragmatism. By carefully managing food resources, households can save money for the family’s financial stability, which in turn reinforces the cultural philosophy of frugality. In this way, the practice of conserving food aligns with a broader cultural ethos of sustainability, one that values the responsible use of all given resources and emphasizes the importance of financial stability and frugality.

Approaches to Ecology in Vietnamese Society

Beyond managing household resources, Vietnamese women also play a pivotal role as “guardians of ecology.” This role is evident in several practices, such as cultivating vegetables in the family garden, reusing leftover food, and raising domestic animals.

Growing Vegetables in the Family Garden

As mentioned above, vegetables represent one of the three staple foods in Vietnamese cuisine. This cultural aspect explains why many Vietnamese families maintain a vegetable garden at home. Unlike the backyards of homes in Western countries that may be covered with grass, Vietnamese backyards are often filled with various types of vegetables. This practice is so pervasive in Vietnamese society that it is often referenced in music and literature. For example, the contemporary song composer Pham Duy begins his song, “*The Vietnamese Mother in the Countryside*,” with the line, “The vegetable garden is colored entirely green. There is a group of chicks that dwell under their leaves.”²¹

Common vegetables grown in Vietnamese gardens include water spinach, sweet potatoes, lettuce, malabar spinach, and bitter melon, as well as a wide variety of herbs

²¹ Pham Duy, *Our Souvenir* (Saigon: Khai Trí Bookstore, 1971), 36.

such as lemongrass, mint, basil, and coriander. Contributing to the unique flavors and health benefits of the cuisine, these vegetables and herbs are integral to daily Vietnamese meals. Water spinach, for instance, is often used in soups, while bitter melon is a staple in stir-fried and medicinal dishes. Sweet potatoes are a versatile ingredient, used in both savory dishes and desserts.

Even many Vietnamese communities abroad continue to uphold this tradition by adapting it to their new environments. In countries like the United States, Australia, Netherland, the Philippines, and Papua New Guinea, many Vietnamese families grow vegetables and herbs on balconies or in small backyards. This practice not only allows them to maintain a connection with their cultural roots but also ensures a steady supply of fresh, homegrown produce.

Reusing Leftover Food

As previously noted, the meal table in Vietnamese homes often serves as a classroom where Vietnamese women teach their children that food is a sacred gift from Mr. Heaven, and every grain of rice is precious. Therefore, during mealtimes, the importance of frugality and avoiding food waste is frequently emphasized by the mother. Leftover steamed rice, vegetables, and fish are stored and creatively repurposed into new dishes.

Three common ways to recycle leftover food are through steamed rice, fried rice, and porridge. These three dishes are typically served at breakfast. Finally, any leftovers from the recycled food will become sustenance for the domestic animals in the Vietnamese family.

Steamed rice and leftover dishes

Reheating leftover steamed rice from dinner for breakfast is a common and practical practice in many Vietnamese households. This tradition is particularly popular among those engaged in physically demanding agricultural work, as steamed rice “sits well in the stomach.”²² Thus, workers receive the necessary nourishment to begin their day and the energy required to endure extended hours in the fields, completing a full workday.

For office workers and individuals living in urban areas, the practice of reheating leftover rice for breakfast often extends to lunch preparation. In such cases, the wife, as the primary figure responsible for daily meal planning, may repurpose the reheated rice by pairing it with other leftover dishes from the previous evening’s dinner. This lunchbox, typically composed of a variety of foods, often includes recycled vegetables, meats, and rice.

To enhance both the flavor and visual appeal of the leftover dishes, fresh herbs from the family garden are often added. Vietnamese households take great pride in their herb gardens, where an assortment of aromatic plants such as coriander, mint, basil, and

²² Vu Hong Lien, *Rice and Baguette*, 169.

green onions are grown and used to elevate the taste of meals. These herbs not only add freshness and vibrancy to the dishes but also contribute to the rich, complex flavors that define Vietnamese cuisine. By incorporating freshly grown herbs from her garden, the Vietnamese woman skillfully transforms leftover food into a new dish for her loved ones to enjoy, without making them conscious of consuming leftovers.

Porridge

Porridge is another beloved recycled dish in Vietnamese households, offering a creative and comforting way to repurpose leftover rice. When steamed rice remains from a previous meal, it is often boiled with water to create a hearty and nourishing breakfast. The process is simple yet efficient, transforming what could be discarded into a warm and satisfying dish that provides both sustenance and comfort. Depending on what leftovers are available, the porridge can vary greatly, with families enjoying different flavors like fish porridge, pork porridge, or even a combination of both.

Fish porridge, for example, is often made with small pieces of fish or fish bones that are simmered with the rice, which imparts a delicate, savory flavor to the broth. Similarly, pork porridge is prepared using leftover pork, such as bits of cooked meat or pork bones, which are simmered to add richness and depth to the dish. If both fish and pork are available, a combination of the two can be used to create a unique fusion of flavors that reflects the resourcefulness of Vietnamese recycled food.

To enhance the taste and aroma of the porridge, condiments like fresh spring onions, coriander, and a sprinkle of black pepper are added. These ingredients not only elevate the dish's flavor but also bring brightness and freshness to the otherwise simple meal. The fragrance of the herbs, combined with the savory broth, makes the porridge an inviting and satisfying choice for breakfast, as it delivers both nutrition and warmth to start the day.

Fried rice

If steamed rice is the only leftover, a quick and simple solution is to fry it, which creates a completely new dish of fried rice. This dish is commonly prepared for breakfast, offering a savory and satisfying start to the day. The rice is typically stir-fried with ingredients such as onions, garlic, and sometimes eggs, all of which add layers of flavor and texture to the dish. Onions and garlic, essential staples in Vietnamese cooking, are often harvested fresh from family garden, making them easily accessible and an integral part of daily meals. The homegrown quality of these ingredients enhances the dish, as their flavors are more vibrant and aromatic than store-bought alternatives. Eggs, which are gathered from home-raised chickens, further enrich the fried rice, making it a wholesome and balanced meal.

Before serving, a generous sprinkle of black pepper is added to the fried rice to boost its flavor, lending a mild spiciness that complements the savory undertones of the dish. The freshly fried rice, fragrant and appetizing, is served hot, often enjoyed by the family during the morning rush before they head off to work or school. This humble but satisfying meal not only provides nourishment but also exemplifies the

resourcefulness of Vietnamese cooking, where even the simplest ingredients can be transformed into something delicious and fulfilling.

Any remaining fried rice that is not consumed by the family is not wasted. It is instead given to the family's domestic animals. This practice ensures that no food is discarded, reinforcing the Vietnamese commitment to frugality and sustainability.

Domestic animals

In Vietnamese society, the notion of the extended family often includes domestic animals, which consist of chickens, pigs, dogs, and cats. These four types of animals are considered essential members of the household and play a significant role in the family's ecological practices. Chickens provide meat and eggs; pigs contribute to the family's financial stability; dogs serve as loyal protectors; and cats keep pests at bay. These animals are frequently featured in Vietnamese folklore and songs, such as the popular folk song "*The Hen Squawks for Her Lime Leaves*."²³

Upon entering a Vietnamese home, especially in the countryside, one might see a couple of dogs resting in the front yard, cats guarding the kitchen, pigs in the backyard, and chickens foraging in the garden. The main source of food for these animals often comes from leftovers from family meals. Nothing goes to waste; the water used to rinse rice, fish fins, and spoiled vegetable leaves are saved for pig feed. Food scraps left in the sink after washing dishes are collected and added to the same pot. Any food that falls on the floor during meals is promptly consumed by the dogs, cats, or chickens.

Through these practices, Vietnamese households minimize waste and maintain a balanced, sustainable ecosystem. In her role as the domestic general, the Vietnamese woman ensures that resources are used efficiently, reinforcing her pivotal role as the "guardian of ecology" in Vietnamese society.

Ecology in the Modern Era

Modern Era

The natural environment plays a significant role in providing essential elements for forming, shaping, and determining a culture. The materials and resources available within a particular environment directly contribute to the formation of cultural practices. For example, the wet rice agricultural system in Vietnam has led to the formation of a society centered around rice consumption. Similarly, in wheat-growing regions, bread has become the staple food, as exemplified by Jewish society. Likewise, the highland environment of Papua New Guinea has fostered a culture in which sweet potatoes serve as a dietary staple for the Highlanders. Given the close relationship between the environment and culture, when the environmental context changes, cultural practices inevitably change as well.

²³ Vũ Ngọc Khánh - Hoàng Khôi, *Vietnamese Food and Drink* (Hanoi: Hà Nội, 2012), 9-16; Vũ Hồng Lien, *Rice and Baguette*, 198.

The transition from an agrarian-based to technology-driven society has significantly transformed the social landscape of Vietnam, especially since the early 1990s when Vietnam adopted a market economy model. Many major cities like Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, along with their surrounding areas, have evolved into major industrial centers. In these areas, high-rise buildings and skyscrapers now appear in great numbers. Additionally, many provinces in Vietnam are gradually becoming more urbanized. Traditional thatched houses, emblematic of the pre-market economy era, are being replaced by modern homes characterized by high walls and equipped with contemporary appliances.

Today's Vietnamese economy operates on a market-based model. The shift to a market economy has altered family financial practices. Thus, household income is no longer solely dependent on the husband. Women have increasingly begun to leave the home environment for jobs in factories and other industries. As a result, Vietnamese women in the modern era, while still holding the title of domestic general, no longer fulfill this role on a full-time basis.

The transition to a market economy in Vietnam has resulted in a marked increase in the abundance and diversity of food supplies, readily accessible in both traditional market stalls and modern retail spaces. Traditionally, daily market visits were a customary practice for procuring fresh produce. However, the modern era has witnessed a significant alteration in this routine. Contemporary lifestyles often involve weekly grocery shopping trips, facilitated by motorized transport, typically undertaken during weekends or days off from work.

Furthermore, economic development has catalyzed a substantial transformation in domestic appliances, especially with the widespread adoption of refrigeration technology. The near-ubiquity of refrigerators in Vietnamese households has greatly altered food storage practices, enabling the preservation of meat, fish, vegetables as well as leftover food from daily meals. These aforementioned shifts, among other socio-economic factors, have collectively contributed to a profound reconfiguration of traditional ecological practices within contemporary Vietnamese society.

Changes

In modern homes, often surrounded by high walls, traditional domestic animals are no longer found in family yards. While dogs and cats may still be present, chickens and pigs have entirely disappeared. Even in households that maintain dogs and cats, the financial means of the owners are generally considerable. Therefore, these animals are kept as pets and typically provided for with specialized pet food. With chickens and pigs no longer raised at home and dogs and cats now considered pets in need of special food, leftover food has increasingly become waste, often ending up in trash bins.

The rapid development of the market economy and the rise of modern lifestyle have led to a surplus of food and more stable family finances. Consequently, while the wife continues to manage the household as the domestic general, she no longer faces the same pressure to reuse or recycle leftover food as in the past. Evenings in a modern

Vietnamese family are often spent “de-stressing” with engaging television programs across numerous channels, and leftover food in the refrigerator is more often discarded than repurposed.

Ecological Philosophy

Although traditional ecological practices in Vietnam have been significantly transformed due to modernization, Vietnamese women continue to occupy a central role in the transmission and adaptation of ecological values. Their position as domestic generals has not diminished in significance; rather, it has evolved in response to contemporary environmental challenges. In this context, Vietnamese women are not merely custodians of ancestral wisdom but active agents shaping ecologically responsible behaviors within both the family and the broader society.

Within the domestic sphere, women remain key educators in instilling ecological consciousness among children. A deeply embedded cultural value is the reverence for food, particularly rice, regarded as a sacred gift from Mr. Heaven (*Ông Trời*). Teaching children to respect even a single grain of rice becomes a moral act, reinforcing a broader philosophy of frugality, gratitude, and harmony with nature. These values align with a longstanding Vietnamese ecological worldview that emphasizes balance, sufficiency, and responsibility in human-nature relationships.

One of the most practical and enduring ecological principles promoted by Vietnamese women is encapsulated in the maxim: “Cook just enough, eat to satisfaction.” This principle reflects both environmental prudence and cultural tradition. “Cooking just enough” involves preparing meals in sufficient but non-excessive portions, aiming to provide nourishment without generating waste. It reflects an intentional, measured approach to consumption consistent with ecological sustainability. When leftovers arise, they are preserved and creatively reused, underscoring a circular model of resource use that predates contemporary zero-waste movements.

The principle of “eating to satisfaction” is equally instructive, especially when families dine in public settings such as restaurants or buffets. Here, women continue their pedagogical role by guiding their families, especially children, to take only what they need and avoid the excesses of consumer culture. In doing so, they promote mindful eating habits and cultivate ecological responsibility, extending beyond the home to the wider community. Importantly, the influence of Vietnamese women is not confined to the private sphere. Increasingly, they are involved in broader ecological and community-based initiatives, promoting the use of local produce, advocating for reduced plastic consumption, organizing waste segregation, and leading environmental education in schools and parishes. Their leadership demonstrates that domestic ecological values are not static but being translated into meaningful public engagement.

Furthermore, Vietnamese women contribute significantly to intergenerational ecological continuity. By transmitting sustainable habits and environmental ethics to their children, they ensure that these values persist into the next generation’s professional, educational, and civic life. Culturally, the archetype of the *bà mẹ tần tảo*—the industrious and resourceful Vietnamese mother—embodies an ethos of ecological

living. Traditionally rising early to work the fields, managing household resources with care, and living according to seasonal rhythms, she symbolizes a life in harmony with the environment. Though rooted in tradition, this figure contains to serve as a relevant model for addressing today's ecological crises.

Moreover, the contributions of Vietnamese women resonate beyond national borders. Their ecological practices align with global sustainability frameworks, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, their roles in promoting responsible consumption (SDG 12), advancing climate action (SDG 13), and supporting gender equality (SDG 5) illustrate how local cultural practices can support global ecological goals.²⁴ Despite the pressures of urbanization, shifting gender roles, and economic demands, Vietnamese women continue to integrate traditional ecological wisdom with contemporary realities. Their resilience and adaptability enable them to bridge past and present, tradition and innovation, making them indispensable contributors to Vietnam's ecological future.

Conclusion

Vietnamese women have historically played, and continue to play, a central role in ecological stewardship within Vietnamese society. Their responsibilities have evolved in response to societal changes, adapting to new economic and social contexts while maintaining core ecological values. By balancing traditional practices with contemporary realities, Vietnamese women have the potential to present a distinctive model of ecological guardianship that is both culturally rooted and adaptable to the contemporary context. As Vietnam continues to navigate its path toward modernization, the contributions of women as ecological stewards will remain vital to fostering sustainable practices and ensuring the resilience of their cultural and environmental heritage.

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